

BREAKING THE CARE CEILING.

Fourteen per cent of care leavers go to university compared to 47 per cent of young people who didn't grow up in care. It will take 107 years to close the gap at the current rate of progress.

HOW MANY CARE LEAVERS GO TO UNIVERSITY?

First published: **September 2023**

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ISBN: 978-1-912581-48-1

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The Portal Trust

The Portal Trust is one of London's oldest independent, grant-making, educational charities set up to help young people achieve their full potential. Recognising the transformative power of education, we dedicate our efforts to supporting educational projects aimed at providing opportunities to those from the most marginalised backgrounds.

We are pleased to have worked in collaboration with First Star UK for a number of years, and to have provided strategic grants, to enable this innovative programme to be brought successfully from the US to the UK, and thereafter, to become a UK registered charity.

The Portal Trust is delighted to have supported the commissioning of this national report, which has been expertly compiled by Civitas, that we are pleased to see has garnered support from across the political spectrum. It shows young people growing up in care have some of the worst educational outcomes of any group. They are three times less likely to go on to higher education than young people who haven't been in care.

Whilst progress has been made in recent years to highlight this issue and increase the numbers entering higher education, it is clear from examining the data obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency that clearly much more needs to be done, particularly at high tariff universities, across the country.

The Portal Trust aims to raise awareness and stimulate a broader conversation and national debate surrounding this issue. By championing initiatives like this seminal research, the Trust hopes to contribute to society, by empowering all young individuals to thrive, regardless of their background. [Find out more about us here](#)

Sophie Fernandes

Chairman

Richard Foley

Chief Executive

Supported by



First Star Scholars UK

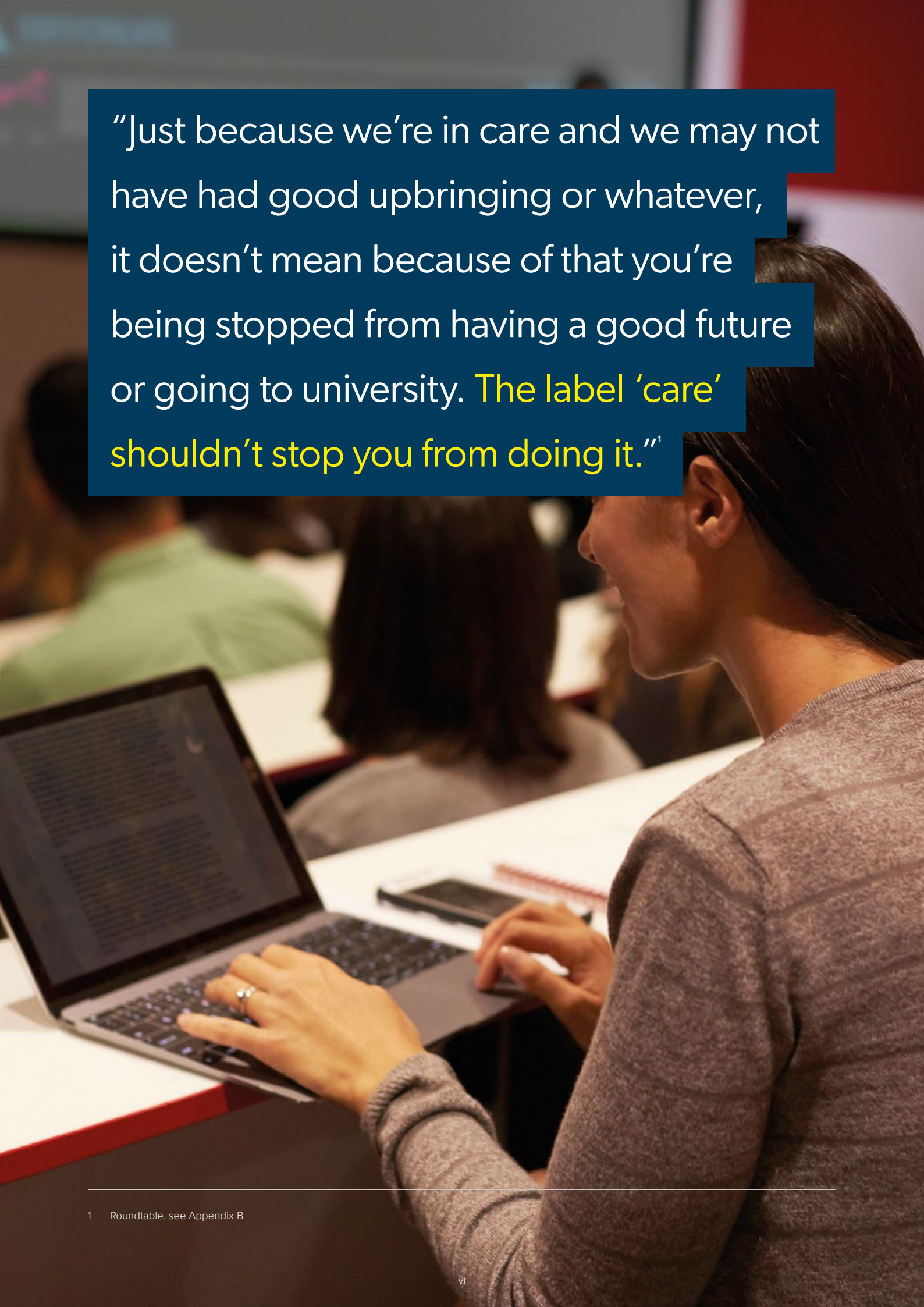
First Star Scholars UK is a national children's charity dedicated to improving outcomes for young people growing up in care. It was founded on an ambitious and aspirational approach to helping some of our most disadvantaged young people access higher education.

Civitas is grateful to Dr. Lorna Goodwin and First Star Scholars UK for their support and guidance. We would also like to thank Rees Davis-Campbell, from First Star Scholars UK, for organising a roundtable meeting of young people, all with experience of care, to inform our research and bring their voice to this work.

The First Star model is a long-term university preparatory programme for children in care. The programme is based on a partnership between a university, the young person and First Star. First Star recruits young people at the end of year 9 as they prepare for their GCSE years (age 14/15), to join the four-year programme of academic support and life skills at a local university up to the age of 18. These young people attend monthly sessions at a university campus and a summer residential programme at their host university. In 2021, 50 per cent of First Star graduates started higher education courses, well in excess of the 14 per cent of care leavers nationally.

This work has been supported by First Star Scholars UK to highlight the number of care leavers who go onto higher education in the UK. It represents an attempt to break down these numbers by institution and in the coming years First Star Scholars UK will repeat this exercise to measure progress.



A woman with dark hair, wearing a grey sweater, is seen from the side, focused on her laptop. She is sitting at a desk in what appears to be a classroom or lecture hall, with other students and desks visible in the background. The lighting is warm and focused on her.

“Just because we’re in care and we may not have had good upbringing or whatever, it doesn’t mean because of that you’re being stopped from having a good future or going to university. The label ‘care’ shouldn’t stop you from doing it.”¹

1 Roundtable, see Appendix B

Foreword

This report sets out the number of care leavers who go to university in the UK, their outcomes and what happens to those who don't. In 2022 the Independent Review of Children's Social Care estimated the lifetime cost of poor outcomes for children with experience of our care system was over £1 million per child.² This report shows that getting into university and graduating helps to avoid many of these outcomes. The cost of a university place and additional support to get them there seems small by comparison.

Changing lives is what the university sector does best, and we want to do everything we can to extend that opportunity to young people who have grown up in care. Care leavers aren't less clever than other people, just less lucky – but young people from care backgrounds leaving education have some of the worst outcomes of any group.

A care leaver is more likely to end up in a prison cell than a lecture theatre,³ and we want to change that. We should have aspirations for our young people in our care – the same aspirations we have for our own children.

Just 14 per cent of care leavers under the age of 19 progress onto higher education, compared to 47 per cent of all other children, a discrepancy that has hardly changed in a decade.⁴ We can do better than this. Analysis conducted by the Children and Families Unit at Civitas shows that children entitled to Free School Meals and those in the poorest fifth of households are more than twice as likely to go to university before the age of 19 as a young person who grew up in care.⁵

At the top 32 universities in England, only 90 care leavers under the age of 19 started an undergraduate course by 2021/22.⁶

Ministers have already pledged to 'close the gap' between care leavers and non-care leavers by 2030 but the gap is getting larger rather than smaller.⁷

There is too little official data on what happens to young people growing up in care beyond their GCSEs – something that needs to change if we ever want to increase the pipeline of looked after children able to apply to university.

Increasing the number of care leavers in higher education should be something we can all get behind, which is why we have jointly written this foreword. This is a social reform that could be delivered in the next parliament but it needs a willingness to take action.

We urgently need to look at ways to improve aspirations among care leavers and send the message that university is for them. This report sets out how we could do it, from some simple steps to more radical approaches.

Baroness Benjamin OM DBE DL
Liberal Democrat

Baroness Eaton DBE DL
Conservative

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe
Labour

2 The Independent Review of Children's Social Care and Alma Economics (2021) *Paying the Price: The social and financial costs of children's social care*. UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 23 June 2023).

3 The progression rate for care experienced children entering university is only 14 per cent. See: Department for Education (2023) *Widening participation in higher education*. Available at: [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](http://Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)) (Accessed: 13 July 2023). Within the 'all_characteristics' spreadsheet in the data files. But care leavers are estimated to make up over one-quarter (27 per cent) of the adult prison population. See: NOMS in Lord Harris, T. (2015) *The Harris Review Changing Prisons, Saving Lives Report of the Independent Review into Self-inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18-24 year olds*. UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 23 June 2023).

4 Note: The latest year of data is pupils who were looked after continuously for 12 months or more on 31st March 2017 who progressed to HE by age 19 by 2020/21. The data is presented based on the year the pupil was aged 19 but the looked after status is on 31st March in the academic year when the pupil was aged 15. The Department for Education follow progress from age 15 until age 19.

5 Department for Education (2023) *Widening participation in higher education*. Available at: [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](http://Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)) (Accessed: 13 July 2023). Within the 'all_characteristics' spreadsheet in the data files.

6 Ibid.

7 Civitas calculations: Between 2017-22, the care leaver progression rate into university increased from 12.637 per cent to 14.175 per cent at an average of 0.308 per cent per year (rounded to 3 d.p.) The progression rate of non-care leavers into higher education in 2022 was 47 per cent. It would take 107 years to get to 47 per cent at 0.308 per cent a year.

Terminology

1. **Looked after child, child looked after, cared for young person** and **child in care** are all synonymous terms. They all refer to children who are in the care of their local authority. They are also often described as **children in the care system**.
 - a. Generally speaking, official documents and research tend to use *looked after children* or *children looked after* (often denoted LAC or CLA) as that is the legal term.⁸ As such, **this report uses ‘looked after children’**.
 - b. Those who have experience of the care system tend to prefer the use of *cared for young people*.⁹ This term is preferable within conversation, but within research such as this report it is preferable to use the technical language.
2. **Care experience** is the blanket term used to describe all individuals who have been in the care of their local authority at some point during their childhood.
3. **Care leaver** is a slightly ambiguous term, but there are a few contexts where it is the official term to use.
 - a. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) use the term ‘Care leaver’ in their official data. This is defined in detail in the methodology section, here it essentially means care experienced students.
 - b. For students in the 2020 application cycle (for university entry in 2020/21 academic year), The Department for Education (DfE) define care leavers as individuals ‘who either have been looked after continuously for 12 months or more on the 31 March 2017 or be a special school pupil who was at least 15 at the beginning of the academic year.’
 - i. Put simply, to be a ‘care leaver’ at 18 or 19, they have to have been in the care system for at least year at the point when they were 15.
 - ii. It is this DfE definition that generates the statistic of 90 care leavers enrolling into university by the 2021/22 academic year.
4. **Universities** are **higher education providers** (also known as **higher education institutions**, or **HEIs**) which have been granted university status. The terms are mostly synonymous, although there are some **higher education providers** which do not have university status.
 - a. The league table is of **higher education providers** and so includes some institutions that are technically not universities in their own right.

8 Children Act (1989) Available at: [Children Act 1989: care planning, placement and case review - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67222/children_act_1989.pdf) (Accessed 28 June 2023)

9 Sunderland Youth Voice, ‘Together for Children’s Change the Language Campaign’. Available at: [Together for Children’s Change the Language Campaign \(Relaunch Booklet\).pdf](https://www.sunderlandyouthvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Together-for-Childrens-Change-the-Language-Campaign-Relaunch-Booklet.pdf) (Accessed 28 June 2023)

1. Where next?

Figures published annually by the Department for Education show that just 550 care leavers under the age of 19 go onto higher education,¹⁰ representing just 0.2 per cent of students starting undergraduate courses.¹¹

Care leavers are half as likely to go university than a child growing up in the poorest fifth of households or a child entitled to Free School Meals.¹²

In 2021/22, just 90 care leavers under the age of 19 went to one of the top 32 universities in England, officially defined as ‘High Tariff’.¹³ This represents just 0.1 per cent of new entrants¹⁴ to these top tier universities, a figure that has barely changed in the last 10 years.¹⁵

There are plenty of suggestions to tweak the system, but bigger change is needed and a future government shouldn’t be afraid of big ideas to tackle this issue and make it one of the few social reforms we could realistically achieve in the next parliament.

Here is how we could do it:

1. **Make it a priority with a clear target:** We need to take this issue much more seriously and give it real political priority with a clear ambition. Ministers have already pledged to ‘close the gap’ between care leavers and non-care leavers by 2030, unfortunately it will take 107 years to do this at the current rate of progression.¹⁶

A better target is needed, with a measurable aspiration for the proportion of care leavers going to university by the end of the next parliament. If we were to simply double the numbers, we would be looking at around an extra 4,000 young people from care going to university each year by 2029 (that is roughly 32 extra students with experience of care per university).¹⁷

2. **Every university should achieve ‘kite mark’ status:** There might soon be two kite marks to showcase the work universities are doing to encourage more care leavers to apply for their courses and to keep them on those courses when they arrive.

The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) ‘quality mark’ was launched in 2021 and is a comprehensive assessment of universities and higher education institutions and their work in this area. It was developed by experts and, so far, 31 institutions carry the NNECL quality mark.¹⁸ In response to the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, the government has agreed to develop its own kite mark. The government would be better off recognising the success of the NNECL award.

If a new government-backed stamp of approval is launched it should come with an ambition that every university in England will have achieved this status by the end of the next parliament. Ministers have considerable soft powers to cajole, nudge and encourage universities to do better; they should use this power to ensure every university eventually carries this kite mark. It would signal a strong intent in the right direction.

10 Department for Education (2023) Widening participation in higher education. Available at: [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics) (Accessed: 13 July 2023). Within the ‘all_characteristics’ spreadsheet in the data files.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Civitas calculations. Between 2017-22, the care leaver progression rate into university increased from 12.637 per cent to 14.175 per cent at an average of 0.308 per cent per year (rounded to 3 d.p.) The progression rate of non-care leavers into higher education in 2022 was 47 per cent. It would take 107 years to get to 47 per cent at 0.308 per cent a year.

17 There are 140 universities and 4,290 care leavers enrolled at university in 2020/21. An extra 32 per university would add 4,480 students, which is what we estimate to be the number that enrolled at university in 2021/22, therefore doubling the number.

18 For a full list see here: NNECL, *Quality Mark Awards*. Available at: www.nnecl.org/pages/222-quality-mark-awards (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

- 3. Publish an annual league table of care leavers at UK universities:** This report publishes the first real attempt to identify the number of care leavers at UK universities by institution. By doing this we can see who is doing well in proportion to the total number of students enrolled on their courses and who still has more to do.

Education league tables are always fraught with imperfections and the cause of much discussion, but they perform a useful role. This is the first ever league table looking exclusively at care leavers and it shouldn't be the last.

Every year a league table should be produced to demonstrate how well we are doing as a country. Someone should do this, whether it is government, a newspaper or a charity with an interest in shining a spotlight on this issue. We shouldn't let up and we need to create the conditions where universities want to rise up this table.

- 4. Require universities to conduct an 'annual canvas' so we know how many care leavers there are at our universities:** The truth is, as exposed in this report, that we don't really know how many students grew up in care. The tick box provided on the UCAS form is a blunt and inaccurate measure. We can't provide support for care leavers at university if we don't know they exist. Producing an accurate table is also more difficult.

One in 11 higher education providers know the care leaver status of fewer than half of their undergraduate students, while one in six providers know the care leaver status of over 90 per cent of their undergraduate students.¹⁹

Local authorities are required by law to conduct an annual canvas to maintain their electoral rolls. A similar expectation should be placed on universities to conduct a canvas of students on their courses to identify care leavers (among other bits of data). Every student is given an email and the university holds considerable power over students, completing a simple survey should be a requirement and help us understand how many care leavers are on campus.

- 5. A National Care Leavers Scholarship:** In the course of this research we were told time and again that young people from care backgrounds were reluctant to go to university because of fears over getting into debt. This emotional barrier is very real and is why recent reforms in Scotland, where care leavers receive a dedicated bursary, have been so successful. It takes the worry out of applying for university and gives the recipient the security they need.

A new government should learn these lessons and establish a 'National Care Leavers Scholarship' building on this model to help it achieve its ambition for more care leavers going to university. It should be a reform ministers could be proud of as thousands of scholarships are awarded each year.

- 6. Use this scholarship to fund foundation courses for care leavers:** Despite coming bottom in our league table, Oxford University has embarked on a radical scheme to open up the university to care leavers and other potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2022 Oxford University launched a new foundation year designed to help would-be students get a place at one of our most prestigious institutions. It is still early and the success of this model has yet to be established, but future ministers should study the model carefully, with a view to helping other universities (or potentially clusters of universities) to establish their own foundation years for care leavers.

It would be a radical change that could open up the lecture halls of our higher education institutions to care leavers. The National Care Leavers Scholarship could be used to help fund this additional year. Better to spend a year at university on a tailor-made foundation course than dropping out altogether, or worse. Research by Dr Neil Harrison has shown that care leavers at university are often older than their non-care peers but not by much, an extra year could make all the difference.

19 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

7. **Develop the pipeline with better data:** It isn't just about universities. Many of them, if not most, are doing a lot to increase access and reach out to young people from care backgrounds. There just aren't enough students ready to complete a UCAS form and realistically apply to university.

We need to develop the pipeline – something we discuss in this report at length. The Department for Education has a crucial role to play. It isn't good enough that there is no official data on attainment at Key Stage (KS) 5 – the stage in between GCSEs and university. In response to parliamentary questions the government also confirmed they do not hold information on the qualifications looked after children study beyond KS4.

The government should publish an annual dataset on KS5 and children with experience of care. It would be simple enough to do. We should know how many are studying for A-Levels, the traditional route to university, and how well they do. We should know how many apply to university; UCAS has the data which the government should publish. We need to develop the pipeline, otherwise we will get nowhere.

8. **Establish a new funding stream to support early intervention models and develop the pipeline:** It isn't just about data, we need to get in early and learn from successful early intervention models identified in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

A new 'catch-up' funding stream is needed, working with universities, charities and Virtual School Heads (VSHs), to identify young people well before they sit their GCSEs and to give them the extra tutoring they need to pass exams, pick the right A-Levels and stay on at school.

The funding model is already there: the National Tutoring Programme is now an established and likely permanent feature of our education system. A new university tutoring grant should be developed to mimic the school-based tutoring grant.²⁰ This should be targeted at young people in the care system, with undergraduates and university staff used to provide catch-up tutoring on campus – a vital ingredient to inspire aspiration.

Funds from the National Tutoring Programme should be set aside to develop the pipeline of young people from care able to apply to university.

One of the distinctive features of successful early intervention models that help to get care leavers into university is partnership: working with universities to demystify what a university is – they literally require young people to step foot on a campus and get used to the idea that they belong at university just as much as anyone else. It builds in aspiration every time they turn up for catch-up classes at a real university.

9. **Use spare capacity in boarding schools:** We could use spare capacity in the state and independent boarding school sector. The model pioneered by the Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF) and featured in this report shows it can work – with 79 per cent of vulnerable children supported by the charity to attend boarding schools going onto university,²¹ and well over a third going on to high-tariff institutions.²²

20 [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/guidance/national-tutoring-programme-guidance-for-schools-2022-to-2023) (2023), 'National Tutoring Programme: guidance for schools, 2022 to 2023', Available at: [National Tutoring Programme: guidance for schools, 2022 to 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/guidance/national-tutoring-programme-guidance-for-schools-2022-to-2023), (Accessed 27 June 2023).

21 D. Murphy, M. Oliver, M. Adkins, G. De Fraja, S. Chun (July 2023), 'Final Report: An independent evaluation of the outcomes for looked after and vulnerable children attending boarding schools'. Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation.

22 Ibid.

Ministers should work with local authorities, charities like RNCSF and boarding schools to identify spare capacity and buy it up for children in the care of the state. It's a model that is hugely aspirational and, more importantly, works to change lives. Hundreds of places could easily be found, more likely thousands if a coordinated push was made to find the right young people and match them to a school, with the state acting as the guarantor for school fees.

Boarding schools provide a stable residential element that is fundamentally important for a child in care. An ambitious government would go beyond simply asking for spare capacity; they would ask how we can increase capacity too, across both state and private sectors. Not all of these places would be filled with children from the care system, and nor should that be the intention, but an expansion of boarding would allow extra places to be created that could change lives. This isn't a new idea; it was recommended by Josh MacAlister in his Independent Review of Children's Social Care and a bold plan should be put in place to make it happen.



Care leavers who graduate from university earn, on average, **just £660** less than non care leavers 18 months after graduation.²³

²³ Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

2. The pipeline: progression into higher education

- The progression rate for care leavers entering university by age 19 is **14 per cent**,²⁴ while the progression rate into high tariff institutions is just **two per cent**. For all other young people, the progression rate by age 19 is **47 per cent**, and to high tariff institutions is **14 per cent**.²⁵
- After KS4, looked after children are 75 per cent less likely than the general population to enter a school sixth form (nine per cent versus 36 per cent) and over twice as likely to be not in education, employment or training (13 per cent versus 6 per cent).²⁶
- The number of care experienced applications to university has doubled since 2008. (There were 4,495 in 2008 and 8,930 in 2022.)²⁷
- There was a 55 per cent growth in care leaver applications to medium tariff UK universities from 2020 to 2022 and an 86 per cent growth in care leaver applications to higher tariff UK universities from 2020 to 2022.
- According to the DfE, 4,290 care experienced individuals entered higher education in the 2020/21 academic year, this was an increase of 20 per cent in two years from 3,570 in 2018/19.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care

In 2021 the government commissioned an independent review into children's social care in the UK. This was published in May 2022 and set out extensive research into the state of children's social care and a multitude of recommendations to the government in response to the evidence presented.

'Mission two' of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care was to 'double the proportion of care leavers attending university, and particularly high tariff universities, by 2026'.

The government's response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in February 2023 addressed mission two, saying:

'We will narrow the gap in care leaver higher education participation rates compared to the general population year-on-year from 2027, with a view to this being minimal by 2030. To do this, we will increase the level of opportunity and support for care leavers in further and higher education.'

The Independent Review's aim would mean 26 per cent of care leavers attending university and 3.7 per cent attending high tariff universities, while the government target would require at least 45 per cent attending university and 13 per cent attending high tariff universities.

24 Harrison, N. (2019) *Care leavers in higher education: how many are there and why does it matter?* Available at: blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/care-leavers-in-higher-education (Accessed: 20 June 2023). Note: Until recently the figure of six per cent was used by the government to reflect the number of care leavers progressing onto Higher Education. Following research by Dr Neil Harrison on the basis for calculating the number of care leavers entering Higher Education has changed and a new figure of between 12-14 per cent is now used by the Department for Education and is considered the correct way of calculating care leaver progression

25 Department for Education (2023) *Widening participation in higher education*. Available at: [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/114444/Widening-participation-in-higher-education-Academic-year-2021-22-Explore-education-statistics-GOV.UK) (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk) (Accessed: 13 July 2023). Within the 'all_characteristics' spreadsheet in the data files.

26 Source: gov.uk (2023) *Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

27 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

The ‘Gold Standard’ for universities

The 12by24 report from the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) think tank in 2020 introduced the idea of providing a ‘gold standard’ accreditation for universities that display impressive engagement with care experienced young people. Since then, there has been much work put into defining, structuring and generating this accreditation.²⁸

This has come under a few different names over the years. The original proposal by the CSJ suggested a ‘gold standard’ for universities. Then when the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) refined and developed this, they called it the ‘NNECL Quality Mark’.²⁹ This has been highly successful and now 31 institutions are NNECL Quality Mark awarded.

In the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care a ‘kite mark’ for universities was suggested,³⁰ proposing new accreditation from the government for universities to go alongside the NNECL Quality Mark. In the government response to the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, this was accepted, with the promise of a new ‘gold standard’ for universities.³¹ The government statement specified:

‘We are committed to introducing a gold standard accreditation scheme for further and higher education institutions. We want the scheme to set a high standard that all institutions will aspire to, including how to drive take-up and retain students. We will bring leaders in the sector together, in order to support the development of the scheme.’³²

Key Stage 5 education

Understanding what happens to care experienced young people between 16-18 is extremely important to understanding progress into higher education.

In 2018/19, the total number of pupils at the end of KS4 (GCSEs) who had been looked after at any point in the 12-month period of 2018/19 was 7,170. Five thousand and ten of these young people enter a ‘sustained education destination’³³ following their GCSE year.

Of the 30 per cent that don’t, six per cent enter apprenticeships or work-based learning, 20 per cent are not in education, employment or training, and the outcomes for the other four per cent are not captured.

Figure 2.1 shows that looked after children are four and a half times less likely to go to a school sixth form than all children, with only nine per cent going compared with a national average of 36 per cent.

Looked after children are over two times as likely as their peers to not be in education, employment or training with 13 per cent having no sustained KS5 destination compared to six per cent of all pupils.

28 Centre for Social Justice (2020) *12by24*. Available at: www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

29 [NNECL_Quality_Mark_Guidance_June_2021.pdf](#) (hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com)

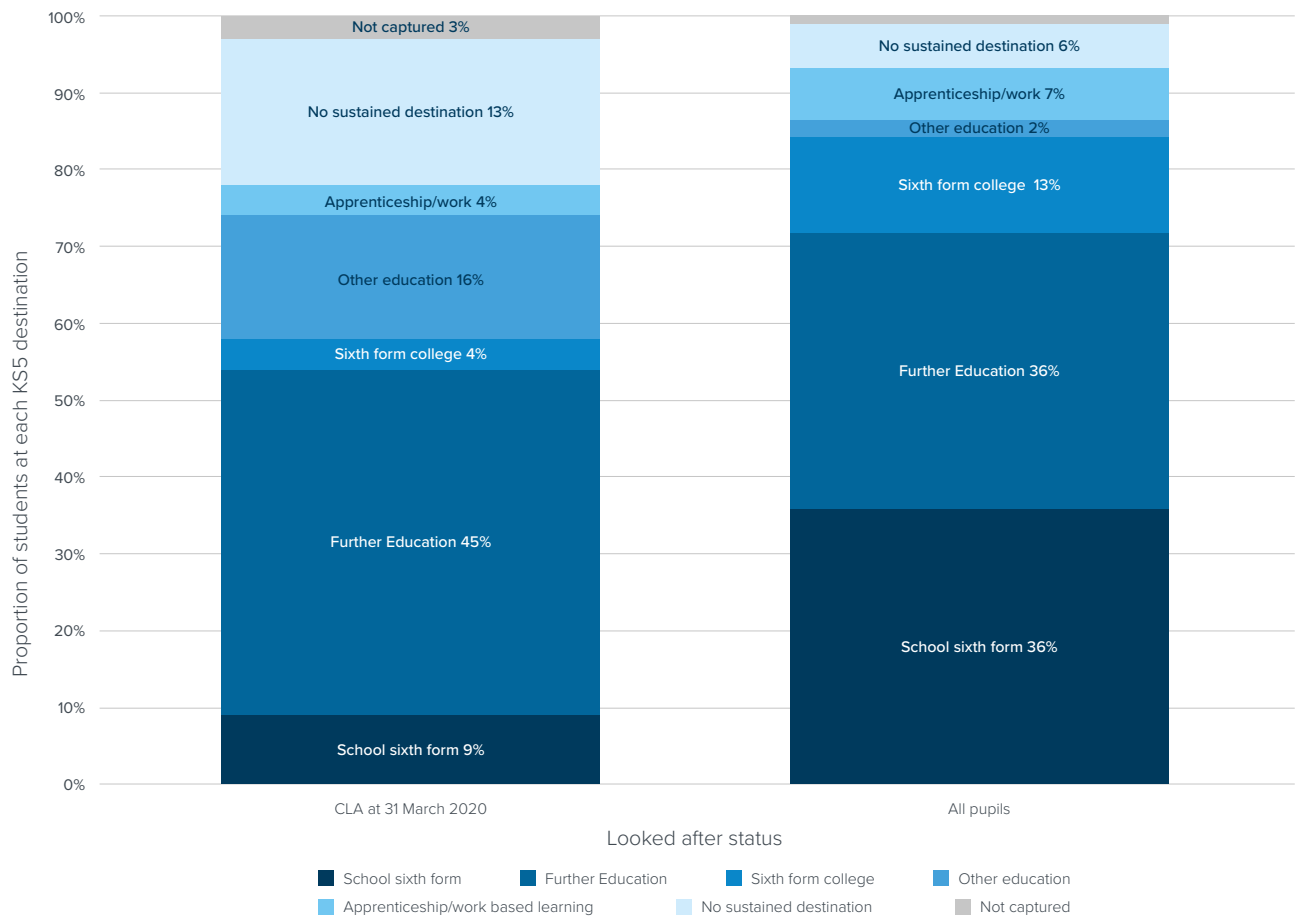
30 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children’s social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Note: A sustained education destination includes school sixth forms, sixth-form colleges, FE colleges, and other education settings.

Figure 2.1: Destination at end of key stage 4 by social care status, England, 2019/20



Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

In a response given in April 2023 to a written question by Baroness Eaton, the government have confirmed that:

‘The department also publishes information on pupils who were at the end of key stage 4 in 2018/19 and reports on their destinations in the 2019/20 academic year. The figures show in 2019/20, 5,010 looked after children were in a sustained education destination in the year following the end of key stage 4. Of these, 2,910 were in further education, 860 were in a school sixth form or sixth form college and 1,240 were in some other form of education.’³⁴

However, the government also confirmed that they do not hold information on the qualifications looked after children study beyond KS4.³⁵

A-Levels are the traditional route into a high tariff higher education institution, however there is no official data on the number of looked after children who are enrolled on A-Level courses. To attempt to calculate the number of looked after children studying for A-Levels, and therefore the theoretical ‘pipeline’ to high tariff institutions, we grouped together the number of children at institutions where students are most likely to be studying A-Level courses and an approximation for further education colleges using existing data.

34 UK Parliament (2023). Further Education: Care Leavers and Children in Care. (UIN HL6747) Question for Department for Education by Baroness Eaton 22 March 2023), answered by Baroness Barran on 5 April 2023. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-03-22/hl6747 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

35 UK Parliament (2022) GCE A-level: Children in Care. (UIN HL299). Question for Department for Education by Lord Farmer (17 May 2022), answered by Baroness Barran on 31 May 2022. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-17/hl299 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

We calculated that there would have been approximately 1,511 children who had been looked after at any point while studying for A-Levels in 2018/19.³⁶ Therefore, roughly 22 per cent of the total number of pupils at the end of KS4 who had been looked after at any point would have been studying for A-Levels, or 30.1 per cent of pupils in a sustained education destination.³⁷

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care found that just 15 per cent of looked after children go on to study A-Levels.³⁸

Our independent school sector is particularly poor for the number of looked after children taking up sixth form places. Just 40 children who had been looked after at any point attended post-16 independent schools in 2019/20,³⁹ 0.05 per cent of all independently educated sixth formers.⁴⁰

Using the data above, the success rate for looked after children progressing to a high tariff higher education institution directly from sixth form is just 4.2 per cent.

This data raises questions about access to higher education for young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, who statistically have some of the worst prospects.

Improving the pipeline: Extension of the Virtual School Heads (VSHs) programme

In September 2021, the VSHs programme was extended to include all children who have or have had a social worker, including children in need and those subject to child protection plans.⁴¹ Also, from October 2021, the government introduced a pilot programme in 30 local authorities to support 16–18-year-old looked after children and care leavers in general further education colleges through extending the VSH duties.⁴²

The Rees Centre in Oxford has evaluated the performance of both programmes. Their initial evaluation found both programmes to be highly successful, particularly in improving college attendance of children with a social worker, including looked after children. The report recommended that the programme is expanded to every local authority.⁴³

Part of this programme was to improve personal education plans for 16- to 18-year-old looked after children and care leavers. The study found that the extension of VSHs to 18 provided an opportunity to do this, and initial results are positive about the impact that this has had.⁴⁴

The VSHs also provide activities to raise the expectations of care leavers and looked after children into having higher aspirations for work and education. Feedback from this suggested that such work needs to be done earlier on, perhaps in KS3, for it to be really effective.⁴⁵

36 Ibid.

37 See here: [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) (2023) *Further education and skills*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-and-skills (Accessed: 20 June 2023). In 2018/19 there were 1,813,700 adults (19+) attending a FE institution of which 390,700 (21.5%) were undertaking a Level 3 course.

38 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children's social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

39 [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) (2023) *Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables (Accessed: 29 June 2023).

40 ISC, 'ISC Census and Annual Report 2021', Available at: www.isc.co.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). P11.

41 Sebba et al. (2022) *Phase one evaluation of the virtual school head's extension of duties to children with a social worker and the post-16 pupil premium plus pilot*. Department for Education. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

One element that was found to be extremely successful in enhancing the self-esteem and confidence of 16–18-year-old looked after children and care leavers was extra-curricular enrichment activities. More than two thirds of the 27 pilot VSHs in the programme had facilitated such activities and feedback was very positive.⁴⁶


The first main recommendation of the first phase of the evaluation of the extension of VSHs to the age of 18 was that more needs to be done to produce pathway plans and educational targets for children in the care system. This focus on improving the pipeline for looked after children is one shared by the authors of this report.⁴⁷

The second main recommendation was that there need to be stronger tailored interventions to support attendance in further education of looked after children and care leavers. They found that the extension of VSHs allowed much better monitoring post-16, and that local authorities enhancing monitoring of attendance and providing interventions, such as funding equipment for specific courses and transport, would be productive.⁴⁸

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

A photograph of a diverse group of students sitting in a lecture hall, listening to a lecturer. The students are of various ethnicities and are looking towards the front of the room. The lecturer is a man with short dark hair, wearing a blue shirt, seen from the back. The lecture hall has red walls and grey seats.

Care leavers are one of **the least likely** groups to go to university. Only travellers of Irish heritage, SEN pupils with an EHC plan and young people from Gypsy/Roma ethnic background do worse.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Department for Education (2023) Widening participation in higher education. Available at: [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/114444/Widening-participation-in-higher-education-2021-22-Explore-education-statistics-GOV.UK.pdf) (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk) (Accessed: 13 July 2023). Within the "all_characteristics" spreadsheet in the data files.

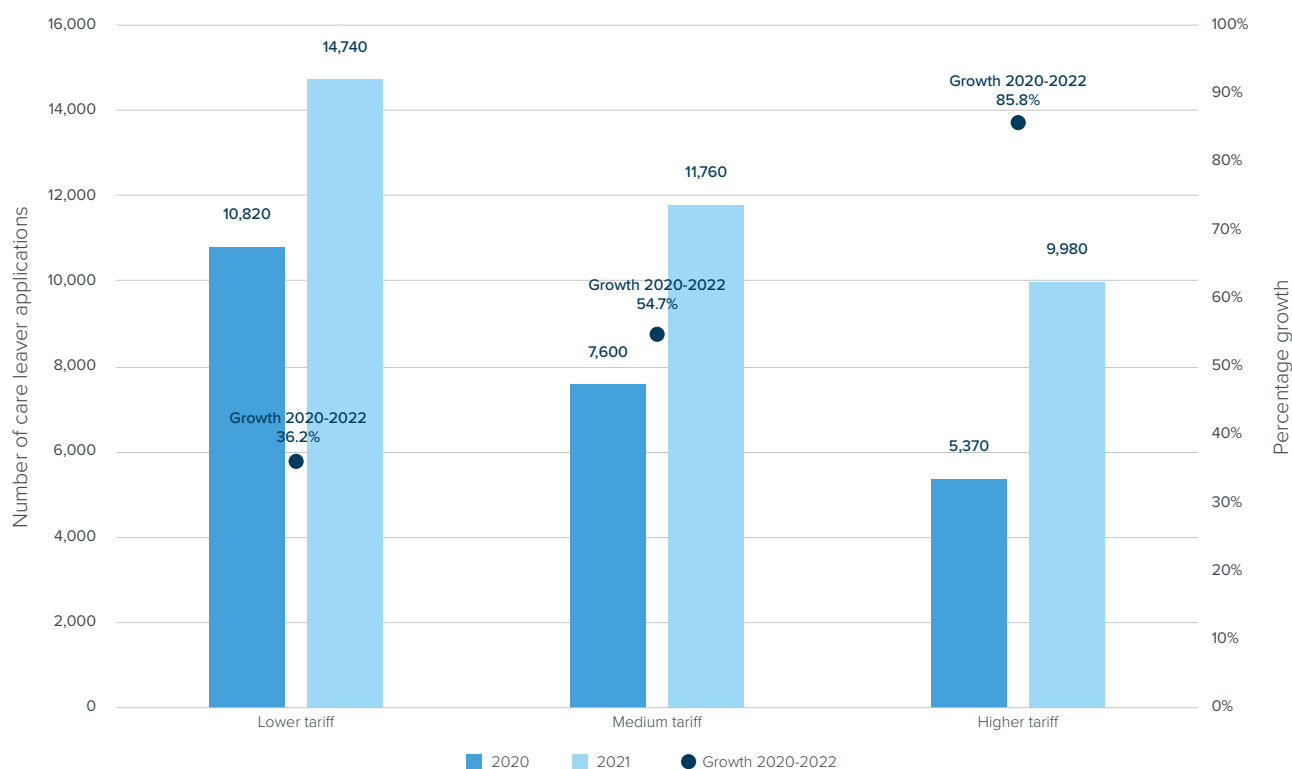
Progression into higher education

The number of care experienced university entrants each year can be measured through UCAS. Since 2008, UCAS applications have included a question where applicants can share their care experience circumstances.

'UCAS defined care leaver' shows students who self-declared on their UCAS as having been in care for three months or more at some point in their life, it also includes non-UCAS entrants who meet this definition.

In 2008, there were 4,495 applicants disclosing a care background. In 2022, there were 8,930, an increase of 99 per cent. The number rose 38 per cent between 2020 (6,450) and 2022.

Figure 2.2: The number of applications made by applicants with care-experience by provider tariff group, UK universities, 2020-2021



Source: UCAS (2022) Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education. Available at: <https://wwwucas.com/> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Even more reassuringly, this impressive growth in care experienced applicants is fastest in applications to higher tariff universities. There are far more applications than applicants as applicants are allowed to make up to five applications.

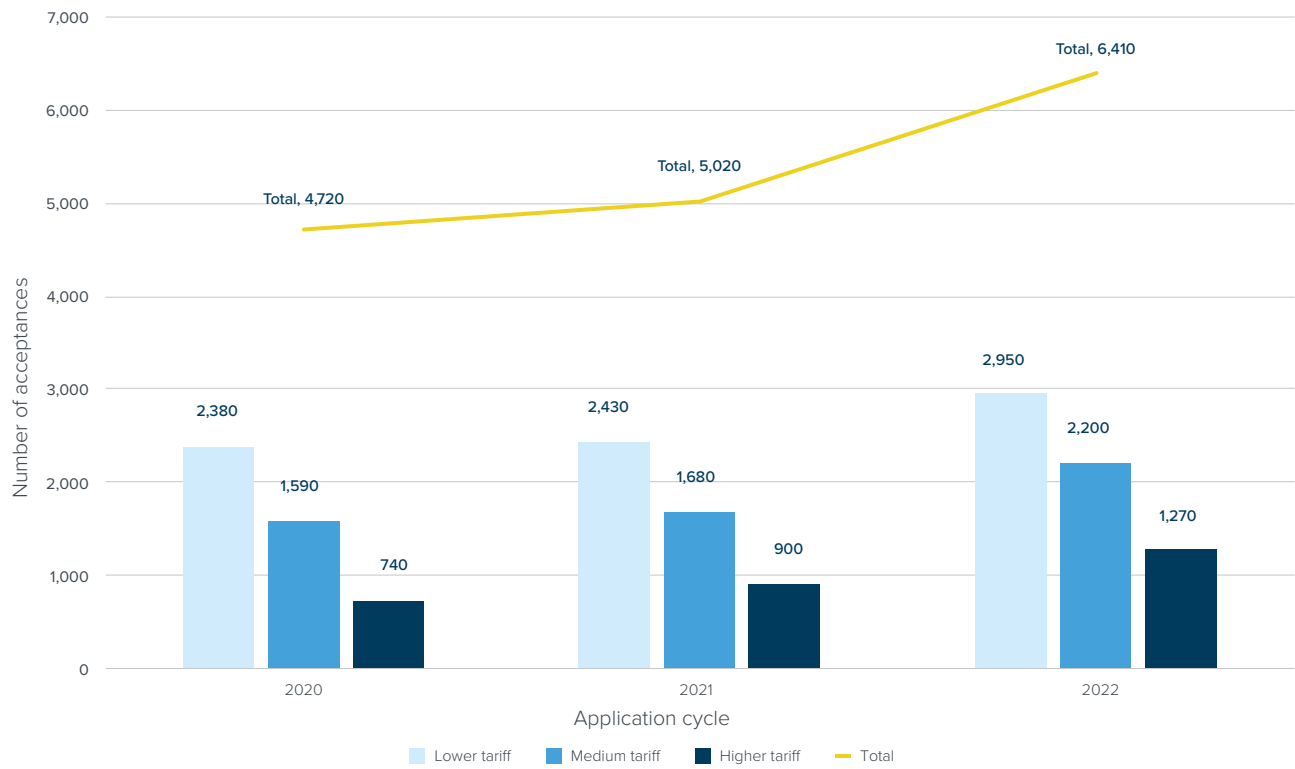
This data does not show us the progression rate of care leavers into university. This is very clear as in 2018/19 there were only 5,010 young people entering a 'sustained education destination'⁵⁰ following their GCSE year and yet there were 6,410 care experienced acceptances into university in 2022.

This is partly because of the range of care experience, which ranges from relatively short periods in care at specific points in childhood to an entire childhood in care. It is also partly because of mature students, as many care experienced university applicants are older.

The figures remain highly reassuring, however, as they show a strong growth rate.

50 Note: A sustained education destination includes school sixth forms, sixth-form colleges, FE colleges, and other education settings.

Figure 2.3: The number of acceptances with care-experience by provider tariff group, UK universities, 2020-2022



Source: UCAS (2022) Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education. Available at: <https://wwwucas.com/> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

How Scotland tripled the number of care leavers at Scottish universities

As First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon made improving the children's social care system in Scotland a priority for her government. In the years between 2016 to 2022 the number of care leavers attending Scottish universities tripled.⁵¹ This is an untold success story that doesn't get enough attention.

In 2014 the Scottish Government launched a Commission on Widening Access to higher education noting that, at the time, young Scottish care leavers were almost seven times less likely to go onto higher education compared to all young people in Scotland.⁵²

The final report of the commission made a series of recommendations for improving access to university for Scottish children in the care system, including a guaranteed offer of a place at a higher education institution and a new bursary scheme for care experienced students.⁵³

The Guaranteed Offer

Only about half of Scottish domiciled university applicants receive an offer of a place on a course at a Scottish university, meaning half of applications are unsuccessful.⁵⁴ In practice this will mean many care experienced students will miss out on a place at university due to the intensity of competition for places.

In 2019 the Scottish Government and all 18 universities and higher education institutions in Scotland agreed to guarantee offers to care experienced applicants who met the minimum entry requirements for any course they applied for.⁵⁵ This national commitment ensured that any applicant with experience of care would receive priority over other applicants if they meet the minimum requirements for the course.

The Care Experienced Bursary (CEB)

The Care Experienced Bursary (CEB) was launched in 2019 and provides care experienced students, studying for an undergraduate degree at a Scottish university, with a non-income assessed, non-repayable grant of £9,000 (£8,100 in 2019).⁵⁶ There is also grant funding available to cover accommodation costs during the long summer break. This grant replaced loans to cover living costs with a non-repayable bursary. Unlike the rest of the UK, Scottish students at Scottish universities pay no tuition fees.

What happened next

Since 2015/16 the number of care experienced students studying for an undergraduate degree at a Scottish university has grown from 445 (0.5 per cent of all undergraduates) to 1,685 (1.9 per cent) in 2020/21.⁵⁷ An increase of almost 280 per cent.

51 Scottish Government (2022) *Maintaining the Momentum Towards Fair Access: Annual Report 2022*. Available at: www.gov.scot (Accessed: 3 July 2023); p13

52 Scottish Government (2016) *The final report of the commission on widening access*. Available at: www.gov.scot (Accessed: 3 July 2023) p51 [six per cent of looked after children were in higher education nine months after leaving school, compared with 39 per cent of all children].

53 Ibid.

54 Universities Scotland (2019) *Scotland's universities to guarantee offers to care experienced applicants who meet minimum entry requirements*. Available at: www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/scotlands-universities-to-guarantee-offers-to-care-experienced-applicants-who-meet-minimum-entry-requirements (Accessed: 3 July 2023).

55 Adams, R (2019) 'Scotland's universities to offer guaranteed places to care leavers', *The Guardian*, 25 July. Available at: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jul/25/scotlands-universities-offer-guaranteed-places-students-in-care (Accessed: 3 July 2023).

56 SAAS, *Support for Care Experienced students*. Available at: www.saas.gov.uk/full-time/support-for-care-experienced-students (Accessed: 3 July 2023).

57 Scottish Government (2022) *Maintaining the Momentum Towards Fair Access: Annual Report 2022*. Available at: www.gov.scot (Accessed: 3 July 2023); p13

Following through to enrolment, the DfE have provided that in the year 2020/21, a total of 4,290 care experienced⁵⁸ individuals entered higher education.

Of these, 580 entered high tariff providers. This suggests that 430, or nine per cent, of those accepted did not enrol. The table below illustrates the DfE data.

Table 2.1: Care leavers entrants into Higher Education, UK, 2020/21

Academic Year	Care leavers entrants at high tariff HE institutions	Care leavers entrants at all HE
2018/19	435	3,570
2019/20	505	3,895
2020/21	580	4,290

Source: UK Parliament (2022) Higher Education: Care Leavers. Question for Department for Education (UIN HL298) by Lord Farmer (17 May 2022), answered by Baroness Barran on 31 May 2022. Available at : <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-17/hl298> (Accessed : 20 June 2023).

This measurement provides a ‘wide brush’ measure of estimating the number of care experienced young people applying to and joining university each year.

We cannot estimate a care experienced progression rate using this measure alone as this measure simply indicates the total incidence of care experienced people applying to and entering university, not just those who have recently finished school.

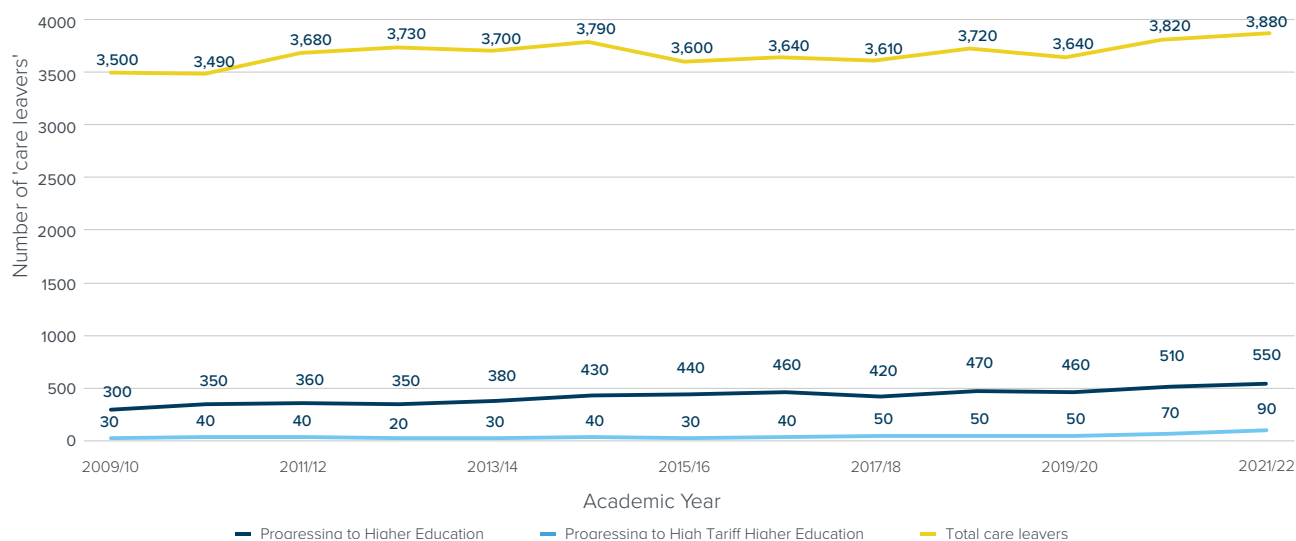
Care leaver progression rate

Care leaver progression into university can also be measured using a ‘narrow brush’ approach, as is done by the DfE. This looks at young people aged 18 or 19 who progress straight into university from school, it also uses the stricter ‘care leaver’ definition as opposed to self-declared ‘care experience’.

58 These individuals were UCAS defined care leavers and/or satisfied the condition called ‘Care leaver (16+)’, and this refers to individuals who can reasonably be verified by the HE provider as having been in care on or after their 16th birthday.

'Narrow brush'

Figure 2.4: Progression into Higher Education of young people aged 18 to 19 who are 'care leavers', England, 2009/10-2020/21



Source: Department for Education (2023) Widening participation in higher education. Available at: [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education) (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk) (Accessed: 13 July 2023). Within the 'all_characteristics' spreadsheet in the data files.

The DfE have also provided, since 2012, a database called 'Widening Participation in Higher Education' which uses data from local authorities across the country to present a detailed breakdown of the characteristics of students entering higher education at age 18 or 19.

This significantly narrows the care leaver base as it focusses on a specific age group – those who have just finished KS5. This narrowing allows us to track a 'progression rate'.

Being a 'care leaver' according to this DfE definition has much stricter criteria than being care experienced. To be a 'care leaver', the individuals must either have been looked after continuously for 12 months or more on the 31 March 2018 or be a special school pupil who was at least 15 at the beginning of the academic year.

In the year 2021/22, a total of 245,140 pupils under 19 progressed into a higher education institution – only 550 of these pupils had been looked after in care continuously for 12 months or more at 31 March 2018.

This means that of all 18- or 19-year-olds in that cohort who had been continuously looked after for 12 months or more on 31 March 2018, only **14 per cent progressed into higher education by the age of 19**.⁵⁹

In comparison, 47 per cent of all other children had progressed into higher education in 2021/22 by the time they turned 19. If you compare these figures to those of a decade ago, not much has changed – the number of children not in care who progressed to higher education by the age of 19 in 2012 was still over three times that of the number of children in care who progressed (36 per cent versus 10 per cent).

⁵⁹ Note: The latest year of data is pupils who were looked after continuously for 12 months or more on 31st March 2017 who progressed to HE by age 19 by 2020/21. The data is presented based on the year the pupil was aged 19 but the looked after status is on 31st March in the academic year when the pupil was aged 15. The Department for Education follow progress from age 15 until age 19.

When looking at high tariff higher education institutions, the 31 providers who require the highest number of UCAS points for entry,⁶⁰ children in care once again only account for a small percentage of pupils entering these institutions. After Travellers of Irish Heritage, SEN pupils with an EHC plan and young people from a Gypsy/Roma ethnic background, looked after children are the least likely group to attend a high tariff institution. Looked after children for 12 months or more are 56 per cent less likely to go to high tariff institutions than children from the most disadvantaged financial backgrounds, and 52 per cent less likely than children entitled to free school meals.

The progression rate to high tariff higher education institutions for looked after children continuously for at least 12 months was two per cent in 2021/22 – the highest figure for over a decade – but was still over 10 per cent lower than the progression rate for other pupils (14 per cent). Of all young people under 19, 70,480 progressed to a high tariff higher education institution in 2021/22, but only 90 – the equivalent of 0.1 per cent – were pupils who had been looked after continuously for at least 12 months.

There has been reasonable growth in the ‘progression rate’ of care leavers, but still very few enter higher education, and a tiny fraction enter high tariff universities.

60 Note: A high tariff higher education institution is calculated by the DfE by grouping HE providers into low, medium and high tariff providers based on the normalised mean tariff score of their intake. The cohort used for the calculation is UK domiciled full-time first year entrants to undergraduate courses at UK Higher Education Providers who are aged under 21. The providers relate to those providing returns to the HESA Student Record and Alternative Provider Record. The calculation of mean tariff is based on the UCAS tariff points of the cohort, where each individual points score is normalised to reflect the equivalent of the top three A level score achieved by the entrant.

71 per cent of care leavers who graduate from university are in employment, further study or a combination of both, 18 months after graduation compared to **77 per cent** of non care leavers.⁶¹



61 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

Care experienced university applicants

- Age: **Care experienced university applicants are over twice as likely to be aged 25 or over** and three quarters more likely to be aged 21 or over than other university applicants.
- Qualifications: In 2022, **care experienced university applicants were 112 per cent more likely to apply university with an Access to HE diploma** than university applicants who were not care experienced, who in turn were 77 per cent more likely to apply using only A-Level qualifications than care experienced students.
- Tariff: In 2022, care experienced applicants were 22 per cent more likely to apply to a lower tariff university than those without care experience, whilst **non-care experienced applicants were 31 per cent more likely to apply to a higher tariff university**.⁶²
- Course: In 2022, care experienced applicants were 69 per cent more likely to apply for nursing or midwifery than other applicants and were 167 per cent more likely to apply for health and social care. Conversely, **those without care experience were 73 per cent more likely to apply for physics, astronomy, or chemistry**.
- These factors interrelate with one another extensively. For example, in 2022, **18-year-old care experienced university applicants were over twice as likely to apply to a higher tariff university than those over 18**.
- Similarly, those applying to university with qualifications such as BTECs and Access to HE diplomas are more likely to apply to lower tariff universities and less likely to apply for STEM subjects or traditional humanities such as geography, history and economics.
- In 2022, just 35 per cent of care experienced individuals that had applied for university said that they had received any information, advice or guidance about going to university or college from their local authority, such as from an adviser or social worker.⁶³

As noted, the number of care experienced university applicants in the UK has doubled between 2008 and 2022, there were 4,495 in 2008 and 8,930 in 2022.⁶⁴ Over 4,000 of these 8,930 applicants had been in care for three years or more, and 6,340 had been in care for at least a year. Excellent work from the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford and from UCAS allows us a good understanding of the characteristics of this growing cohort.

Age and sex

Research looking at the age of students at the end of their first year conducted by the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford has shown that care experienced students tend to be older than non-care experienced students. **They found that while over 90 per cent of non-care leavers were either 19 or 20 at the end of their first year, under 60 per cent of care leavers were either 19 or 20**. Care leavers were also found to be over three times as likely to be aged 21 to 23 at the end of their first year (40 per cent versus 13 per cent).⁶⁵

Researchers found that care experienced students were over twice as likely to be 25 or older compared with non-care experienced students (17 per cent versus eight per cent).⁶⁶

The UCAS 'Next Steps' report in 2022 canvassed care experienced university applicants and repeated these findings. Their research found that in 2022, care experienced applicants were 75 per cent more likely to be

62 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Harrison, N. (2019) 'Patterns of participation in higher education for care experienced students in England: why has there not been more progress?', *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(9), pp.1986-2000. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03075079.2019.1582014?journalCode=csh20 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

66 Ibid.

aged 21 or over. 27.6 per cent of care experienced applicants were at least 21, compared with just 15.8 per cent of all other applicants.⁶⁷ Conversely, non-care experienced applicants were 33 per cent more likely to be aged 18 or under.⁶⁸

Two-thirds (66 per cent) of care experienced applicants are female, compared to 58 per cent of all applicants. Of care experienced undergraduate students in 2021/22, 63 per cent were female, compared to 57 per cent of all undergraduate students.⁶⁹ This is particularly striking as 64 per cent of 18-year-old care leavers in 2021 were men,⁷⁰ suggesting that the proportion of care experienced women applying to higher education is over three and a half times higher than for men.

Part-time university students tended to have roughly the same age profile for care experienced and non-care experienced students.⁷¹

Ethnicity

Nearly three quarters (73 per cent) of UK undergraduate students whose ethnicity is known are white, this figure is 62 per cent for care experienced students. Children in the care system are slightly more ethnically diverse than the general population of the UK, and those who are white have a lower progression into university.⁷²

This is unsurprising as white children in the UK are significantly less likely to go to university than those of other ethnic backgrounds.⁷³

Care experienced undergraduate students are particularly likely to be black. Seventeen per cent of care experienced undergraduate students whose ethnicity is known are black, compared to just seven per cent of all UK undergraduate students.⁷⁴

Interestingly, black care experienced students are particularly likely to be older and female. Over two thirds (67 per cent) of black care experienced undergraduate students are female and as many are 30 or older as are 18-20 years old (31 per cent for both).⁷⁵

Forty-five per cent of black female care experienced undergraduate students are at least 25 years old, compared to 34 per cent of black male care experienced undergraduate students and 21 per cent of Asian female care experienced undergraduate students.⁷⁶

Asian care experienced students are the most likely to be 20 years old or younger. They are 68 per cent more likely than black care experienced students to be aged 20 or under.⁷⁷

Qualifications

67 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

68 Ibid.

69 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023). *Data has been prepared and provided in a form which complies with Jisc Services Standard Rounding Methodology*. Copyright Jisc 2023. Neither Jisc nor Jisc Services Limited can accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from data or other information supplied by Jisc or Jisc Services Limited. The relevant data has been subject to the completion of a HE Provider Preview, notifying higher education providers and providing them with a preview of the proposed supply of the information.

70 NSPCC (2021) *Statistics briefing: looked after children*. Available at: www.nspcc.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

71 Harrison, N. (2019) 'Patterns of participation in higher education for care experienced students in England: why has there not been more progress?', *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(9), pp.1986-2000. Available at: [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03075079.2019.1582014](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1582014)?journalCode=csh20 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

72 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023).

73 gov.uk (2022), 'Entry rates into higher education', Available at: [Entry rates into higher education - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures \(ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/entry-rates-into-higher-education)

74 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023).

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

In 2022, care experienced applicants were 112 per cent more likely to apply to university with an Access to HE Diploma and 46 per cent more likely to apply with only BTECs. Conversely, they were 40 per cent less likely to apply with A-Levels. This result matches other KS5 data on how few care experienced young people take A-Levels.

The report by the Rees Centre also found that care experienced students were less likely to have A-Levels than other university students. They particularly found that care experienced mature students were less likely to have A-Levels than other university students and more likely to have other Level 3 qualifications.

They found that a majority of non-care experienced students (54 per cent) entered university with A-Level qualifications, whilst for care experienced students, less than a third (33 per cent) entered university with A-Level qualifications. Nearly three in five care experienced students (59 per cent) entered university with another Level 3 qualification, an Access to HE diploma, or lower than Level 3 qualifications. This was compared to two in five (41 per cent) non-care experienced students.

These two variables – age and entry qualifications – were highly related. Almost half (47 per cent) of the care experienced students aged 20 or under had entered with A-Levels, compared to less than six per cent of those aged 25 and over. Similarly, just one per cent of the care experienced students aged 20 or under had entry qualifications below Level 2, compared with over a fifth of those aged 25 and over.

This illustrates that the comparatively high proportion of care experienced university students entering higher education as mature students tend to have had different educational experiences to those entering higher education at 18- or 19-years-old. This supports other research suggesting mature care experienced students tend to have experienced educational disruption and disengagement and then returned to education sometime after.⁷⁸

Academic standard

In 2022, eight per cent of care experienced applicants averaged the top grade (grade 9) across their top three GCSEs, compared with 18 per cent of other applicants. Twenty-two per cent of care experienced applicants averaged either 8 or 9 across their top three GCSEs, compared with 38 per cent of other applicants.⁷⁹

Of those applying with A-Levels, care experienced 18-year-olds are 51 per cent less likely to have A*AA or above at A-Level and 31 per cent less likely to have ABB or above at A-Level. Just over a third (35 per cent) of care experienced applicants had an average across their top three GCSE grades of 7 or above,⁸⁰ compared with over half (53 per cent) of all applicants.

Tariff groups

In 2022, care experienced applicants were 22 per cent more likely to apply to a lower tariff university than those without care experience, whilst non-care experienced applicants were 31 per cent more likely to apply to a higher tariff university.⁸¹ This was largely because care experienced applicants tended to be older than those without care experience.

Eighteen-year-old applications with care experience were fairly spread across tariff levels. Thirty-two per cent of applications were to higher tariff universities, 33 per cent to medium tariff universities and 35 per cent to lower tariff universities.⁸²

Other care experienced applications were far more heavily weighted towards lower tariff level universities. Just

78 Gilligan, R. and Brady, E. (2022) 'What helps adult care leavers return to education? exploring the relevance of learner identity and the life course perspective', *Journal of Youth Studies*. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2022.2098706 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

79 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

80 For example, if a students' top three GCSE grades are 8,7 and 6, that would be an average of 7.

81 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

82 Ibid.

15 per cent of applications from care experienced individuals older than 18 were to higher tariff universities, 28 per cent were to medium tariff universities and 57 per cent were to lower tariff universities.⁸³

This means that 18-year-old care experienced university applicants, applying to university straight after KS5, are over twice as likely to apply to higher tariff universities than older care experienced students.

Subjects

In 2022, care experienced applicants were 69 per cent more likely to apply for nursing or midwifery than other applicants. They were also 167 per cent more likely to apply for health and social care.⁸⁴

University applicants in 2022 without care experience were more likely to apply for traditional STEM subjects, for example they were 73 per cent more likely to apply for physics, astronomy, or chemistry and 43 per cent more likely to apply for maths or engineering.⁸⁵ Fewer than one in 300 students that are studying medicine, veterinary sciences or mathematics have care experience.⁸⁶

University applicants who were not care experienced were also more likely to apply for humanities subjects, for example they were double as likely to apply for economics and 63 per cent more likely to apply for history and archaeology or geography, earth and environmental studies.⁸⁷

The UCAS 'Next Steps' report had five recommendations alongside its research. These are outlined below:

1. 'UK Government departments to share verified data about applicants who have been in care to facilitate better targeting and consistency of support and offer-making strategies'.
2. 'Higher education admissions policies to recognise the impact of educational disruption, with clear commitments regarding offer-making strategies for care experienced applicants published online'.
3. 'Greater support for care experienced mature students through common routes, such as the Access to HE Diploma and, in future, the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE)'.
4. 'Closer engagement with the networks and individuals that care experienced students trust for information and advice'.
5. 'Universities and colleges should consider opportunities to improve the care experienced student experience holistically across the whole institution, and review current practice to address challenges – this should be student led, and acknowledge the intersectionality of care experience with other characteristics'.⁸⁸

These observations provide important information on the pipeline into higher education for care experienced young people. The questions that remain are what proportion of these care experienced young people who have experienced educational disruption or disengagement have returned to education as mature students, what motivated them to do so and, by extension, how can policy ensure that those who do leave education before higher education have an accessible route back into education.

83 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

84 Ibid.

85 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

86 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023).

87 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

88 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Support applying to university

In our roundtable of experts, there was significant concern that care experienced young people receive insufficient and inconsistent support when looking to apply for university.

In 2022, just 35 per cent of care experienced individuals that had applied for university said that they had received any information, advice or guidance about going to university or college from their local authority, such as from an adviser or social worker.⁸⁹ This figure is also likely far higher than it is for those who had not applied for university.

This mirrored findings from our roundtable of experts, some of whom commented that social workers have differing levels of experience of higher education, and different attitudes about it.

Just 31 per cent of care experienced university applicants in 2022 knew that there was support available for care experienced students in higher education before they started the application process.⁹⁰

University support was better but varied: 27 per cent of care experienced university applicants said that none of their chosen universities had contacted them about the support available for them as care experienced individuals, and only 13 per cent said that all of their chosen universities had contacted them.⁹¹

Care experienced university applicants generally did not feel especially supported at school or college throughout their school career: 39 per cent felt unsupported with social and extra-curricular support, 34 per cent felt unsupported educationally and 28 per cent felt unsupported in general and pastoral support.⁹²

Care experienced university applicants did, however, generally feel supported by their pathway plan personal advisor: 62 per cent of care experienced university applicants felt supported by their pathway plan personal advisors in careers information and general advice and guidance and only 13 per cent felt unsupported.⁹³

Sheffield University 'Pathways to University' report⁹⁴

In 2019, Sheffield University released a report called 'Pathways to University' where they interviewed 234 care experienced students at universities across England and Wales and published detailed findings and recommendations.

Over half (51 per cent) of the respondents had considered dropping out of university.⁹⁵ The main reasons cited were workload, health, money and personal issues. Sixty-eight per cent of survey respondents had experienced mental health difficulties whilst at university.⁹⁶

Seventy per cent said that they had found it easy to make friends, although 41 per cent said they felt different from their peers and 55 per cent were not comfortable sharing their care background.⁹⁷

One element of university that can be extremely difficult for care experienced people, particularly those who have experienced childhood trauma, is the drinking and drugs culture of university. Twenty-seven per cent said that they found the volume of drinking and drug use required for a social life to be excessive.⁹⁸

89 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Ellis, K. and Johnston, C. (2019 & 2020) *Pathways to University from Care: Findings Report One and Two*. University of Sheffield. Available at: www.sheffield.ac.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

One finding highlighted in the report is ‘Staying Put’.⁹⁹ Since 2014, fostered young people in England have the right to stay with their foster families when they reach 18, if both parties agree. Sixty-one per cent of those with foster care experience who were interviewed by Sheffield University had made use of Staying Put and 75 per cent of that group had found the scheme helpful. Here, Sheffield University recommended that foster carers should be properly reimbursed by the government for offering Staying Put.¹⁰⁰

The Office for Students (OfS) has performed extensive work into widening participation of care experienced students at university and a more complete understanding of different types of care experience.¹⁰¹ To do this, they have, alongside the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), changed the HESA field on care leavers at university so that it captures a wider range of care experience. Students report one of the following options:

- Looked after in Scotland.
- In care in the rest of the UK.
- Not a care leaver.
- Care leaver.
- Care experienced.
- Self-declared care experience but not confirmed.
- No experience of care.
- Not known.
- Prefer not to say.
- Not available.

This more detailed understanding of care experienced students helps universities to know which students need what support and how best to offer it.

The OfS have made admirable improvements in their data capture of care experience in higher education and there is consequently rich data on care experienced students and care experienced graduates. This focus has undoubtedly improved support of and prospects for these individuals.

They are, however, held back by the lack of information on children looked after and care experienced teenagers in KS5, where there is a ‘cliff-edge’ of support for and data on looked after children.

99 The Fostering Network (2016) *Staying Put*. Available at: www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/practice-information/staying-put#:~:text=A%20staying%20put%20arrangement%20is%20not%20the%20same,leaver%20and%20will%20be%20allocated%20a%20personal%20advisor (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

100 Ellis, K. and Johnston, C. (2019 & 2020) *Pathways to University from Care: Findings Report One and Two*. University of Sheffield. Available at: www.sheffield.ac.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

101 Wright, R. (2021) *Care experienced students in higher education: Building a fuller (data) picture*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/care-experienced-students-in-higher-education-building-a-fuller-data-picture/#:~:text=The%20OfS%20and%20HESA%20have%20developed%20an%20improved,butt%20are%20not%20supported%20by%20their%20local%20authority (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

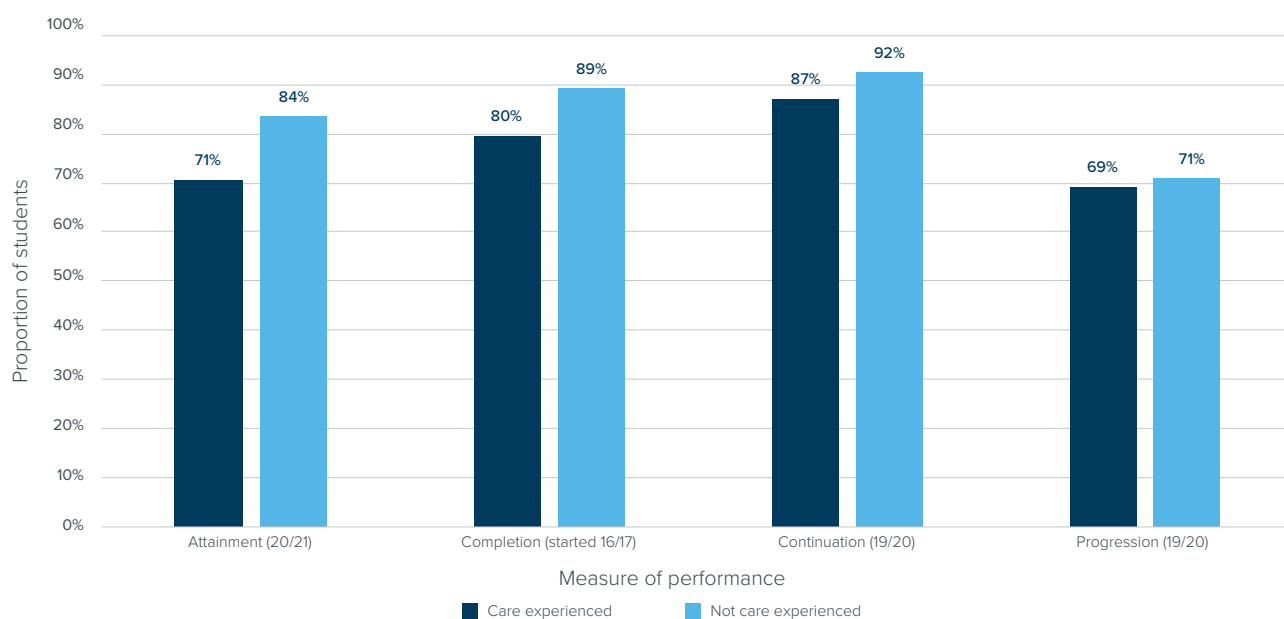
Performance at university

- Of those starting their degrees in 2019/20, 87 per cent of care experienced students continued in their second year, just five percentage points below the 92 per cent of all other students that continued into their second year.
- Of those that started their degrees in 2016/2017, 80 per cent of care experienced students completed their degree. Much as this is impressive, it means that one in five did not complete their degrees, almost double the 11 per cent of all other students that did not complete their degrees.
- In 2020/21, 71 per cent of care experienced graduates achieved a 2:1 or a 1st in their degree, compared with 84 per cent of all other graduates.

There are four main measures of student performance at university: continuation, completion, attainment, and progression measures.

Overall, care experienced university students perform only a little worse at university than the general population. Considered in the wider context of educational performance of care experienced individuals, **the cohort of care experienced university students perform outstandingly well**. This is clear in terms of continuing through from starting university to finishing it, the grade achieved at university, and the outcomes sometime after leaving.

Figure 2.5: Measuring performance at university by care experience, most recent year



Source: Office for Students (2022) Student characteristics data: Outcomes data. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-characteristics-data/outcomes-data-dashboard/> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Continuation

The continuation rate measures the proportion of students who continued into second year after their first year of university.¹⁰²

Care leavers are slightly more likely to withdraw from their studies at university than the general population.

Most recent estimates suggest that care experienced students entering their studies in 2017-18 have had a continuation rate of 87.1 per cent, 5.3 percentage points below that of non-care experienced students, whose continuation rates are 92.4 per cent.¹⁰³ This has shrunk in the last five years – five years ago the gap was almost eight per cent.¹⁰⁴

Completion

The completion rate measures the proportion of students completing their degree.¹⁰⁵

Completion rates suggest a slightly larger gap, where care experienced students are 9.6 percentage points less likely to complete than non-care experienced students (for the most recent cohort we have data for).¹⁰⁶

Still, four fifths of care experienced university students complete their degree, a very high proportion.

Attainment

The university attainment rate is the most direct measure of performance in degrees as it measures the proportion of graduating students receiving a 2:1 grade or above in their degree.¹⁰⁷

Over 70 per cent of care experienced students achieve a first or 2:1 grade in their degree. Although impressively high, this is a little lower than the attainment rate for non-care experienced students and a little down from 72.3 per cent in 2019-20.¹⁰⁸

It is considerably up from 66.5 per cent in 2018-19 – the last year before Covid-19 related disruptions.

Research has shown that when adjusting for other background circumstances other than care experience, however, the discrepancies disappear.¹⁰⁹ This suggests that care experienced students perform as well as individuals who have no care experience but are otherwise from an equivalent background.

For non-care experienced students, these figures were 78 per cent in 2018-19, 83.3 per cent in 2019-20, and 83.6 per cent in 2020-21, respectively. This means that the gap has grown from around 11.5 percentage points to 13 percentage points in two years.¹¹⁰

102 Office for Students (2022) *Student characteristics data: Student outcomes*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). OfS definition.

103 Office for Students (2022) *Annex B: Differences in student outcomes – further characteristics: Care experience*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

104 Office for Students (2022) *Student characteristics data: Student outcomes*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

105 Office for Students (2022) *Student characteristics data: Student outcomes*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). OfS definition.

106 Office for Students (2022) *Student characteristics data: Outcomes data*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-characteristics-data/outcomes-data-dashboard (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

107 Office for Students (2022) *Student characteristics data: Student outcomes*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). OfS definition.

108 Jack, P. (2022) *Care leavers 'lack support' getting into university*. Available at: www.timeshighereducation.com/news/care-leavers-lack-support-getting-university#:~:text=Recent%20figures%20from%20the%20Office%20for%20Students%20show,%E2%80%93%20down%20from%2072.3%20per%20cent%20in%202019-20 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

109 Harrison, N. (2019) *Higher education can be a transformative experience for care leavers*. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/higher-education-can-be-a-transformative-experience-for-care-leavers (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

110 Office for Students (2022) *Student characteristics data: Outcomes data*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-characteristics-data/outcomes-data-dashboard (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Graduate outcomes

The progression rate measures the proportion of graduates that, 15 months after graduating, are in managerial or professional employment, further study or other positive outcomes among the activities that they were undertaking.¹¹¹

This can be thought of as the final indicator for the proportion of graduates who have had an overwhelmingly successful outcome from higher education.

The progression rate for care experienced graduates was only two percentage points lower than for all graduates for those graduating in 2019/20. This is extraordinarily commendable for those graduates and their universities. We should not ignore this achievement.

Over a quarter (28 per cent) of care experienced graduates had gone on to further study in the six months after graduating, mainly postgraduate or professional. This proportion was higher than for other graduates (25 per cent).¹¹²

Of the care experienced graduates in work, only slightly fewer were in professional roles, at 71 per cent, compared with 77 per cent for other graduates, and the salary levels in those roles were identical. Care experienced graduates are more likely to work in the public sector or in social work and social care jobs than other graduates, and are less likely to be working in finance, law or accountancy.¹¹³

There are some notable patterns surrounding the academic performance of care experienced students at university. Care leavers from an ethnic minority community and non-British care leavers (particularly refugees) on average received lower grades and were doing less well after graduation.¹¹⁴

Disabled graduates – particularly those who had not received a Disabled Students Allowance whilst studying – were less likely to be working after graduation but more likely to be studying.

HESA graduate outcomes data has collected the graduate outcomes of 10 per cent of the 2019/20 and 2020/21 cohorts of care experienced graduates, resulting in a sample of 2,605 care experienced graduates whose outcomes 18 months after graduating (in January 2022 and January 2023, respectively) can be analysed. For non-care experienced graduates, HESA has collected the outcomes of 381,190 individuals.

Employment

By the age of 27, just 22 per cent of care leavers are in employment, compared to 57 per cent of non-care leavers. For university graduates a year and a half after graduating, 71 per cent of care leavers are either in full-time employment, full-time study or were employed and studying, compared with 77 per cent of non-care experienced graduates.¹¹⁵

Looking specifically at employment and not further study, just 6.6 per cent of care experienced graduates were unemployed and not due to start work or further study 18 months after graduating. Meanwhile, 52 per cent of the care experienced graduates were in full-time employment.¹¹⁶

111 Office for Students (2022) *Student characteristics data: Student outcomes*. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). OfS definition.

112 Harrison, N. (2019) *Higher education can be a transformative experience for care leavers*. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/higher-education-can-be-a-transformative-experience-for-care-leavers (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

116 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

For those who were not care experienced the unemployment rate was a little lower, at 4.6 per cent, and the full-time employed group was 58 per cent of the cohort. Care experienced graduates are just 12 per cent less likely to be in full-time employment and **only two percentage points more likely to be unemployed.**¹¹⁷

Of the care experienced graduates that were employed, 69 per cent were in highly skilled work and just 18 per cent were in low-skilled work. This is not dissimilar to non-care experienced graduates, where 73 per cent were in highly skilled work and 15 per cent in low-skilled work.¹¹⁸

Salary

Employed care experienced individuals earn approximately one third less than individuals who have never been in care.¹¹⁹ Employed care experienced graduates earn an estimated 2.5 per cent less than employed non care experienced graduates.¹²⁰ **University can shrink the earnings discrepancy between those with and without care experience by more than nine tenths.**

HESA record salary graduate outcome data 18 months after graduation for 1,115 of the care experienced students that graduated in 2019/20 or 2020/21 and 190,685 of those without care experience. The average salary for care experienced graduates was £26,500 per annum and for those without care experience the average was £27,160 per annum, a discrepancy of just 2.5 per cent, or £660 a year.¹²¹

Occupation

HESA collect data on the occupations of these graduates as well, they do this using the ONS standard occupational classifications.¹²² This uses a sample of 2,000 employed care experienced graduate and 302,330 employed graduates without care experience.

Employed care experienced university graduates are **only five per cent less likely to be working in managerial or professional occupations**¹²³ and are 42 per cent more likely to be in caring and leisure occupations.

Seventy-three per cent of employed non-care experienced graduates were in managerial or professional occupations compared with 69 per cent of those with care experience. 9.2 per cent of employed care experienced graduates were working in caring and leisure occupations compared to just 6.4 per cent of those without care experience.

Twelve per cent of the HESA sample of employed care experienced university graduates were social workers, care workers, or other registered nursing professionals. This is compared to five per cent of those without care experience.

Graduates without care experience were 2.4 times as likely to be working as medical practitioners, management consultants, in finance or as accountants than care leavers.

117 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

118 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023). Where relevant, derived fields containing data on Highly skilled (Highly skilled/ Non-highly skilled) and on Work – Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2020 relates to sources from the Office for National Statistics, Open Government Licence v.3.0

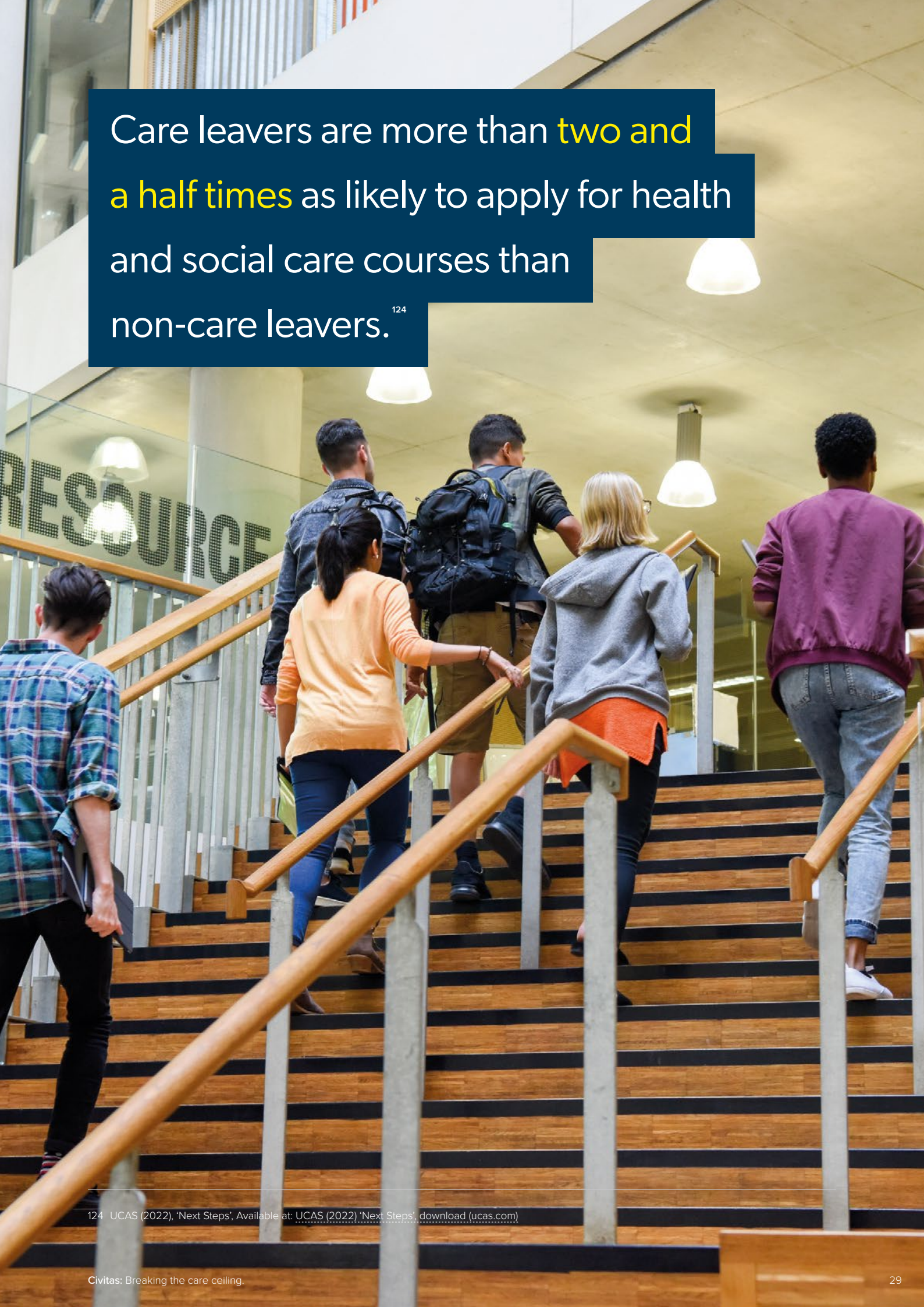
119 Nelson, M. and Anderson, O. (2021) Post-16 Education and labour market outcomes for Looked After Children (LEO). Department for Education. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

120 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023), 18 months after graduating care experienced mean income is £26,500.45 and non-care experienced mean income is £27,157.54.

121 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

122 Where relevant, derived fields containing data on Highly skilled (Highly skilled/ Non-highly skilled) and on Work – Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2020 relates to sources from the Office for National Statistics, Open Government Licence v.3.0

123 This includes 'Associate professional occupations'.



Care leavers are more than **two and a half times** as likely to apply for health and social care courses than non-care leavers.¹²⁴

124 UCAS (2022), 'Next Steps', Available at: UCAS (2022) 'Next Steps', download (ucas.com)

Financial support for care experienced students in the UK

England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Higher education funding arrangements across England, Wales and Northern Ireland are similar.¹²⁵

Students can expect to be charged £9,250 a year for an undergraduate degree in England, £9,000 a year in Wales¹²⁶ and £4,710 in Northern Ireland¹²⁷ – though students can apply for a loan to cover tuition fees and living costs which is repayable once you graduate and earn the threshold amount in each nation. For students from England, the maximum loan which will be given is £13,022; students from Wales may be eligible for a loan of up to £13,375;¹²⁸ and students from Northern Ireland may be eligible for a loan of up to £9,492.¹²⁹

In England and Wales, care leavers starting a higher education course for the first time before their 25th birthday can apply for a one-off bursary of £2,000 from their local authority.¹³⁰ Local authorities in England and Wales (or Trusts in Northern Ireland) are expected to provide some financial support for looked after children from their area participating in higher education, although this is highly variable.¹³¹

Scotland

Scottish domiciled students studying at a Scottish university do not have to pay tuition fees.¹³²

‘Care experienced’ students can apply for a non means tested Care Experienced Students’ Bursary worth £9,000.¹³³ There is no upper age limit for this bursary.¹³⁴

There is an additional non repayable grant (the Care Experienced Grant) of up to £105 per week to help with accommodation costs during the summer holidays.¹³⁵

Scottish higher education institutions are classified as statutory corporate parents under the Children and Young People (Scotland) 2014 Act. This means they have additional duties placed on them to improve access and support care leavers.¹³⁶

125 Propel, *Funding*. Available at: becomecharity.org.uk/get-support/propel/united-kingdom/support-for-young-people/funding (Accessed: 4 July 2023). gov.uk, *Student finance for undergraduates*. Available at: www.gov.uk/student-finance/new-fulltime-students (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

126 Ibid.

127 Student Finance NI (2022) *Information and resources for care leavers*. Available at: www.studentfinancenl.co.uk/practitioners-news/information-and-resources-for-care-leavers (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

128 gov.uk, *Student finance for undergraduates*. Available at: www.gov.uk/student-finance/new-fulltime-students (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

129 Student Finance NI (2022) *Information and resources for care leavers*. Available at: www.studentfinancenl.co.uk/practitioners-news/information-and-resources-for-care-leavers (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

130 Propel, *Funding*. Available at: propel.org.uk/uk/support/funding (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

133 Student Information Scotland, *Financial support for care experienced students*. Available at: www.studentinformation.gov.scot/students/higher-education/care-experienced (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

134 Child Poverty Action Group (2023) *Benefits for care experienced students*. Available at: cpag.org.uk (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

135 SAAS, *Care Experienced Accommodation Grant*. Available at: www.saas.gov.uk/full-time/support-for-care-experienced-students (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

136 Propel, *Funding*. Available at: propel.org.uk/uk/support/funding (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

Improving support for care experienced young people

Boarding schools for children in care

Boarding schools can provide a stable residential environment with a strong focus on education for young people growing up in care. Research conducted by academics at the University of Nottingham on behalf of the Department for Education suggests looked after children placed in a boarding school are more than four times as likely to achieve five good GCSE grades (including maths and English) than similar children who do not attend a boarding school.¹³⁷ They are also more than twice as likely to secure a place at university than disadvantaged children who did not go to boarding school.¹³⁸

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care called for the government to do more to increase the number of looked after children placed in boarding schools. Research by the Children and Families Unit, suggests that there are more than 3,000 spare boarding places in boarding schools that could be used for looked after children and those on the edge of care.¹³⁹

Modelling by the RNCSF suggests there are at least 1,000 children growing up in care who could benefit from a boarding school place.¹⁴⁰ There are likely to be many more who could benefit from an expanded state boarding school sector.

A recent analysis conducted by policy impact consultancy Pro Bono Economics on behalf of RNCSF found that large savings could be made in public expenditure through improved outcomes and avoiding the costs of children's social care.¹⁴¹

In 2018, a 10-year academic study of looked after children placed in Norfolk boarding schools found similar improvements in academic attainment and taxpayer benefits.¹⁴² This analysis also found that almost two thirds (63 per cent) of looked after children went from the highest to the lowest level of risk after being placed in a boarding school.¹⁴³

Responding to recommendations contained within the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, the UK government extended existing programmes to widen access to independent boarding schools. The Broadening Education Pathways Scheme praised the potential of placing looked after children in boarding schools, with a review of evidence showing the policy represents a 'significant value-add in academic attainment, wellbeing and university progression', as well as 'significant value for money for the taxpayer'.¹⁴⁴

While there will always be additional costs associated with a looked after child compared to those with no social worker involvement, it's not hard to see the potential for both young people and the taxpayer in widening access to our historic boarding schools sector. The most expensive boarding schools charge about a quarter of the average cost of a place in a children's home.¹⁴⁵

137 D. Murphy, M. Oliver, M. Adkins, G. De Fraja & S. Chen (2023) 'Final report: An independent evaluation of the outcomes for looked after and vulnerable children attending boarding schools', Department for Education, p2, Available at: [9d6b54_ebc23406d4f54ffb8d9378972bb0621f.pdf \(royalspringboard.org.uk\)](https://royalspringboard.org.uk/9d6b54_ebc23406d4f54ffb8d9378972bb0621f.pdf)

138 D. Murphy, M. Oliver, M. Adkins, G. De Fraja & S. Chen (2023) 'Final report: An independent evaluation of the outcomes for looked after and vulnerable children attending boarding schools', Department for Education, p11 Available at: [9d6b54_ebc23406d4f54ffb8d9378972bb0621f.pdf \(royalspringboard.org.uk\)](https://royalspringboard.org.uk/9d6b54_ebc23406d4f54ffb8d9378972bb0621f.pdf)

139 ISC (2020) *ISC Census and annual report 2020*. Available at: www.isc.co.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). 2020: 69,680 boarders. ISC (2023) *ISC Census and annual report 2023*. Available at: www.isc.co.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). 2023: 66,325 boarders.

140 Royal National Children's Springboard Foundation and the Department for Education, "*Broadening education pathways*" for looked-after & vulnerable children. Available at: www.idpe.org.uk (Accessed: 16 June 2023).

141 Ibid.

142 Norfolk County Council (2018) *Boarding School Placements For Vulnerable Children and Young People*. Available at: www.issuu.com (Accessed: 16 June 2013).

143 Ibid.

144 Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation and the Department for Education, "*Broadening education pathways*" for looked-after & vulnerable children. Available at: www.idpe.org.uk (Accessed: 16 June 2023).

145 See this study by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA): www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-market-study-final-report which found the average cost of a children's home place is approximately £200,000 per annum. The most expensive independent boarding school places will typically cost between £40,000 - £50,000 per annum.

It isn't just the UK's historic independent boarding schools that have a role to play, there are a small number of state boarding schools across the UK who provide boarding at a significantly reduced costs to parents. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care challenged the government to do more to 'increase the supply of boarding school places for looked after children in the state sector' and set aside money for free schools to encourage 'a new wave of state boarding capacity'. This represents a potentially radical option for a future government to significantly increase the number of boarding places available to vulnerable young people. There has so far been no response to this recommendation from the government, with little to suggest that expanded boarding capacity in the state sector is being considered by ministers.

Initiatives for support into and through university

North East Raising Aspiration Partnership (NERAP)

The North East Raising Aspiration Partnership (NERAP) is an award-winning¹⁴⁶ collaboration of the five universities (Durham University, Newcastle University, Northumbria University, University of Sunderland, and Teesside University) in the north east of England.

Individually, each of the five universities delivers a range of programmes and activities to support higher education decision-making. But together, NERAP provide a wide range of in-school and online workshops/activities covering a variety of topics on behalf of all of the university partners for students from Year 2 to Year 11. All activity is mapped against the Gatsby Benchmarks for Good Careers Guidance, the NERUPI framework and the North East Regional Progression Framework. Additionally, NERAP delivers events for teachers, advisers, parents and carers to support information, advice and guidance given to the young people in the region.

The six key aims of NERAP are:

1. 'To **lead** the development of collaborative widening participation and social mobility activity in the region to increase the number of young people applying to and entering higher education.
2. 'To **collaborate** on widening participation projects which benefit students in the region and support partner institutions' core aims and objectives.
3. 'To **inspire** young people from under-represented groups to fully explore all higher education opportunities by providing progressive and/or intensive programmes of support.
4. 'To provide additional capacity for our five partner universities through a programme of **joint representation** visits in primary and secondary schools which enhances the reputation of the higher education offer in the region.
5. 'To make a **measurable difference** in young people's learning, attitudes, knowledge and confidence to progress to higher education among students participating in our core programmes for under-represented groups.
6. 'To set **stretching impact targets** that enable the Partnership to demonstrate the effectiveness of the collaboration to inform the future direction of this work.'¹⁴⁷

146 NERAP (2023) *North East Universities' support for care-leavers wins national education award*. Available at: www.nerap.ac.uk/news/north-east-universities-support-for-care-leavers-wins-national-education-award (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

147 NERAP, About Us. Available at: www.nerap.ac.uk/about-us (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Care experienced students

NERAP – described as ‘sector-leading in its work with care experienced students’¹⁴⁸ – are committed to offering consistent support across each of the five universities to ensure all care experienced students get the same access to support throughout their higher education journey.¹⁴⁹ In 2023, NERAP became the first university partnership in the country to create a regional Care Leaver Covenant.¹⁵⁰

Over the year, NERAP offer the following events:

- Choices Together – an annual progressive programme for care experienced pupils and young carers in Years 7-13¹⁵¹ of both online and in-person events which are ‘dedicated to opening up the world of university and post-18 study, taking place across the year.’
- A training session for foster carers and others supporting care experienced young people which will allow them to ‘develop their awareness and understanding of higher education and the ways in which they can support the young people in their care.’

NERAP are also members of the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL).¹⁵²

Unite Foundation Scholarship

The Unite Foundation is an independent registered charity that offers an accommodation scholarship to care leavers and estranged students. The scholarship provides students’ accommodation and bills year-round for up to three years and offer rapid response to pastoral needs that can negatively affect the student experience.¹⁵³

Unite Foundation Scholarship students must be 25 or younger and studying full-time at one of the 30 universities Unite partners with. Several of these universities are high tariff institutions. By 2022/23, over 600 estranged and young care leaver students had received a Unite Foundation Scholarship.¹⁵⁴

Unite Foundation Scholarship students showed very good progression from the first to second year of their degrees, at the same level as non-care leavers, and 71 per cent completed their first degree in three years. This is some way above the rate for other care leavers (62 per cent) but below the rate for non-care leavers (77 per cent).¹⁵⁵

Unite Foundation Scholarship students also showed good performance in their degrees, with 78 per cent achieving a 2:1 or a 1st in their degree. This is around the same as for non-care leavers (81 per cent), and above the rate for other care leavers (71 per cent).¹⁵⁶

Overall, the Unite Foundation Scholarship students’ performance is closer to that of non-care leavers than care leavers. Statistical analysis from Jisc Analytics suggested that this impressive performance was largely due to receipt of the scholarship.¹⁵⁷ This remarkable programme by the Unite Foundation illustrates the power that improved financial support could have for care leavers in higher education.

148 Durham University (2023) *Top award for project to support care-leaver students*. Available at: www.durham.ac.uk/news-events/latest-news/2023/05/nerap-award-win (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

149 Northumbria University (2023) *North East universities collaborate to improve support for care experienced people*. Available at: newsroom.northumbria.ac.uk/pressreleases/north-east-universities-collaborate-to-improve-support-for-care-experienced-people-3229912 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

150 NERAP (2023) *North East universities collaborate to improve support for care experienced people*. Available at: www.nerap.ac.uk/news/north-east-universities-collaborate-to-improve-support-for-care-experienced-people (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

151 NERAP, *Choices Together*. Available at: www.nerap.ac.uk/students/choices (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

152 NERAP, *Care Experienced Students* Available at: www.nerap.ac.uk/students/care-experienced-students (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

153 Unite Foundation, Available at: thisisusatuni.org/unite-foundation (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

154 Ibid.

155 Jisc data analytics (2022) *The Unite Foundation Scholarship Scheme. A quantitative impact analysis on 10 years of accommodation support for estranged and care leaver students*. Unite Foundation. Available at: thisisusatuni.org/unite-foundation (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

University of Oxford Astrophoria Foundation Year

Starting in Autumn 2023, the University of Oxford is offering an Astrophoria Foundation Year.¹⁵⁸ In this foundation year, students will belong to an Oxford college, but the university offers free accommodation, no course fees and a non-repayable bursary to cover living costs. Up to 50 places will be offered each year.¹⁵⁹

At the end of the year, students are allowed to join an Oxford undergraduate degree or an undergraduate degree at another university, provided they pass.¹⁶⁰

This foundation year is an extremely exciting project from the University of Oxford that can effect great positive change.

Open University

Also launching in 2023/24 is the Open University Care-Experienced Scholarship. The Open University is offering four full-time undergraduate scholarships to care experienced young people aged 25 and under.¹⁶¹ The Open University also provides a £250 bursary to all care experienced students.¹⁶²

There are various eligibility criteria for this foundation year but it is aimed at disadvantaged young people, and all those with care experience are eligible to apply.¹⁶³ Other eligibility characteristics include free school meals, certain school characteristics, and certain postcodes.¹⁶⁴

158 University of Oxford, *Astrophoria Foundation Year*. Available at: foundationyear.ox.ac.uk/home (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

159 Ibid.

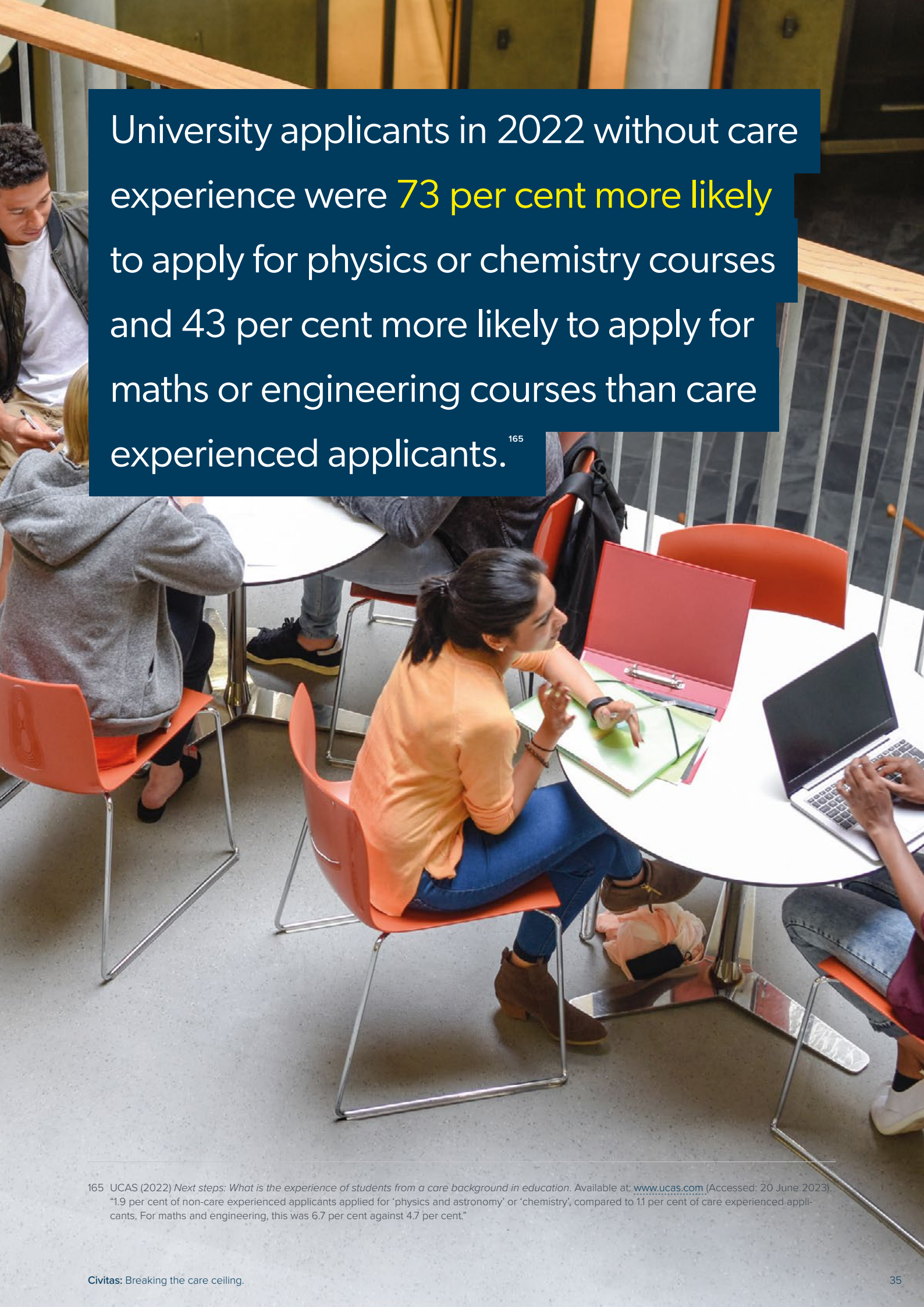
160 Ibid.

161 Open University, *Care Experienced Scholarship*. Available at: www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding/care-experienced-scholarship (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

162 Open University, *Care Experienced Bursary*. Available at: www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding/care-experienced-bursary (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

163 University of Oxford, *Eligibility*. Available at: foundationyear.ox.ac.uk/eligibility#collapse3816756 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

164 Ibid.



University applicants in 2022 without care experience were **73 per cent more likely** to apply for physics or chemistry courses and 43 per cent more likely to apply for maths or engineering courses than care experienced applicants.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023). "1.9 per cent of non-care experienced applicants applied for 'physics and astronomy' or 'chemistry', compared to 1.1 per cent of care experienced applicants. For maths and engineering, this was 6.7 per cent against 4.7 per cent."

3. Applications to and offers from UK universities

- Freedom of Information (Fol) research conducted by the Children and Families Unit suggests there were 17,568 applications made by care experienced individuals for entry into university in 2021/22, **a rise in 40 per cent over two years.**
- In 2021/22, 63 per cent of these applications received an offer, resulting in 11,106 offers for care experienced individuals from UK universities.
- The top university applied to and offered for by care experienced individuals was Manchester Metropolitan University, with 79 per cent more applications and 65 per cent more offers than any other university.
- The University of Bristol offered the most places of all high tariff universities, offering an average of 158 places a year between 2019/20 and 2021/22 at an offer rate of 57 per cent, 15 percentage points higher than their overall offer rate of 42 per cent.¹⁶⁶
- Our evidence suggests that the UCAS tick box is not a particularly good measure of real underlying care experienced population of students.

On the 13 April 2023, the Children and Families Unit sent an Fol request to all UK universities, asking:

‘How many care leavers, according to your institution’s definition of a care leaver¹⁶⁷

(a) applied for an undergraduate degree course at your university

(b) was offered a place at an undergraduate degree course at your university

For the years 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22.’

Our overall response rate was 91.5 per cent,¹⁶⁸ with 76.2 per cent of requests being answered in full. In 4.2 per cent of cases the institutions gave a partial response, generally due to not holding all of the information, and 11.1 per cent of requests were refused or none of the information was held.

The Fol request on enrolments cannot be directly compared with the request on applications and offers. This is because there are large discrepancies across universities over how care experience in students is measured and defined, there is significant variation in how much effort universities put into identifying care leavers, and there are significant problems with universities using the UCAS care experience tick box as the sole indicator of care experience among applicant students.

This does mean that the prevalence of care experienced students at some universities as compared to others has been misrepresented. However, it remains true that the following results are the universities’ declared answers to the questions asked.

¹⁶⁶ University of Bristol, *Applicant numbers and demographics: undergraduate and postgraduate admissions statistics*. Available at: www.bristol.ac.uk/ssio/applicant-statistics (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Correct as of 1 June 2023.

Applications to and from universities

The table below shows the aggregate number of applications to UK universities and offers from the universities. There has been strong growth in the last three years, with the number of applications for enrolment in 2021/22 40 per cent higher than they were for enrolment in 2019/20.

The aggregate data also shows an offer rate of 63.8 per cent on average, and 63.2 per cent in 2022. This is slightly lower than the aggregate offer rate for entrance in 2021/22 of 66.4 per cent.¹⁶⁹

Table 3.1: Applications to and offers from UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	Total	Average
Applications	12,555	14,546	17,568	44,669	14,890
Growth (YoY)		15.9%	20.8%		
Offers	8,065	9,319	11,106	28,490	9,497
Growth (YoY)		15.5%	19.2%		
Offer rate	64.2%	64.1%	63.2%	63.8%	63.8%

Source: Civitas FoI request.

Below shows the universities which received the greatest number of **applications** from care leavers and those which gave the most offers to care leavers. We are not able to provide the universities with the fewest for these statistics as numbers under five have not been given by many universities to protect the identity of individuals.

Table 3.2: Top 10, Applications to UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

University (Top 10)	Number of Applications			Average
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	
Manchester Metropolitan University	496	576	926	666
University of East London	340	360	415	372
Liverpool John Moores University	340	360	401	367
Nottingham Trent University	288	329	444	354
University of the West of England, Bristol	343	333	379	352
University of Derby	255	348	418	340
University of Salford	329	322	361	337
University of Leeds	253	326	392	324
University of Brighton	257	264	366	296
Glasgow Caledonian University	231	287	362	293

Source: Civitas FoI request.

The top 10 universities for the number of offers given to applicants self-declaring care experience is largely similar. Notably, the University of Wolverhampton offered the 5th greatest number of university places over the last three years even though they received the 11th most applications, this was a result of an 87.1 per cent offer rate, the highest in the top 10.

¹⁶⁹ Weale, S. (2022) 'Offer rate for A-level students applying to top universities falls to 55%', *The Guardian*, 15 June. Available at: www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jun/15/offer-rate-for-a-level-students-applying-to-top-universities-falls-to-55 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Table 3.3: Top 10, Offers from UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

University (Top 10)	Offers/offer rate			Average	
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22		
Manchester Metropolitan University	291	375	604	423	63.6%
Liverpool John Moores University	235	247	287	256	69.8%
Nottingham Trent University	189	237	336	254	71.8%
University of East London	230	225	285	247	66.4%
University of Wolverhampton	234	248	246	243	87.1%
University of Brighton	201	228	275	235	79.4%
De Montfort University	184	196	263	214	82.3%
University of the West of England, Bristol	204	191	223	206	58.6%
University of Salford	173	192	222	196	58.0%
University of Derby	171	204	204	193	56.7%

Source: Civitas Fol request.

Top universities by tariff group

The tariff group of each university is measured by the normalised¹⁷⁰ mean tariff score of their intake, that is, the average performance in KS5 of the new students enrolling each year, generally this is the top three A-Level grades of each entrant. It focuses specifically on entrants aged under 21.

The average academic standard at the point of entering university is a good proxy for how hard it is to get into a given university. What the table below shows is that, as would be expected, the universities that care experienced individuals are most drawn to tend to be medium or low tariff universities, with none of the top seven being high tariff universities.

Interestingly, **the 1st, 3rd and 4th most applied to universities by care experienced individuals are all medium tariff universities**, not low tariff. Two of the top five high tariff universities for care experienced applications are in Scotland.

Table 3.4: Top five, Applications to high tariff UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

High Tariff: Top 5 Universities	Number of Applications			Average
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	
University of Leeds (8 th)	253	326	392	324
Glasgow Caledonian University (10 th)	231	287	362	293
University of Bristol (12 th)	250	270	310	277
Edinburgh Napier University (18 th)	186	252	278	239
Queen Mary University London (25 th)	196	195	234	208

NOTE: Overall rank across all tariffs in parentheses.

Source: Civitas Fol request.

¹⁷⁰ All results, across different qualifications, are normalised so that they reflect the equivalent of a student's top three A levels.

Table 3.5: Top five, Applications to medium tariff UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

Medium Tariff: Top 5 Universities	Number of Applications			Average
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	
Manchester Metropolitan University (1 st)	496	576	926	666
Liverpool John Moores University (3 rd)	340	360	401	367
Nottingham Trent University (4 th)	288	329	444	354
University of Salford (7 th)	329	322	361	337
University of Kent (19 th)	235	215	230	227

Source: Civitas Fol request.

Table 3.6: Top five, Applications to low tariff UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

Low Tariff: Top 5 Universities	Number of Applications			Average
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	
University of East London (2 nd)	340	360	415	372
University of the West of England, Bristol (5 th)	343	333	379	352
University of Derby (6 th)	255	348	418	340
University of Brighton (9 th)	257	264	366	296
University of Wolverhampton (11 th)	282	279	275	279

Source: Civitas Fol request.

The lower incidence of care experienced individuals at high tariff institutions is shown more profoundly when looking at offers. We see in Table 3.7 that the university offering the most places of all high tariff universities was the University of Bristol, which was 14th of all universities, and wouldn't have made the top five on either the medium or low tariff lists. That noted, the overall offer rate at the University of Bristol is just 42 per cent, below the offer rate given to care experienced individuals of 57 per cent.¹⁷¹

Table 3.7: Top five, Offers from high tariff UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

High Tariff: Top 5 Universities	Number of Offers			Ave.	Offer rate
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22		
University of Bristol (14 th)	145	160	170	158	57.2%
University of Leeds (16 th)	118	149	178	148	45.8%
Glasgow Caledonian University (20 th)	87	131	193	137	46.7%
University of Liverpool (22 nd)	105	120	174	133	69.9%
Edinburgh Napier University (26 th)	95	137	156	129	54.2%

Source: Civitas Fol request.

171 University of Bristol, *Applicant numbers and demographics: undergraduate and postgraduate admissions statistics*. Available at: www.bristol.ac.uk/ssio/applicant-statistics (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Table 3.8: Top five, Offers from medium tariff UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

Medium Tariff: Top 5 Universities	Number of Offers			Ave.	Offer rate
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22		
Manchester Met. University (1 st)	291	375	604	423	63.6%
Liverpool John Moores University (2 nd)	235	247	287	256	69.8%
Nottingham Trent University (3 rd)	189	237	336	254	71.8%
University of Salford (9 th)	173	192	222	196	58.0%
University of Kent (12 th)	160	150	180	163	72.1%

Civitas: Fol request.

Table 3.9: Top five, Offers from low tariff UK universities, Care experienced, 2019-2022

Low Tariff: Top 5 Universities	Number of Offers			Ave.	Offer rate
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22		
University of East London (4 th)	230	225	285	247	66.4%
University of Wolverhampton (5 th)	234	248	246	243	87.1%
University of Brighton (6 th)	201	228	275	235	79.4%
De Montfort University (7 th)	184	196	263	214	82.3%
UWE, Bristol (8 th)	204	191	223	206	58.6%

Source: Civitas Fol request.



“Spread more information [about university] to people in care, even like little posters, really anything I think could help because I feel like some people don’t even think about going to university. And also, trying to fight that stereotype of people saying children in foster care can’t go to university because they’ve come from this background [of care].”

4. Care leavers in higher education league table

Table 4.1:

Rank*	Institution Name	Care leaver pop. 2021/22**	Total pop. 2021/22***
1	University of East London	295	11,390
2	University of Northumbria at Newcastle	515	21,160
3	University of the West of Scotland	280	13,990
4	University of Stirling	180	9,155
5	University of Suffolk	50	2,545
6	Solent University	170	9,000
7	Leeds Trinity University	200	10,570
8	Anglia Ruskin University	460	25,545
10	Kingston University	220	12,940
11	Bath Spa University	170	10,565
12	University of Hull	170	10,720
14	Glyndwr University	65	4,400
15	University of Derby	240	15,630
16	Edinburgh Napier University	165	11,015
17	Glasgow Caledonian University	225	14,910
18	University of Gloucestershire	90	6,300
19	Canterbury Christ Church University	310	21,410
20	University of Chichester	65	4,800
22	St Mary's University, Twickenham	50	3,670
23	Roehampton University	100	7,865
24	University of Lincoln	175	13,605
25	Goldsmiths College	75	5,725
27	University of Highlands and Islands	105	8,530
28	Edge Hill University	130	10,730
29	University of Central Lancashire	225	19,085
30	Robert Gordon University	115	9,890
31	Buckinghamshire New University	215	18,620
32	University of Wolverhampton	165	14,420
33	Birkbeck College	70	6,025
34	Liverpool Hope University	50	4,360
35	University of Greenwich	190	17,105
36	Cardiff Metropolitan University	95	8,485
37	Birmingham City University	255	22,875
38	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	45	3,955
41	University of Portsmouth	210	19,380
42	University of Surrey	125	11,450
43	University of Bolton	80	7,895
44	University of Aberdeen	105	10,140

Rank*	Institution Name	Care leaver pop. 2021/22**	Total pop. 2021/22***
45	University of South Wales	165	16,320
46	University of Sunderland	140	13,750
47	City, University of London	130	12,660
48	Middlesex University	135	13,680
49	York St John University	55	5,625
50	University of Chester	85	8,620
51	University of Plymouth	150	15,060
53	University College Birmingham	45	4,620
54	London Metropolitan University	100	10,820
55	University of Winchester	65	6,840
57	University of Brighton	125	14,470
58	Bournemouth University	120	13,570
59	University of Strathclyde	140	16,215
60	Aberystwyth University	55	6,465
61	University of Northampton	90	10,635
62	Heriot-Watt University	65	7,565
63	University of Salford	160	18,875
64	Sheffield Hallam University	200	23,870
65	University of St. Andrews	80	9,345
67	Teesside University	115	14,380
68	Abertay University	35	4,330
69	Manchester Metropolitan University	230	29,205
70	Staffordshire University	120	15,735
71	Leeds Beckett University	135	17,360
73	Liverpool John Moores University	170	22,510
74	University of Dundee	90	11,775
76	University of West London	110	14,930
77	University of Cumbria	55	7,295
79	University of Essex	90	12,660
80	Bangor University	50	7,010
81	Swansea University	120	16,565
82	University of Bradford	55	8,000
83	Brunel University London	80	11,890
84	De Montfort University	145	21,505
85	Newcastle University	140	20,760
86	Keele University	60	8,880
87	University of Westminster	105	16,155
90	University of Kent	95	14,515
91	Oxford Brookes University	80	12,510
93	University of Hertfordshire	105	16,800
95	University of East Anglia	80	13,935
96	University of York	90	15,350

Rank*	Institution Name	Care leaver pop. 2021/22**	Total pop. 2021/22***
97	University of Glasgow	135	23,460
98	Nottingham Trent University	190	33,275
101	University of Liverpool	120	22,265
103	University of Huddersfield	85	16,055
104	King's College London	120	23,225
105	Coventry University	135	27,260
106	Aston University	65	13,170
108	University of Leeds	135	27,015
109	University of Cambridge	65	13,645
111	University of Worcester	35	7,345
112	SOAS University of London	15	3,400
113	University of Sussex	65	14,685
114	University of Leicester	45	11,315
115	University of Reading	50	12,355
116	University of the West of England, Bristol	100	25,415
117	Ulster University	95	23,585
118	University of Manchester	95	24,105
119	University of Wales Trinity Saint David	50	12,355
120	London School of Economics and Political Science	20	5,575
121	University of Bristol	85	23,055
122	Royal Holloway University London	35	9,685
123	Queen's University Belfast	65	17,970
124	Queen Mary University of London	60	17,430
125	University of Edinburgh	90	26,000
126	Cardiff University	80	23,765
127	University of Exeter	80	23,755
129	University of Nottingham	95	28,690
130	University of Lancaster	40	12,860
131	University of Southampton	45	15,110
132	University of Birmingham	70	25,150
136	University of Warwick	40	18,955
140	University College London	40	23,800
141	University of Durham	25	17,395
142	University of Bath	20	13,850
144	Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	15	11,740
145	Loughborough University	15	14,955
146	University of Sheffield	15	20,040
148	University of Bedfordshire	5	11,630
149	University of Oxford	5	15,685

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

*Rank is measured using data supplied by HESA and calculated by taking the unrounded number of care leavers as a percentage of the total unrounded undergraduate student population. ** Total number of care leavers (HESA rounding methodology applied, see HESA guidance on rounding methodology.)

***Total population 2021/22: total number of undergraduate students in 2021/22. (HESA rounding methodology applied, see HESA guidance on rounding methodology.)

Specialist and small institutions

Table 4.2:

Rank	Institution Name	Care leaver pop. 2021/22	Total pop. 2021/22
9	University of the Arts, London	300	17,240
13	Ravensbourne University London	40	2,520
21	Bishop Grosseteste University	20	1,645
26	Plymouth Marjon University	30	2,205
39	Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance	10	915
40	Leeds Conservatoire	15	1,480
52	Newman University	20	2,150
56	Royal Central School of Speech and Drama	5	665
66	Glasgow School of Art	15	1,700
72	Hartpury University	15	2,090
75	Arts University Plymouth	10	1,610
78	Norwich University of the Arts	20	2,630
88	St George's, University of London	25	3,625
89	Royal Academy of Dramatic Art	-	150
92	Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance	5	965
94	Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts	5	815
99	Conservatoire for Dance and Drama	5	905
100	Writtle University College	5	725
102	University for the Creative Arts	65	12,365
107	Royal Agricultural University	5	1,015
110	Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	5	865
128	Harper Adams University	15	4,565
133	University College of Osteopathy	-	415
134	St Mary's University College	-	885
135	AECC University College	-	460
137	Royal Veterinary College	5	2,095
138	Stranmillis University College	-	1,125
139	Royal Northern College of Music	-	610
143	Leeds Arts University	20	13,585
147	Guildhall School of Music and Drama	-	4,260

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

Fewer than **one in 300** students studying medicine, veterinary science or mathematics grew up in care.¹⁷²



172 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023) "440 studying these subjects are care experienced out 140,870 (both rounded to nearest 5)"

Results

In the 2021/22 academic year there were 1.95 million undergraduate students at higher education institutions in the UK, 1.38 million (71 per cent) were not care leavers, 15,555 (0.80 per cent) were care leavers and 551,500 (28 per cent) were ‘unknown’.

This suggests that there could be more than 6,000 care leavers at UK universities who are unknown to their institution. ¹⁷³

Knowledge of which students come from a care background varies drastically by university:

- Thirteen higher education providers, including universities such as UCL (37 per cent), LSE (40 per cent) and King’s College London (49 per cent), **know the care leaver status of less than half of their undergraduate students.**
- Twenty-five higher education providers, including Edge Hill University (98.2 per cent), Liverpool Hope University (97.0 per cent), and the University of Manchester (93.5 per cent), **know the care leaver status of over 90 per cent of their undergraduate students.**

A detailed understanding of which students have care experience is clearly possible to have as many higher education institutions (HEIs) manage it, however, for nearly three in 10 UK undergraduates, their care background, or not, is simply not known.

It is important to acknowledge that this league table is a simple outcomes-based measure. Many universities will make considerable efforts to engage with care leavers and those with experience of care.

There are several factors that HEIs have limited control over the number of care leavers at their institutions, including application numbers, subject choices and the entry requirements.

Overview

The University of East London comes out comfortably top of our rankings table, with one in every 39 undergraduate students having confirmed care experience. The University of Northumbria, in second, is the only other university where at least one in every 50 undergraduate students has care experience.

The University of Northumbria, however, is the university with the most care experienced undergraduate students, whilst the University of East London comes fifth on the raw numbers. The rest of the top five is Anglia Ruskin University (2nd), Canterbury Christ Church University (3rd) and the University of the Arts, London (4th). The latter providers are slightly lower in the rankings table as they are large institutions, but they have impressive cohorts of care leavers.

Three universities had fewer than one care leaver in every 1,000 undergraduate students.

‘Tariff’ groupings and the Russell Group of universities

Russell Group universities tended to perform extremely poorly in the table. **Five of the bottom 10 HEIs were Russell Group universities** (seven if you exclude small and specialist institutions), none of the 24 Russell Group universities made the top 80 and the overall proportion of care leavers at Russell Group universities was just 0.4 per cent, a proportion that would come in the bottom 30 of the 149 ranked universities.

173 1.1 per cent of those whose care experience is known are care experienced at university, if this is true of those who care leaver status is unknown.

Care experienced students are disproportionately at lower tariff universities. **1.01 per cent** of the undergraduate student population at lower tariff HEIs are care leavers, compared with **0.87 per cent** of the undergraduate student population at medium tariff providers and just **0.48 per cent** at higher tariff providers.

Just three of the top 29 HEIs are higher tariff, 10 are medium tariff and 16 are lower tariff. On the other end, **eight of the bottom 10 HEIs are higher tariff.**

Geography

The regions with the highest proportion of care leavers were the North East, with 1.06 per cent of students having care experience, and Scotland, with 1.02 per cent of students known to have experience of care. Both these regions have extensive and well-established programmes in place for widening care experienced participation in higher education.

Northern Ireland was the region with the lowest proportion of care leavers, at 0.36 per cent. It should be noted, however, that there are only four HE providers in Northern Ireland, of which two are too small to feature in the main rankings table and one other is a Russell Group university.

Open University

The Open University does not feature on our league table due to its unique status as an exclusively distance learning institution. It is also easily the largest HEI in the UK, with 140,860 undergraduate students, four times as many as the 33,275 undergraduate students at the second largest UK higher education provider, Nottingham Trent University.

The Open University has the most undergraduate care leavers of any university in the UK. There are 1,455 undergraduate students with confirmed care experience.

This also means that, for those students whose care leaver status is known, 1.8 per cent of them have care experience.

Methodology

This rankings table uses official data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Universities are ranked by the proportion of their **undergraduate** students, of **all ages**, that are classified as 'care leavers'.

The undergraduate population used is from the 2021/22 academic year, and the institutions that have been selected to be in the main table satisfy four conditions:

1. HESA defined higher education provider that was willing to provide HESA with information;
2. Undergraduate student population in the 2021/22 academic year of at least 2,000;
3. At least three care leavers in the undergraduate student population in 2021/22;
4. Not an institution specialising in a specific area such as performance arts and medical sciences.

The results have been split into two separate tables, considering these criteria. The table for **specialist and small** providers lists the HEIs which satisfied conditions 1 but not all of conditions 2, 3 and 4. These are institutions that specialise in a specific area of study, generally performing arts or medical sciences, or are the institutions that are particularly small and are therefore specialist in that capacity.

There are four HESA defined higher education providers that do not feature in either table, two of whom opted not to have their data shared with third parties.

Proportions are simply measured by taking the number of undergraduate care leavers as a percentage of the total undergraduate student population for the 2021/22 academic year for each provider.

Care leaver

For an individual to be classified as a care leaver in this league table, they must be in one of the following categories:

1. **'Care leaver (16+)':** 'includes all students who can be reasonably verified as having being in care on or after their 16th birthday. For example this may have been verified by talking to the student personally, by email correspondence or as a result of assessing their eligibility for financial support.'
2. **'Looked after in Scotland' (Scotland Only):** 'Looked after in Scotland (Scotland only): includes all students who can be reasonably verified as currently being looked after by a local authority or having been looked after by a local authority between the ages of 0 -18.'
3. **'In care in the rest of UK' (Scotland only):** 'In care in the rest of UK (Scotland only): includes anyone who has spent any time up to the age of 18 in the care of a local authority in England or Wales or Health and Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland.'
4. **'UCAS defined care leaver':** 'Self-declared as in care for 3 months or more. This code may be used for non-UCAS entrants if they meet that definition. If providers choose not to confirm care leaver status then they should use the data from [the UCAS application] and record care leavers as [UCAS defined care leavers]. If providers choose to collect and/or confirm care leaver status then care leavers who were confirmed to be in care after their 16th birthday should be recorded as [Care leaver (16+)] rather than [UCAS defined care leaver].'

This final note is important: for students that satisfy more than one of the definitions, then **categories 1, 2 and 3 always take priority over category 4.**

For a student to be classified as **'not a care leaver'**, they must have been verified to have never been in care during their childhood. For any student where HESA does not know their care leaver status, either because they have been refused that information or because it is not known, their care leaver status is recorded as **'unknown'**.

Rounding

All results in this league table have been rounded according to the Jisc rounding methodology, meaning:

1. All numbers are rounded to the nearest multiple of five.
2. Any number lower than 2.5 is rounded to zero (denoted '-').
3. Halves are always rounded upwards (for example, 2.5 is rounded to five).
4. Percentages based on fewer than 22.5 individuals are suppressed.
5. Averages based on seven or fewer individuals are suppressed.
6. The above requirements apply to headcounts, FPE and FTE data.
7. Financial data is not rounded.

We have added an additional measure in our methodology of placing very small providers where the student population is below 2,000 into a separate table. This is because of the effect on our proportions of their being such small proportions of care leavers at many higher education providers.



Care leavers are more than **twice as likely** to attend a 'low tariff' university than a 'high tariff' university.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023), 1.01 per cent of the undergraduate student population at lower tariff higher education providers are care leavers, compared with just 0.48 per cent at higher tariff providers.

5. School experience of looked after children

- An estimated **37 per cent** of looked after children aged five to 16 have emotional and behavioural health problems which it considered to be 'a cause for concern'.¹⁷⁵
- In England, 56 per cent of looked after children have an identified Special Educational Need (SEN) and over a quarter (26 per cent) have an Emotional Health and Care (EHC) plan. This is compared to 16 per cent of all children having an SEN and just 3.1 per cent of all children having an EHC plan.¹⁷⁶
- A recent UCAS survey found that 35 per cent of looked after children between the ages of 11 and 18 had moved schools at least once due to a change in placement.¹⁷⁷
- In school, 12.4 per cent of those who had been in care for less than 12 months received at least one suspension in the 2020/21 academic year and 9.8 per cent of those who had been in care at least 12 months received at least one suspension. The national average was just 2.3 per cent.

Trauma and emotional and behavioural wellbeing

Many looked after children have experienced considerable childhood trauma. This, combined with many other factors, makes school difficult for looked after children.

The measure used for the emotional and behavioural health of looked after children is called a Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a questionnaire which gives the children scores according to their estimated emotional and behavioural health.

Last year, an SDQ score was reported for 77 per cent of looked after children aged five to 16 (43,290 children).¹⁷⁸

According to the government website, an SDQ 'score of 0 to 13 is considered normal, 14 to 16 is borderline, and 17 to 40 is a cause for concern.'

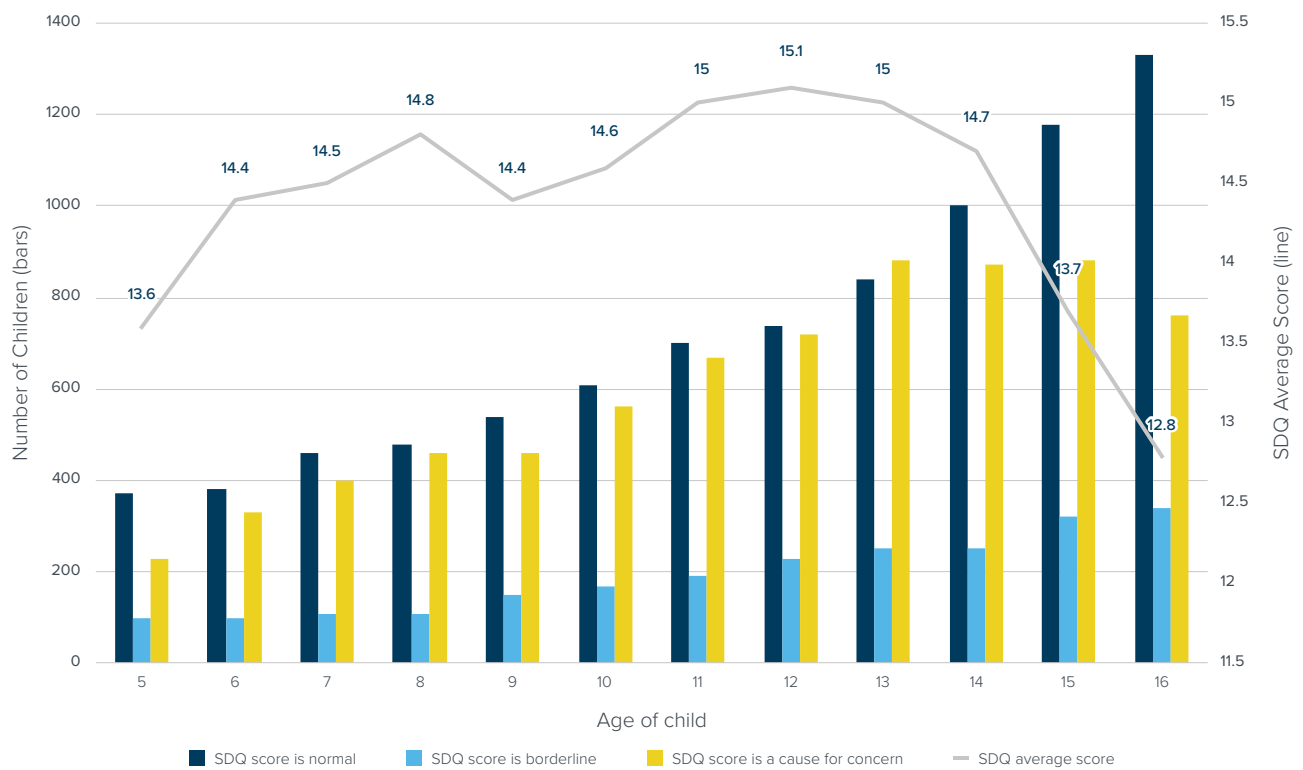
175 [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions-2022) (2022) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: [explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022](https://www.explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022) (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

176 Source: [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england) (2023) *Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England*. Available at: [explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables](https://www.explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables) (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

177 UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

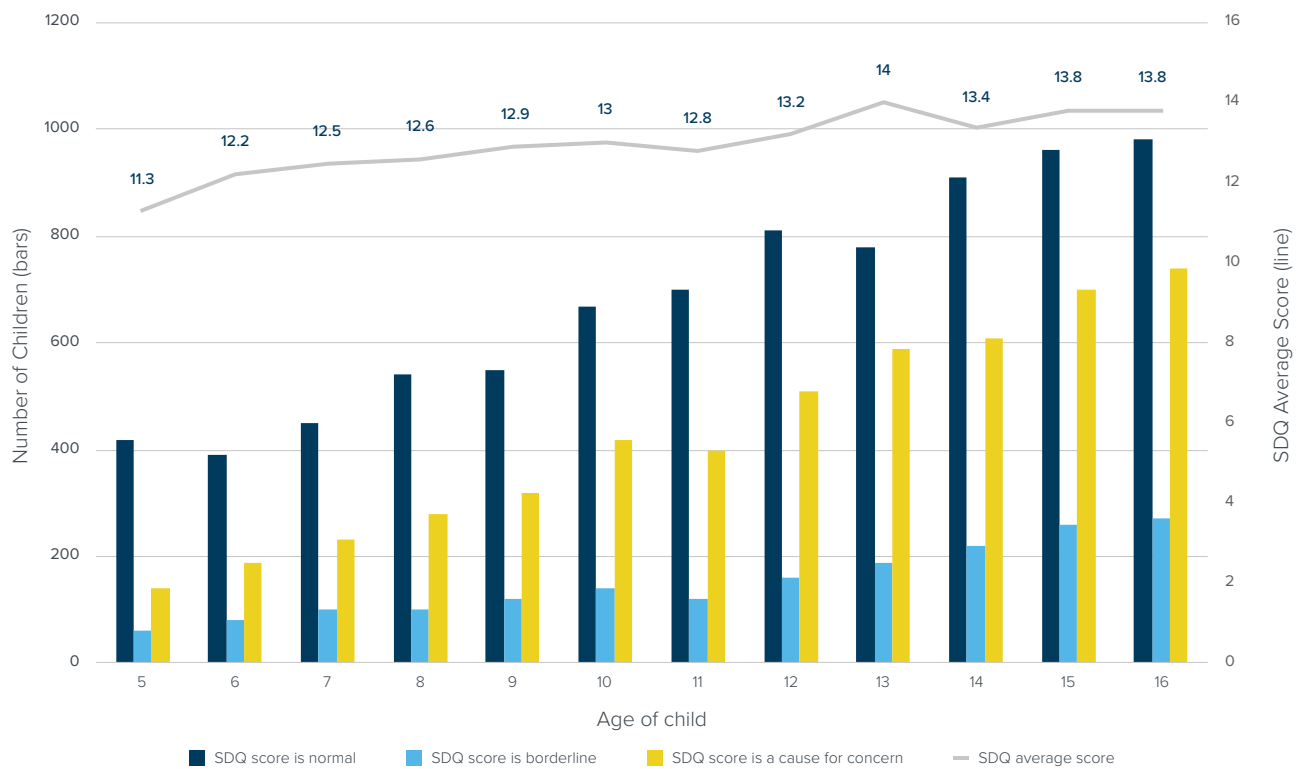
178 [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions-2022) (2022) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: [explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022](https://www.explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022) (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Figure 5.1: Measuring emotional and behavioural health: SDQ scores of male looked after children by age, England, 2022



Source: gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Figure 5.2: Measuring emotional and behavioural health: SDQ scores of female looked after children by age, England, 2022



Source: gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Overall, across all looked after children in the survey, the average SDQ score was 13.8, which is a 'borderline' score.

The bars on Figures 5.1 and 5.2 represent the number of children of each age that received scores that were classified as 'normal', 'borderline' or 'a cause for concern' respectively. The line represents the average SDQ score for each age group.

Half of all children received 'normal' scores, but well over a third (37 per cent) received scores that were a cause for concern (17 or over).

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show the SDQ scores of looked after children by age and gender in 2022. Forty per cent of boys had emotional and behavioural health that was classified as a cause for concern, with the emotional health of looked after boys particularly poor from age 11-14.

The emotional health of 15- and 16-year-old looked after boys was better, with a 12.8 average SDQ score for 16-year-old boys.

Around a third (34 per cent) of girls had emotional and behavioural health which was a cause for concern. For looked after girls, emotional health problems tend to worsen as they get older, although they are worst age 13, where the average score was 14.0.

These emotional and mental health difficulties of looked after children has been shown before. The most comprehensive survey of mental health of young people aged five to 17 in Great Britain was conducted the by the ONS in 2001/02. This found that 45 per cent of looked after children had a mental health disorder, compared to 10 per cent of the general population aged five to 17-years-old.¹⁷⁹

179 Meltzer, H. et al (2003) *The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England*. Available at: sp.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/5280/mr-doc/pdf/5280userguide.pdf (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Care leavers make up **one in every 39** undergraduate students at the **University of East London**, they top the care leavers league table.¹⁸⁰



180 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023) See Chapter 4 'Care leavers in higher education league table'

Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Emotional Health and Care (EHC) plans

Looked after children are much more likely to have SEN than other children. Fifty-six per cent of looked after children have an identified SEN, compared with just 16 per cent of all children.

Over a quarter of looked after children have an EHC plan, almost nine times the 3.1 per cent of all children who have one.

This is similar – but less extreme – for children in need, where 46 per cent have an identified SEN and 22 per cent have an EHC plan.

Looked after children also tend to have different SEN to the general population, as their additional needs tend to relate to their trauma.

The primary type of SEN for the general population of children with an EHC plan is autism, with almost 30 per cent of cases. Social, emotional and mental health only accounts for 15 per cent of EHC plans.

For looked after children, social, emotional and mental health is the primary type of SEN, with 40 per cent of cases.

Much of the lower academic performance by children looked after can be explained by the fact that children looked after are disproportionately likely to have a SEN.

Moving schools and absence

Looked after children move schools much more frequently than most children, often due to a change in their care placement. This can be disruptive academically, pastorally and socially.

A recent UCAS survey found that 35 per cent of respondents between the ages of 11 and 18 had moved schools at least once due to a change in placement.¹⁸¹ Due to the complexities of circumstances for looked after children, moving schools can sometimes be beneficial and sometimes be unhelpful. The UCAS 'Next Steps' report conducted some interviews with care experienced young people where they found a range in experiences.

Quantitatively, they found that looked after young people are more likely to describe moving schools as having:

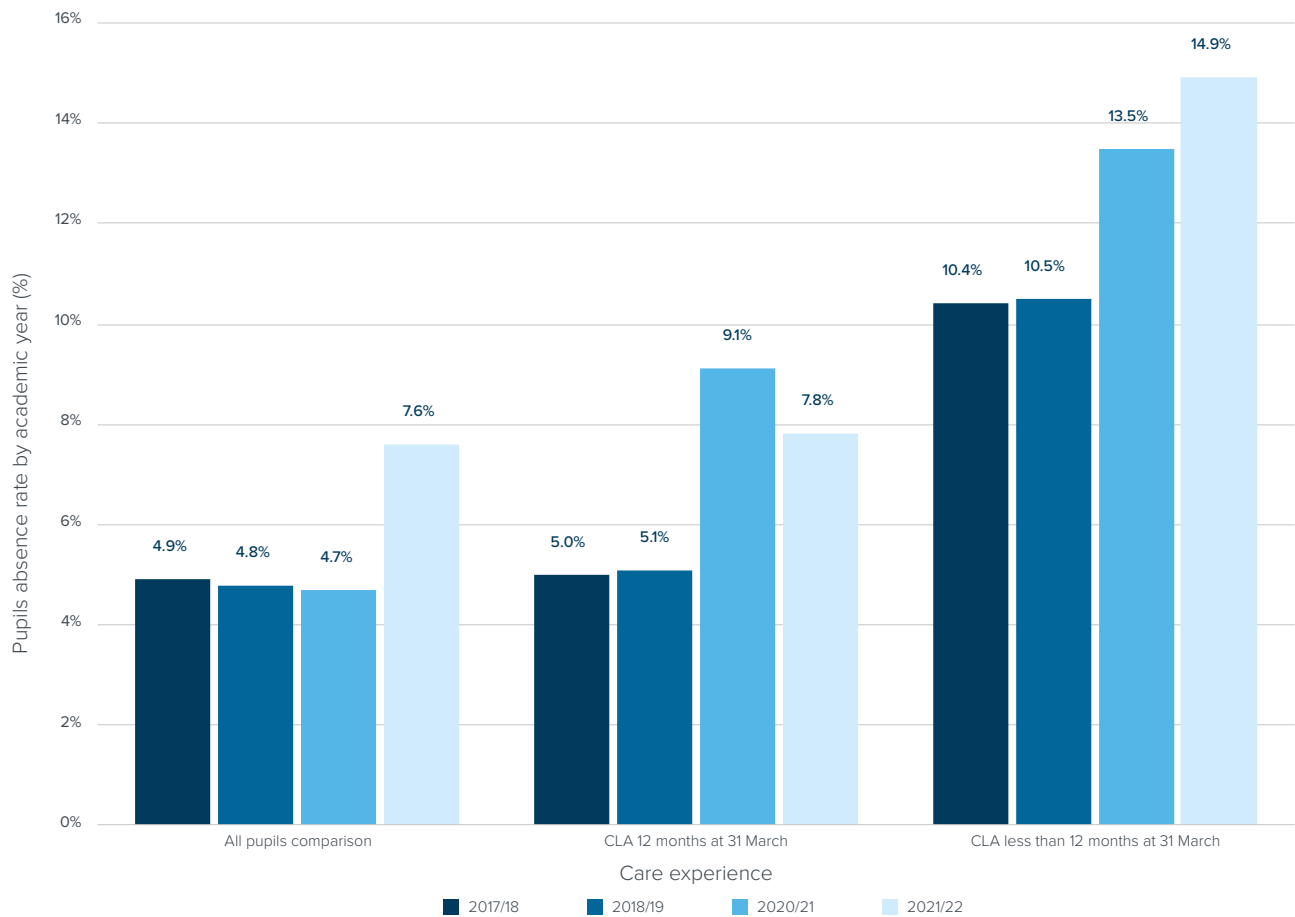
- A negative impact socially (41 per cent negative versus 31 per cent positive);
- A highly varied impact academically (28 per cent describing it as having a negative impact, 28 per cent as a positive impact, and 28 per cent describing it as having both a positive and a negative impact); and
- A positive impact pastorally (45 per cent positive and just 19 per cent negative).

One problem that moving schools can cause is high absence rates because looked after children are in school communities where they do not feel at home.

School absence rates have also increased dramatically since the significant disruption to the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years due to the Covid-19 pandemic, absence rates were up over three fifths (62 per cent) across the country in 2021/22.

¹⁸¹ UCAS (2022) *Next steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education*. Available at: www.ucas.com (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Figure 5.3: Percentage of overall absence by social care group and school type, England 2017/18-2021/22¹⁸²



Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Figure 5.3 shows the relationship between instability in the care system and school absence.

Looked after children who have been in the care system for less than 12 months had a school absence rate of 14.9 per cent in 2021/22, almost double the absence rate for looked after children who had been in the care system at least 12 months (91 per cent higher).

Children who miss more than 10 per cent of sessions are considered persistently absent by schools.

The absent rate of looked after children for 12 months or more was just 0.2 percentage points higher than the national average for all children.

182 "12 months at 31 March" and "less than 12 month at 31 March" refer to how long the child has been in the care system on the 31st March in each academic year, e.g., for 2021/22, how long they've been in care on 31st March 2022.

Looked after children missing from school

In March 2022 there were 1,363 looked after children (2.7 per cent) missing from school.¹⁸³ This was broken down by 541 looked after children (1.1 per cent) not enrolled in any school (this category aligns with the government's definition of children missing education),¹⁸⁴ 673 (1.3 per cent) receiving unregistered provision, and 149 (0.3 per cent) who were enrolled at a school but not attending.¹⁸⁵

In terms of the 1.3 per cent who are receiving unregistered provision, 320 of these looked after children (48 per cent) are receiving one-to-one or small group private tuition, 171 (25 per cent) are being educated through other provision, 168 (25 per cent) are attending an unregistered setting, and 14 (two per cent) are receiving elective home education.¹⁸⁶

The groups of looked after children found to be the most likely to be missing school were: UASC, children with EHC plans, children with social and emotional mental health needs or autism spectrum disorder, older children (the age with the highest proportion not in school is 16), boys (68 per cent of looked after children not in school are male),¹⁸⁷ and those of the 'Other' ethnic group (although when taking account of UASC in the analysis, the Black ethnic group becomes the ethnic group with the largest proportion of children not in school).¹⁸⁸

UASC were overrepresented amongst the population of looked after children not in school. Twenty-one per cent (291) of the UASC in the scope for the Children's Commissioner's analysis were not in school. This high prevalence is reflected in the ethnicity characteristics, particularly as the ethnic group with the highest rate of not in school was 'Other' (12 per cent), of whom 88 per cent were UASC. The findings also reflect information from local authorities, as 'UASC often fall between the gaps in education and local authorities have to make use of a patchwork of unregistered education provision'¹⁸⁹ – particularly one-to-one or small group private tuition.¹⁹⁰

There were also regional differences in the rate of looked after children not in school. The region with the highest rate of looked after children not in school is London (4.6 per cent). Meanwhile, the northern regions (North West, North East, Yorkshire and the Humber) have the lowest rates – ranging from 1.9 to 1.4 per cent.¹⁹¹

There were also links identified between a looked after child's likelihood of absence and their education. If a child had missed over 10 per cent of sessions without authorisation in the 2021 autumn term, they were more likely to be missing school in March 2022; looked after children who had previously attended schools rated inadequate by Ofsted were more likely to be missing school; and looked after children who had previously attended a state-funded alternative provision (AP) were more likely to not attend school.¹⁹²

Additionally, links were made between a looked after child's likelihood of absence and their placement. It was found that children in foster care were much less likely to not be in school; having a higher number of care placements in a year was associated with not being in school; and those living in placements outside of their home local authority were more likely to not be in school.¹⁹³

183 Children's Commissioner (2023) *Looked after children who are not in school*. Available at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). p7.

184 Ibid, p19.

185 Ibid, p20.

186 Ibid, p40.

187 Ibid, p22.

188 Ibid, p8.

189 Ibid, p22.

190 Ibid, p41.

191 Ibid, p32.

192 Ibid, p8.

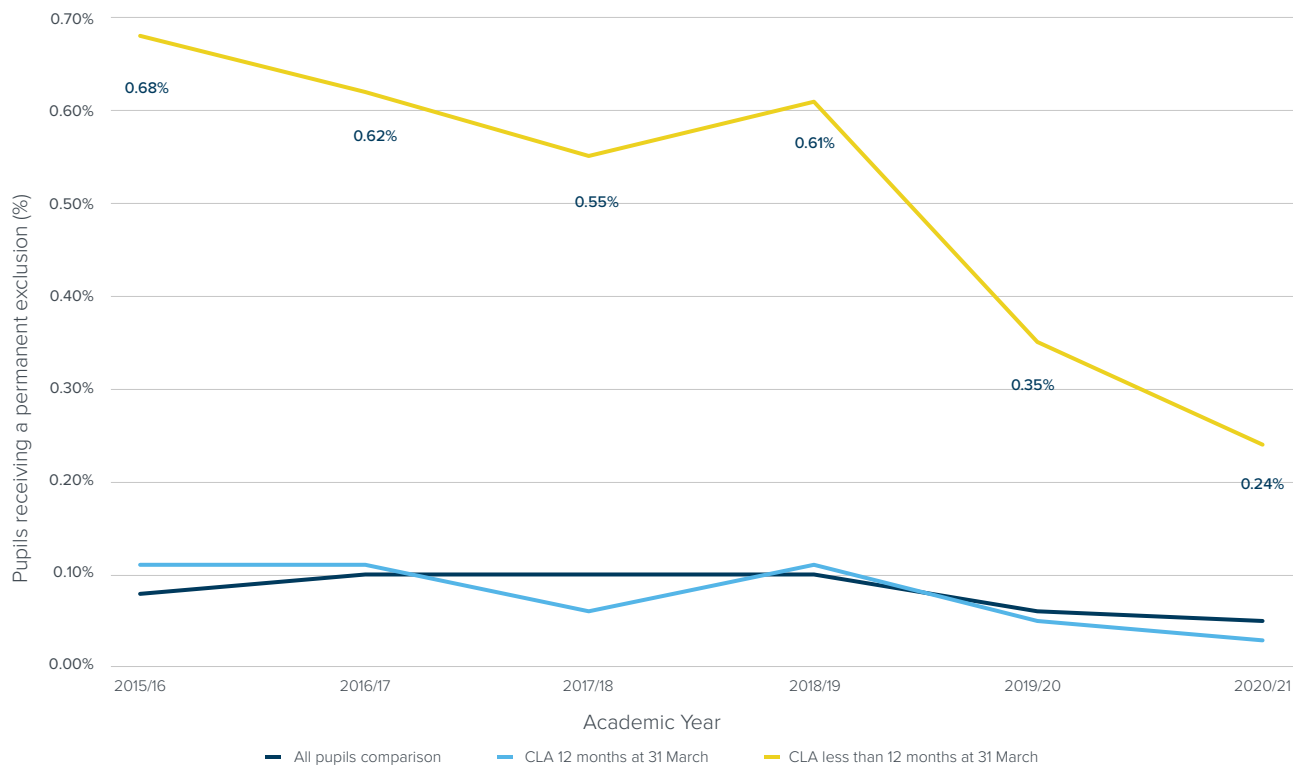
193 Ibid, p8-9.

Exclusions and suspensions

Looked after children are more likely to receive severe punishments at school, including suspensions and permanent exclusions.

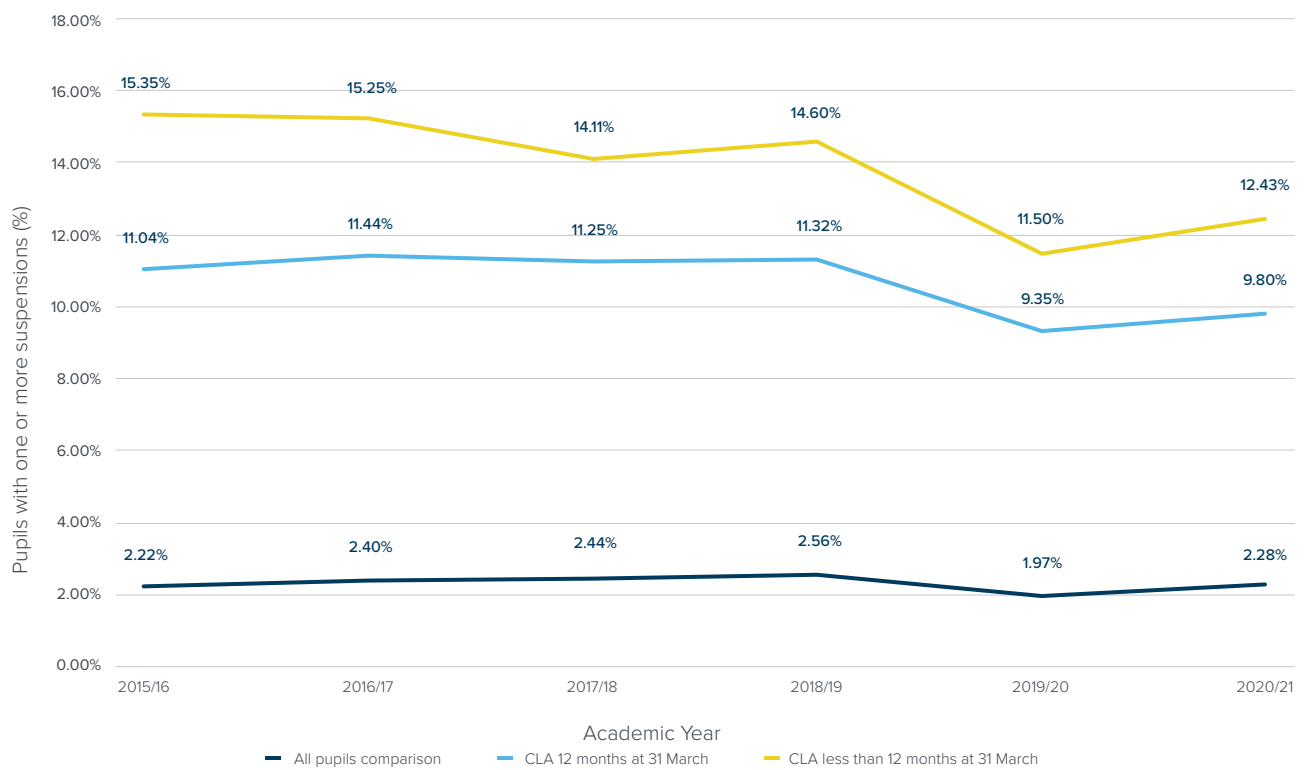
Permanent exclusions and suspensions have fallen nationally since before the pandemic, perhaps due to nation-wide extenuating circumstances.

Figure 5.4: Percentage of pupils permanently excluded by Social Care Group in England 2015/16-2020/21



Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Figure 5.5: Percentage of students with one or more suspension by social care group, England 2015/16-2020/21



Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Figure 5.4 shows that permanent exclusions are around eight times higher for those on new placements than those not (0.24 per cent), compared to 0.05 per cent of all pupils and 0.03 per cent of those who have been looked after at least 12 months.

12.4 per cent of those new to care were suspended at least once, compared with 9.8 per cent of those who had been in care for more than 12 months and a national average of 2.3 per cent.

The number of care leavers applying to university **has doubled** since 2008.¹⁹⁴



194 UCAS (2022), 'Next Steps', Available at: [UCAS \(2022\) 'Next Steps', download \(ucas.com\)](https://www.ucas.com)

Academic performance in education

Table 5.1: Summary of academic performance in compulsory education by looked after status, England, 2021/22

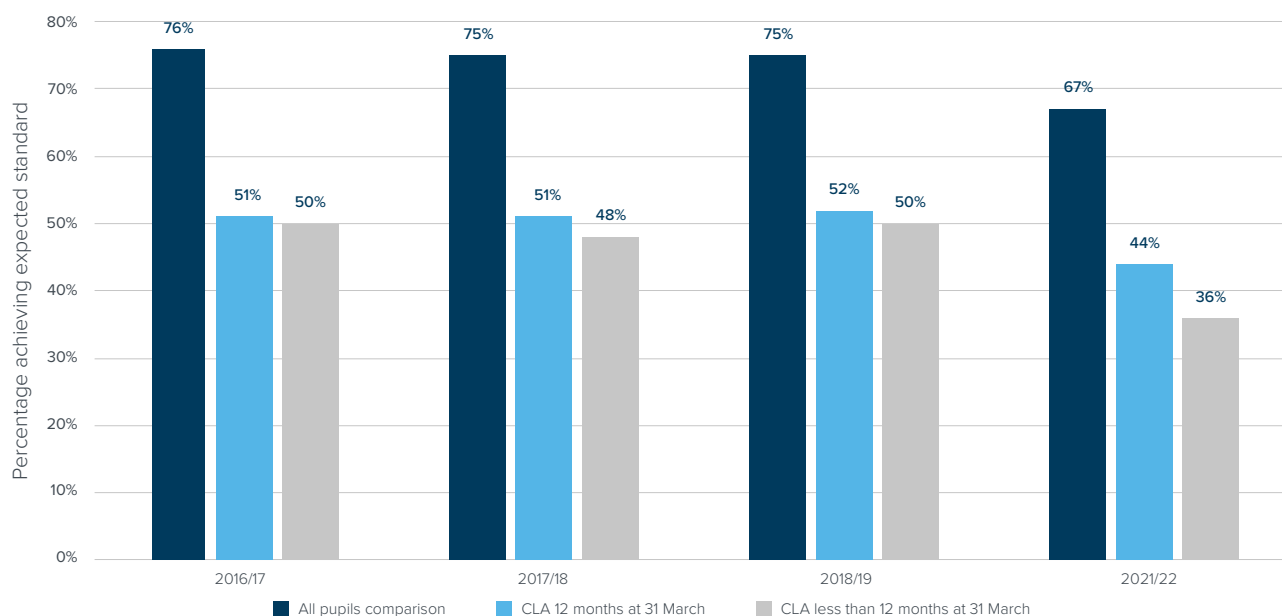
Proportion reaching expected standard (KS4 expected standard = grade 5)			
Age	All pupils	Looked after children (less than a year)	Looked after children (at least a year)
KS1	Reading: 67% Writing: 58% Maths: 68%	Reading: 44% Writing: 33% Maths: 43%	Reading: 36% Writing: 26% Maths: 37%
KS2	Reading, writing and maths: 59%	Reading, writing and maths: 31%	Reading, writing and maths: 30%
KS4	English and maths: 50%	English and maths: 11%	English and maths: 8%

Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Key Stage 1

Looked after children start school behind their peers and fall further behind throughout their time at school.

Figure 5.6: Key Stage 1 performance in reading of children by social care status, 2016/17-2021/22



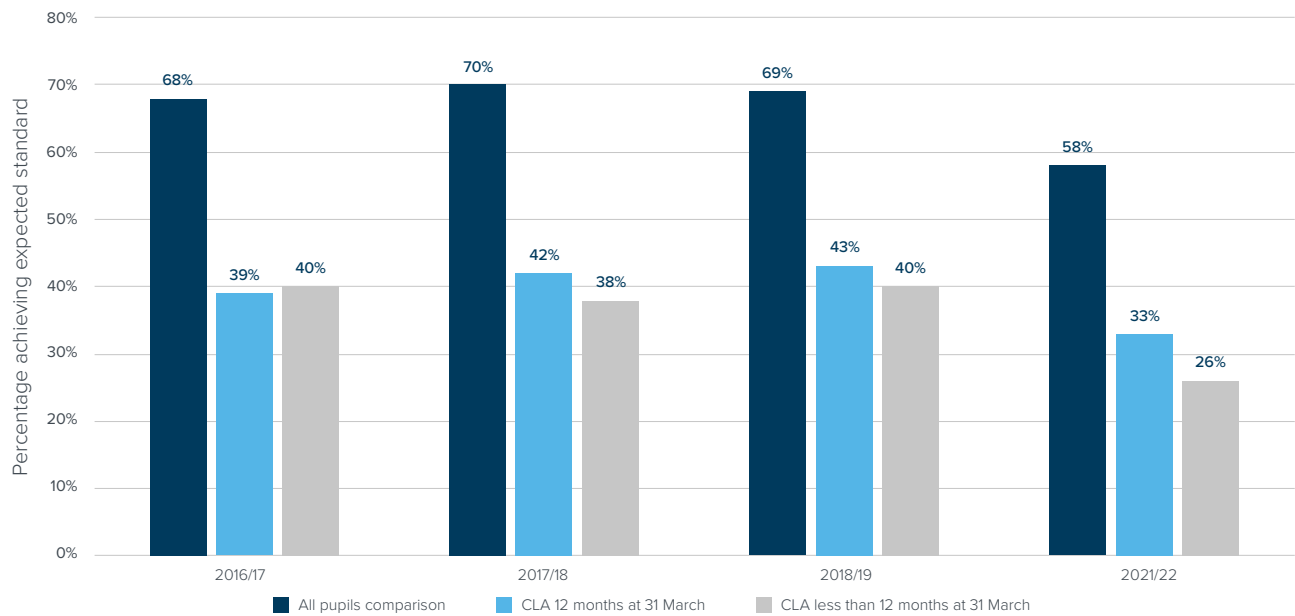
Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Figure 5.6 shows that in KS1 looked after children are much less likely to meet the expected standard in reading. In 2021/22, two thirds (67 per cent) of seven-year-olds reached the expected standard in reading, compared with 44 per cent of looked after children for at least 12 months and 36 per cent of looked after children for less than 12 months.

These figures were all down significantly on the previous year for which we have data in 2018/19, before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The attainment for looked after children has fallen slightly further than for the general population. This means that while looked after children were around a third less likely to meet the expected standard in reading in KS1 in 2018/19, they were around two fifths less likely in 2021/22.

Figure 5.7: Key Stage 1 performance in writing of children by social care status, 2016/17-2021/22

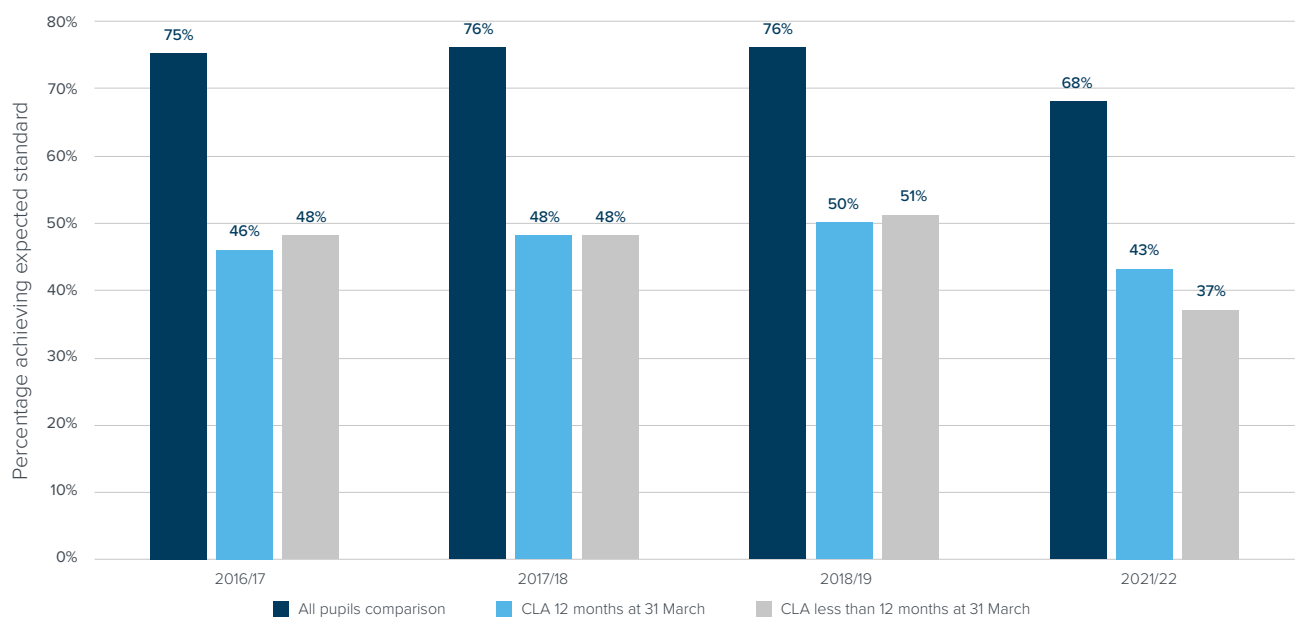


Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Just under three in five (58 per cent) seven-year-old children meet the expected standard in writing, compared to only three in ten looked after children. In KS1, fewer children meet the expected standard in writing than meet the expected standard in reading, suggesting it is slightly more difficult. With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that looked after children also struggle more, with attainment roughly half as good as the general population.

Figure 5.7 shows that, as with reading standards, the standard of writing in KS1 has fallen considerably since 2018/19. This is very likely to be related to the disruption in schooling during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 5.8: Key Stage 1 performance in maths of children by social care status, 2016/17-2021/22



Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Figure 5.8 shows the same relationship as Figures 5.6 and 5.7. While just under seven in 10 (68 per cent) seven-year-olds meet the expected standard in maths, only around four in 10 looked after children do so. Forty-three per cent of those who have been in care for at least a year meet the expected standard, and just 37 per cent of those new to care meet the expected standard.

Across all three measures, looked after children struggle in KS1, particularly those who have been in the care system for less than a year.

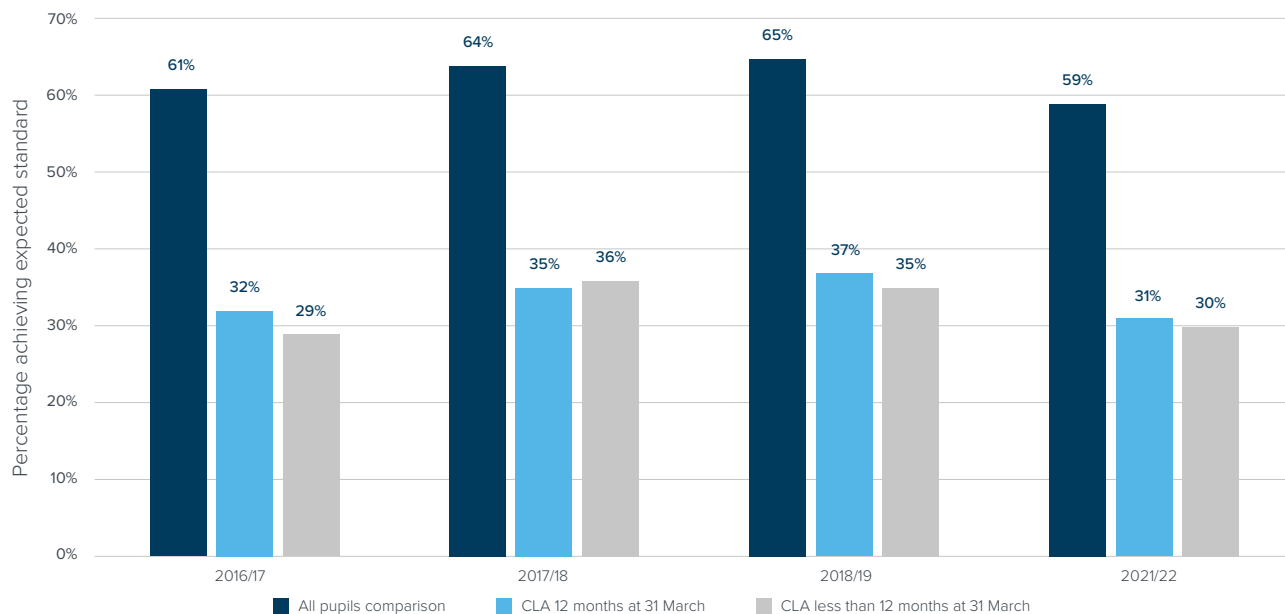
Key Stage 2

In KS2, looked after children fall slightly further behind. Only just over half as many looked after children reach the expected standard in reading, writing and maths as all children. Again, the national standard has dropped markedly since 2018/2019.

Just under three in five children (59 per cent) met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in KS2 in 2021/22, down from nearly two thirds (65 per cent) in 2018/19, a drop of six percentage points.

For looked after children who have been in the care system for at least a year, there was also a six percentage point drop in attainment, from 37 per cent reaching the expected standard to 31 per cent reaching the expected standard. Looked after children who had been in care for less than a year had a similar pattern, and slightly lower attainment than those who have been in care longer. Thirty-five per cent of looked after children who had been in care less than a year reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in 2018/19, and this was down to 30 per cent in 2021/22.

Figure 5.9: Key Stage 2 performance in reading, writing and maths of children by social care status, 2016/17-2021/22



Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4a929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

Key Stage 4

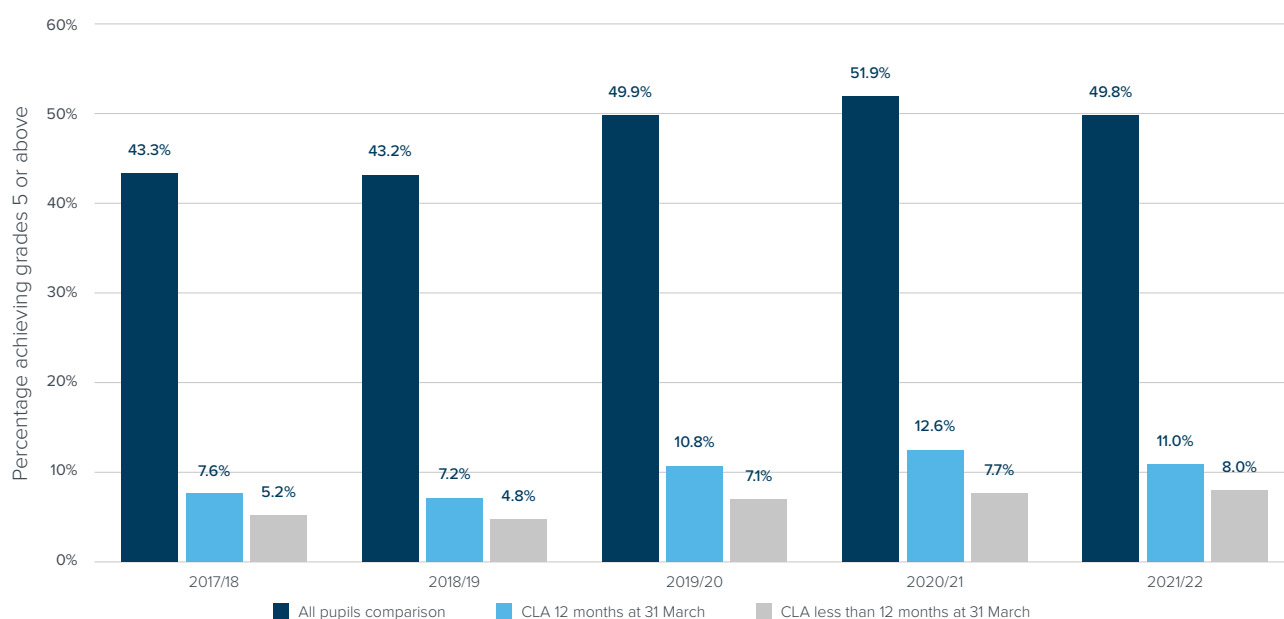
KS4 is the end of compulsory education.

In KS4, or GCSEs, looked after children fall further behind again. Looked after children are around five times less likely to achieve a grade 5 in English and maths compared with all pupils. Roughly half of the national cohort meet this standard, compared with around a tenth of children looked after.

Achieving a grade 5 in English and maths is the KS4 equivalent of meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in KS2.

In 2018/19, the last academic year that was not disrupted by Covid-19, 7.2 per cent of children who had been looked after for at least 12 months, and 4.8 per cent of children who had been looked after for less than 12 months, achieved at least a grade 5 in both English and maths GCSEs. This was up significantly in 2021/22, with the national grade inflation, to 11 per cent and eight per cent.

Figure 5.10: Key Stage 4 performance in English and maths of children by social care status, 2017/18-2021/22



Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4a929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

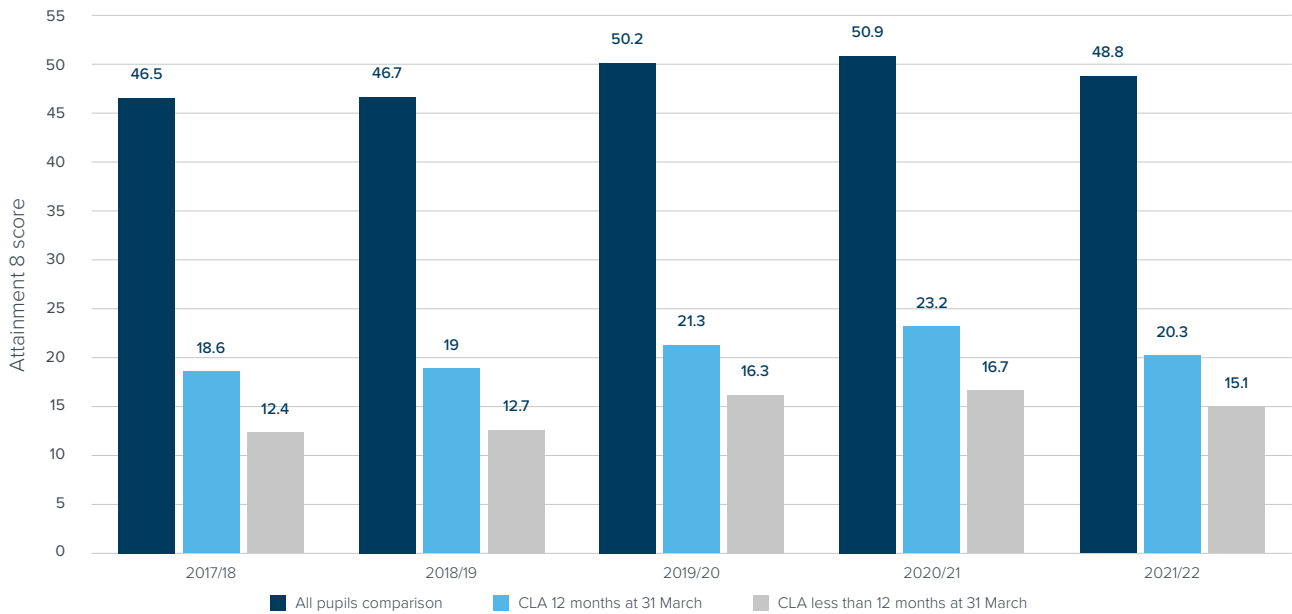
Key Stage performance can also be measured by attainment 8 scores. An attainment 8 score is the combined score of an individual's top 8 GCSE grades. For example, if a student scores eight grade 5s, their attainment 8 score would be 40 (that is, eight multiplied by five). If a student scores three grade 7s and five grade 4s, their attainment 8 score would be 41 (that is, seven multiplied by three (21), plus four multiplied by five (20)).

The number of care leavers applying to 'high tariff' universities has grown by **86 per cent** since 2020.¹⁹⁵



195 UCAS (2022) 'Next Steps', Available at: [UCAS \(2022\) 'Next Steps' download \(ucas.com\)](https://www.ucas.com/next-steps/download)

Figure 5.11: Key Stage 4 performance by Attainment 8 score of children by social care status, 2017/18-2021/22



Source: gov.uk (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england#dataBlock-6e04fa7b-7878-46b3-b073-7c8be4d929e2-tables> (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

The average attainment 8 score across all pupils in 2021/22 was 48.8; looked after children for more than 12 months scored an average of 20.3. The gap between the two was 28.5, this gap has been over 27 points every year since 2017/18.

Looked after children for less than a year particularly struggle, scoring averages of under 18 since 2017/18 and 15.1 in 2021/22.

6. In numbers: looked after children and care leavers

Numbers

- In 2022 the number of looked after children in the UK was an estimated **105,500** – 82,170 of these children were looked after in England.
- In England, care started this year for 31,010 (38 of per cent) of these children and almost a third (31 per cent) of looked after children had more than one placement this year.¹⁹⁶
- The Northern regions of England have the highest proportion of looked after children in the country. The **North East has the highest proportion**, where over one per cent of children are in the care system.¹⁹⁷
- Looked after children tend to be slightly older. **Almost two thirds (63.2 per cent) of looked after children are over 10**, compared just under half (48.2 per cent) of all English children. Seven per cent of looked after children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and 87 per cent of UASC are 16 or older.¹⁹⁸
- **Ninety-four per cent of looked after children enter the care system because of a breakdown in their family situation.** Two thirds (66 per cent) of looked after children enter the care system because of abuse or neglect, and the majority of looked after children (59 per cent) are in foster placements.¹⁹⁹

196 [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) (2022) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

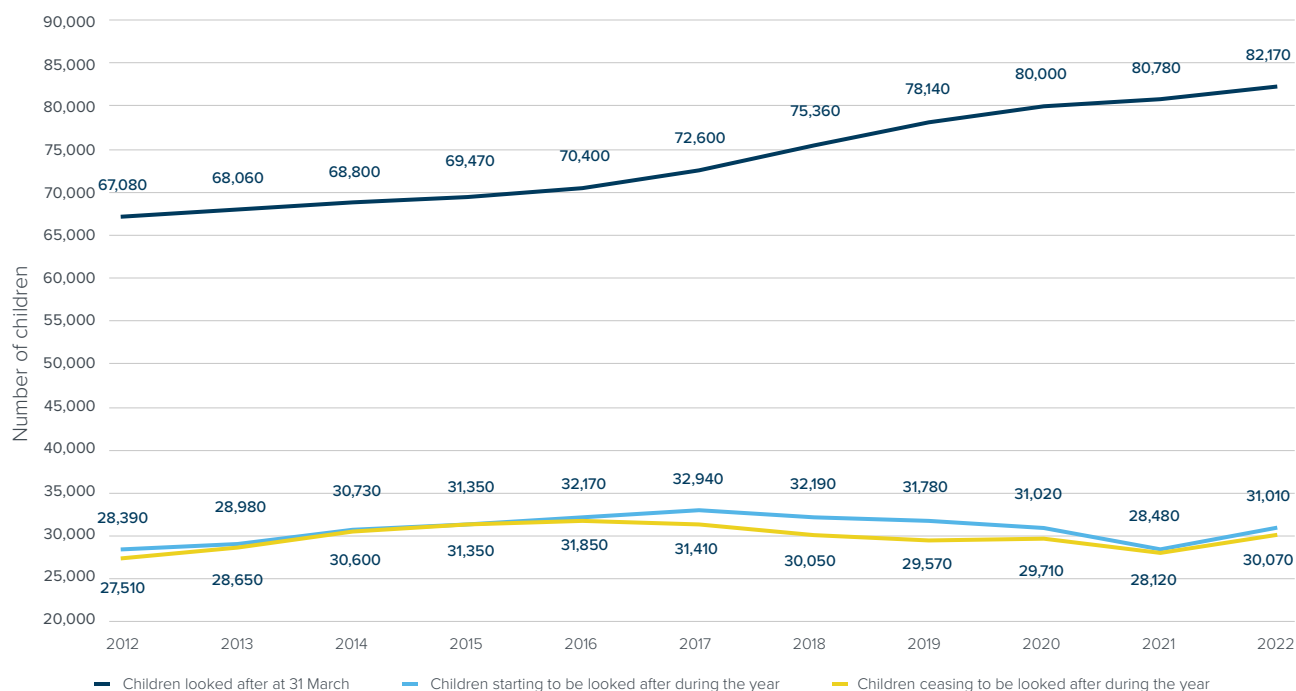
197 Ibid.

198 Ibid.

199 Ibid.

Trends in the numbers of looked after children

Figure 6.1: Number of looked after children, number starting to be looked after and number ceasing to be looked after, England, 2022²⁰⁰



Source: gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

In 2022 the number of looked after children in the UK was an estimated 105,500. Of these, 82,170 were in England (78 per cent); 12,596 in Scotland (12 per cent); 7,080 in Wales (6.7 per cent); and 3,624 in Northern Ireland (3.4 per cent).

This continues the long-term upward trend across the UK. In England, the 2022 figure was up 13 per cent in five years (from 72,600 in 2017) and in Wales the number increased every year from 2015 to 2021, decreasing slightly last year.

There is an extremely high turnover of children entering and leaving the care system each year. In England, over a third (38 per cent) of looked after children in 2022 had started being looked after in 2022. Similarly, over a third (37 per cent) of children who were looked after in 2021 left the care system in 2022. Twenty-one per cent of those ceasing to be looked after were aged one to four.²⁰¹

In England, looked after children account for 0.7 per cent of the child population, or roughly one in every 140 children.²⁰² This is the lowest of the UK nations. In Northern Ireland, 0.8 per cent of the child population are in the care system; in Wales, 1.1 per cent are in the care system, and in Scotland that figure is 1.2 per cent. These numbers aren't, however, entirely comparable as the legislative frameworks across the UK are slightly different. For this reason, the regional analysis below focuses on England.

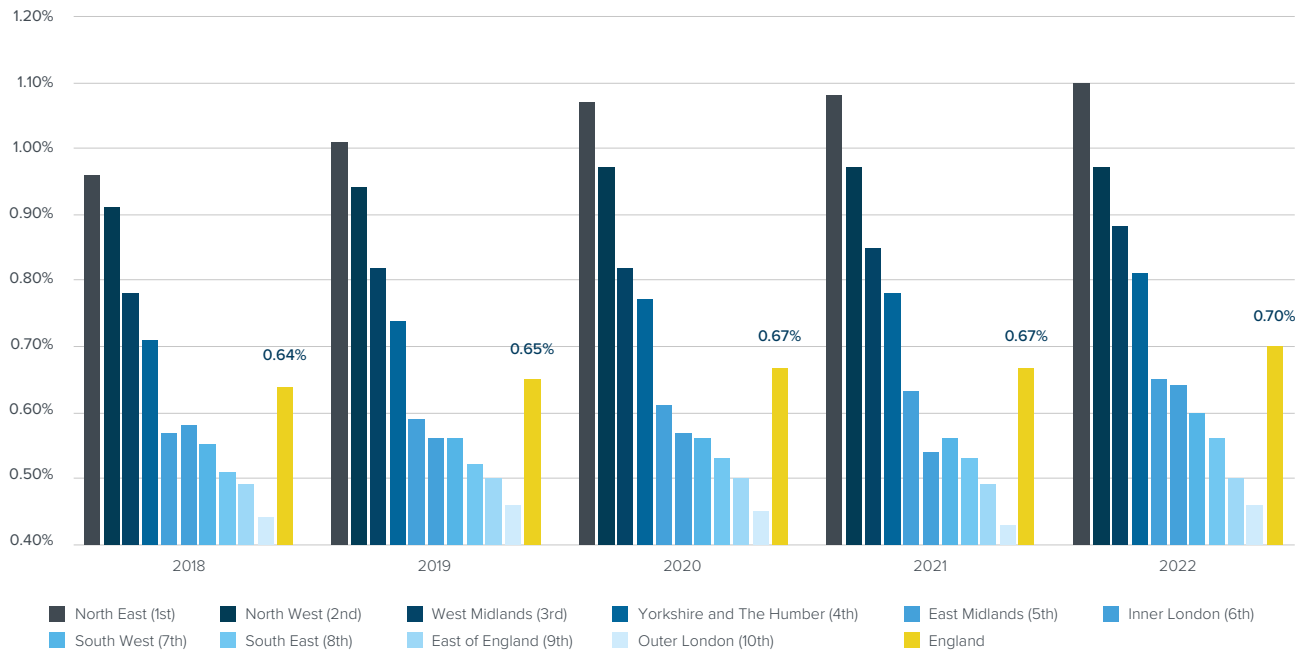
There are some areas in the UK where the rate of looked after children is particularly high. For example, in the City of London, one in 36 children are looked after.

200 Note: The data label for the number of children ceasing to be looked after during the year each year is below the data marker, the data label for the number of children starting to be looked after during the year each year is above the data marker.

201 gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

202 Ibid.

Figure 6.2: Looked after children as a percentage of child population, Regional, England, 2022



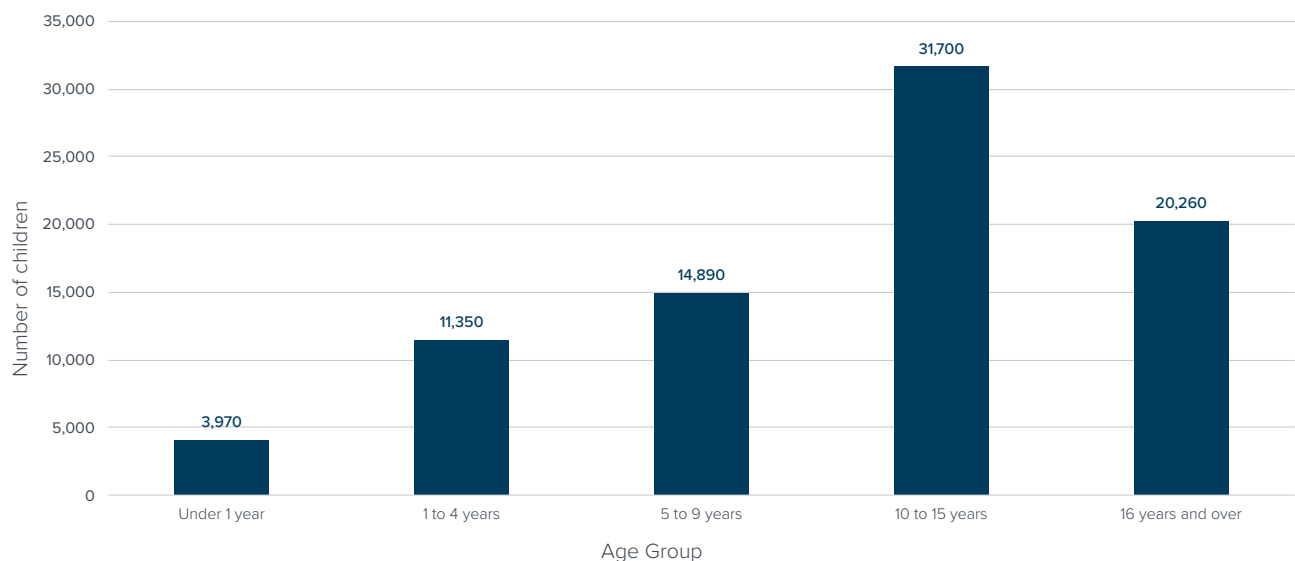
Source: gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Figure 6.2 shows the proportion of children who are in the care system in different regions of England. The North East has the highest proportion of looked after children, with over one per cent of children in the care system. Outer London has the fewest – it is the only region where under half a per cent of children are in the care system.

The Northern regions have consistently had the highest proportions of children in the care system recently, with the North East (1st), the North West (2nd) and Yorkshire and the Humber (4th) being near the top for prevalence of looked after children for all five years.

Age of looked after children

Figure 6.3: Looked after children by age group, England, 2022

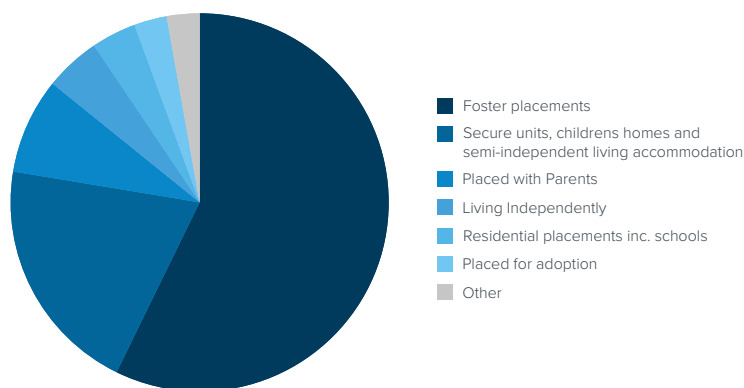


Source: gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Figure 6.3 shows that looked after children are generally slightly older. Almost a quarter (24.7 per cent) of looked after children are 16 or over, compared with just 15.5 per cent of all English children; and almost two thirds (63.2 per cent) of looked after children are over 10, compared with just under half (48.2 per cent) of all English children.

Similarly, almost a quarter of all children (24.8 per cent) in England are four and under, but less than a fifth (18.6 per cent) of looked after children are.²⁰³

Figure 6.4: Looked after children during year by placement type, England, 2022



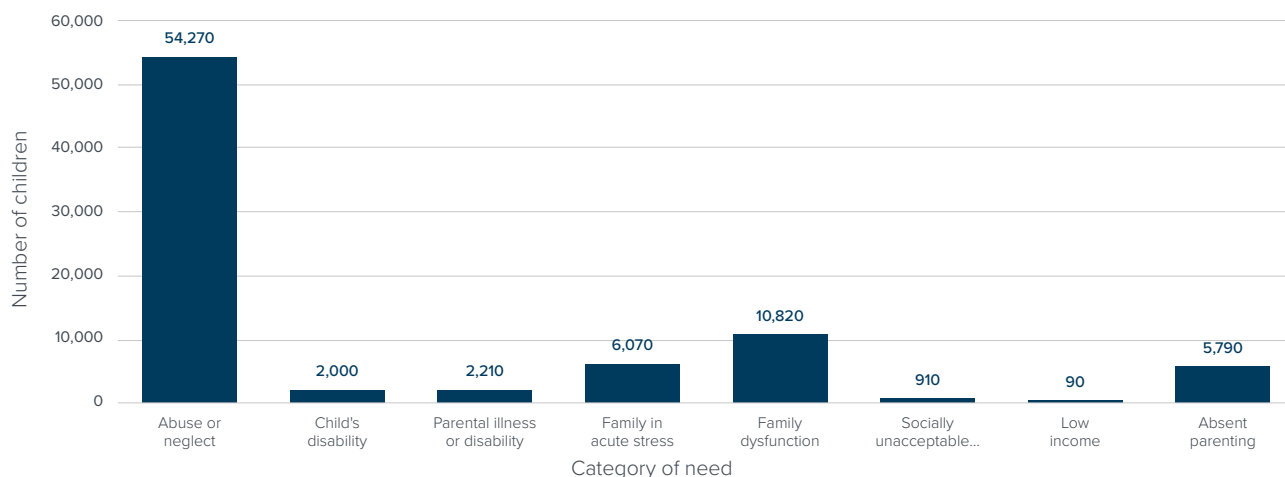
Source: gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Figure 6.4 shows the placements of looked after children in 2022. About three fifths (57 per cent) of looked after children live in foster placements. Of the remaining 43 per cent, just under half (20 per cent) live in secure units, children’s homes, and semi-independent living accommodation.

Categories of need

The categories of need of looked after children allows some understanding of the trauma that many of these children have suffered.

Figure 6.5: Looked after children during year by category of need, England, 2022



Source: gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

203 ONS (2022) Population and household estimates, England and Wales: Census 2021, unrounded data. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulation-andcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationandhouseholdestimatesenglandandwales/census2021unroundeddata (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Ninety-four per cent of looked after children enter the care system because of a breakdown in their family situation. Of these, two thirds (66 per cent) of looked after children have been placed in the care system because of abuse or neglect, and a further 28 per cent are in care because of absent parenting, family dysfunction or family in acute distress.

The 2022 ONS report 'Who are the children entering care in England?'²⁰⁴ found that half of the children who went into care for the first time after the 2011 Census were from lone parent households. Just 26 per cent of those who did not go into care were from lone parent households.

Only five per cent of looked after children, an estimated 4,210 children, are placed in the care system because of a disability or illness of their own or their parents, and just one per cent of looked after children are in the care system for any other reason, such as their own behaviour.

Thirty-nine per cent of the children who entered care after the 2011 Census were classified as deprived in the education dimension. That is a group where no household member has a Level 2 qualification (such as a GCSE at grade C/5 or above) nor is any household member aged 16- to 18-years-old and a full-time student. Only 16 per cent of the children who did not enter care were classified as deprived in the education dimension.²⁰⁵

Children entering the care system in that period were also 60 per cent more likely than other children to be from accommodation that was either overcrowded, in a shared dwelling or with no central heating.²⁰⁶

Overall, the ONS report found that over four out of five of the children entering the care system were found to be living in a household that was classified as deprived in at least one dimension, compared to under half of the general population of children.²⁰⁷

Children who entered care were six times as likely to be absent for at least 15 per cent of sessions at school as those who did not enter care, and were more than twice as likely to live in a household where no one was employed.²⁰⁸

Location of placements

When children are placed in the care system, they are often moved far from where home had been before they entered care. Figure 5.6 illustrates how this differs according to the placement that looked after children have. Over 80 per cent of those living with their parents are in the same local authority and within 20 miles of their previous home, compared to under 30 per cent of those in secure units, children's homes or semi-independent living.

204 ONS (2022) *Who are the children entering care in England?* Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/socialcare/articles/whoarethekidnenteringcareinengland/2022-11-04 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

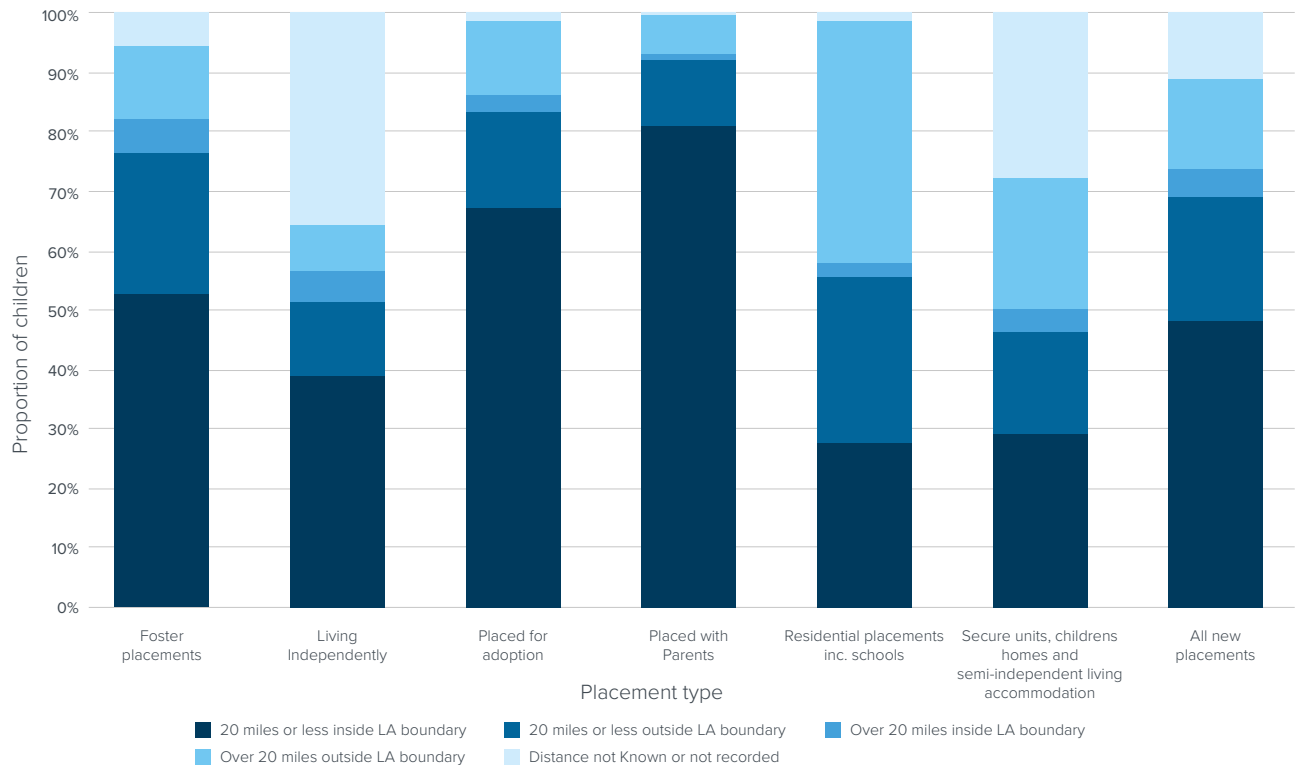
205 ONS (2022) *Who are the children entering care in England?* Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/socialcare/articles/whoarethekidnenteringcareinengland/2022-11-04 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

206 Ibid.

207 Ibid.

208 Ibid.

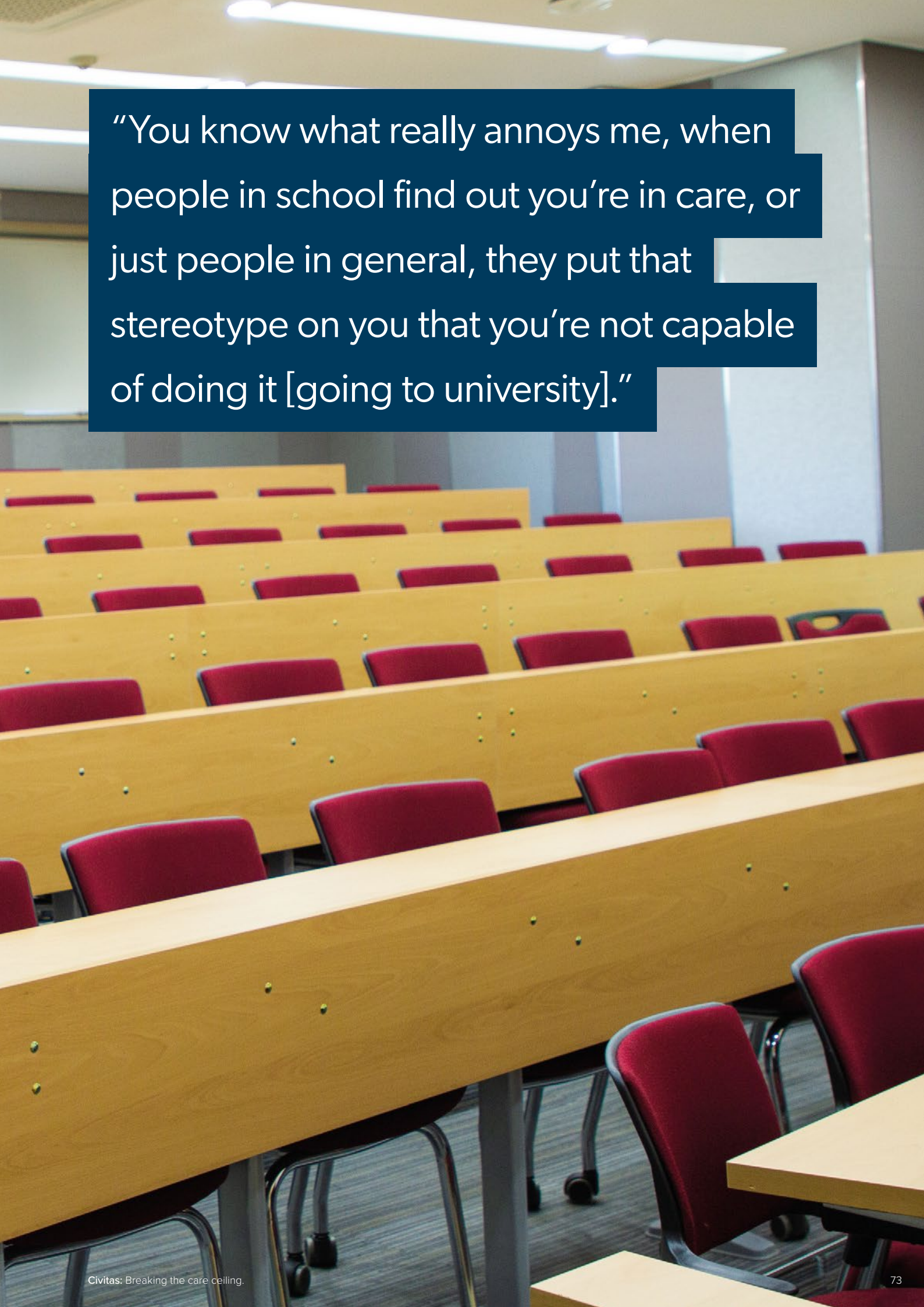
Figure 6.6: Looked after children during year by placement type, by locality and local authority, England, 2022



Source: gov.uk (2022) Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022> (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

Around two fifths (42 per cent) of those in residential placements are over 20 miles from their previous home and outside the local authority boundary.

The placement location of those living independently is often not known, with over a third not known or recorded.

A photograph of an empty lecture hall. The room is filled with rows of light-colored wooden desks and red upholstered chairs. The desks are arranged in a tiered fashion, sloping upwards from the front to the back of the room. The chairs are tucked under the desks. The background shows a whiteboard and a window. The lighting is bright, coming from overhead fluorescent lights.

“You know what really annoys me, when people in school find out you’re in care, or just people in general, they put that stereotype on you that you’re not capable of doing it [going to university].”

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are children 'who have applied for asylum in their own right and are separated from both parents and/or any other responsible adult.' Local authorities are legally obliged to provide these children with accommodation.²⁰⁹

Numbers

On 31 March 2022 there were 5,570 looked after UASC in England – a 10 per cent increase on the number on 31 March 2020, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic – and the highest number since records began on UASC in 2004.

Between 2004-09, there was a steady increase in the number of looked after UASC. The numbers then decreased until 2014. Since 2014, numbers have steadily increased (apart from in 2021, where there was a fall in the number of looked after UASC by over 900 due to the Covid pandemic).²¹⁰

UASC now comprise around one quarter of each new cohort of care leavers,²¹¹ with a substantial rise since the mid-2010s.

Characteristics

UASC currently represent roughly seven per cent of all looked after children in England, up from five per cent last year, and up slightly from six per cent in 2018.²¹²

UASC do, however, make up a much more significant share of those in care at 16, and particularly those entering care at 16 or after.²¹³

This is because UASC are overwhelmingly male and older. Ninety-five per cent of UASC are male – an increase from 92 per cent last year. Only 13 per cent of UASC were under 16-years-old – the same as 2020 but down from 19 per cent in 2018.

The ethnicity of UASC has been changing over recent years. The majority of UASC are from 'other ethnic groups' – a number which has been increasing. In 2022, they accounted for 45 per cent of UASC, a 10-percentage point increase since 2018. Meanwhile, white children make up a small and shrinking proportion – down to four per cent this year, a fall from six per cent last year and 11 per cent in 2018.²¹⁴

Most of the growth of UASC from 'other ethnic groups' has been associated with the Syrian Civil War as 'Arab' falls into the 'other ethnic groups' category.²¹⁵

Educational outcomes

Research by the Rees Centre found that, despite UASC experiencing 'significant difficulties'²¹⁶ – including 'interrupted history of schooling, trauma, isolation through different language and culture, loss of family and peer relationships, strong co-ethnic peer relationships, and stressful life events on arrival including

209 gov.uk (2022) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

210 Ibid.

211 Ibid.

212 Ibid.

213 Ibid.

214 Ibid.

215 Home Office (2023) *Illegal Migration Bill: children factsheet*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-migration-bill-factsheets/illegal-migration-bill-children-factsheet#:~:text=The%20bill%20will%20provide%20the,so%20by%20the%20Home%20Office. (Accessed 19 June 2023).

216 O'Higgins, A. (2019) *Analysis of care and education pathways of refugee and asylum-seeking children in care in England: implications for social work*. Rees Centre. Available at: www.education.ox.ac.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

racism, discrimination, and uncertain legal status²¹⁷ – they had better KS4 scores than other looked after children and children in need, though a worse score than the general child population.

Further, UASC in mainstream schools, where the majority of UASC are placed, also received better exam scores in KS4 than those not in a mainstream school.²¹⁸

Exam scores were also found to be higher for UASC who were placed in care at a younger age, were living in foster or kinship care, had fewer behavioural problems (behavioural problems tend to reflect trauma), were placed in a mainstream school (where the majority of UASC are placed), and changed school fewer times (UASC change school in Years 10 or 11 at four times the rate of all other children).

UASC 'have significantly fewer authorised and unauthorised absences' than other looked after children or children in need. Their attendance was similar with children in the general population.²¹⁹ In comparison to non-migrant children, the mean absence rate for UASC in Year 11 in 2017 was 6.8 per cent, while non-migrant children had a slightly lower average absence rate of 6.6 per cent.²²⁰

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) think-tank and Unbound analysed fixed period and permanent exclusions rates of UASC. From this, they discovered that UASC had higher rates of fixed period exclusions than the non-migrant population (7.1 per cent compared to 5.2 per cent). UASC receive very few permanent exclusions.²²¹

Placement stability – 'pinball machine'

Looked after children often have an unstable childhood.

Entering the care system is generally a highly traumatic experience and stability is essential to allowing children to recover from this. Yet in 2022, 10 per cent of looked after children had at least three placements during the year.

Government minister Alex Burghart MP has described the instability of life in the care system for children as like living in a pinball machine, a description given to him by a care experienced individual who had had over 20 placements.²²²

In our roundtable of experts, stability was raised an important factor for young people in thinking about higher education. A lack of stability can make higher education a low priority for young people and those who have found stability through having their own housing or a job can be unwilling to put this at risk by applying to university.²²³

The average duration of the last period of care for children leaving care this year was 895 days (around 30 months), and of those staying in care, almost a third (31 per cent) of looked after children in 2022 had more than one placement.²²⁴

Almost one in five 12–15-year-olds looked after in 2018/19 experienced multiple moves in that year alone.²²⁵

217 Ott, E. and O'Higgins, A. (2019). *Conceptualising educational provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in England*. Rees Centre. Available at: www.education.ox.ac.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

218 O'Higgins, A. (2019) *Analysis of care and education pathways of refugee and asylum-seeking children in care in England: implications for social work*. Rees Centre. Available at: www.education.ox.ac.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

219 Ibid.

220 Hutchinson, J. and Reader, M. (2021) *The educational outcomes of refugee and asylum-seeking children in England: An experimental methodology for analysing attainment, absence and exclusions*. Working Paper. Education Policy Institute. Available at: www.epi.org.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

221 Ibid.

222 Burghart, A. (2015). *Alex Burghart: The children growing up in a pinball machine*. Available at: conservativehome.com/2015/07/27/alex-burghart-the-children-growing-up-in-a-pinball-machine (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

223 See Appendix A

224 gov.uk (2022) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

225 Clarke, T. (2020) *Stability index 2020: Technical report*. Children's Commissioner. Available at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

This instability is not just from moving. A recent Children’s Commissioner report tells us that there are thought to be 20,000 children in care in England who have been separated from their siblings – representing more than one in three children in care with siblings²²⁶ (37 per cent).

The rate of siblings separated is at its highest amongst children with more than one sibling, children placed in semi-independent accommodation or children’s homes, and children in care because of socially unacceptable behaviour and/or because of a disability.²²⁷

Only 3.5 per cent of looked after children – under 3,000 children – were adopted in the year ending 31 March 2022.²²⁸ There are currently 2,040 children waiting for adoption in England, over half of which have been waiting for at least 18 months, and of those children, two thirds haven’t yet turned five.²²⁹

General outcomes

- Nearly two in five (38 per cent) 19- to 21-year-old care leavers are not in employment, education, or training, compared to only 11 per cent of the general population of 19- to 21-year-olds.²³⁰ By the age of 27, **only 22 per cent of care leavers are in employment, compared to 57 per cent of non-care leavers.**²³¹
- Despite care leavers accounting for an estimated two per cent of the population, over a quarter (26 per cent) of the homeless population are estimated to have been in care at some point during their childhood.²³²
- An ONS study following looked after children born in 1994 found that 15 per cent had received an immediately custodial sentence by the age of 24, **over 10 times** the proportion of children who had not been in care.²³³
- Research from the ONS suggest that care leavers are **70 per cent more likely to die by the age of 60** than the rest of the population.
- The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care estimated that the social cost to Britain of the adverse outcomes of children who have ever needed a social worker is **£23 billion per year.**²³⁴

226 Children’s Commissioner (2023) *Siblings in care*. Available at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023). ‘the analysis focuses on the 55,000 children who have been in care at any point between 1992-2022 and have at least one sibling in state school and also in care’.

227 Ibid.

228 gov.uk (2022) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

229 Home for Good (2023) *Statistics: National statistics for fostering and adoption*. Available at: homeforgood.org.uk/statistics (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

230 gov.uk (2022) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

231 House of Commons Education Committee (2022) *Educational poverty: how children in residential care have been let down and what to do about it. Second report of Session 2022-23*. House of Commons. Available at: committees.parliament.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

232 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children’s social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

233 ONS (2022) *The education background of looked-after children who interact with the criminal justice system*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/theeducationbackgroundoflookedafterchildrenwhointeractwiththecriminaljusticesystem/december2022 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

234 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children’s social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).



Children entitled to Free School Meals and those in the poorest fifth of households are more than **twice as likely** to go to university before the age of 19 than a young person who grew up in care. ²³⁵

235 Department for Education (2023) Widening participation in higher education. Available at: [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#) (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk) (Accessed: 13 July 2023). Within the "all_characteristics" spreadsheet in the data files.

Overview

Care experienced young people across the UK have significantly worse outcomes than children who did not experience care. These include increased adverse employment outcomes, risk of homelessness and poor housing,²³⁶ health issues,²³⁷ early parenthood,²³⁸ and involvement in the criminal justice system.²³⁹

Employment

There is a wealth of evidence to show that individuals who have been in the care system are much less likely to be employed. Evidence following individuals who have been in care until their 50th birthday shows that this is persistent throughout adulthood.²⁴⁰ Employment prospects are particularly bad for those who have been in residential care and are better for those who have been in parental care.²⁴¹

According to the latest figures from the Department for Education (DfE), one-fifth of 17-year-old care leavers and 28 per cent of 18-year-old care leavers are not in education, employment or training.

For 19- to 21-year-old care leavers, almost two fifths (38 per cent) are not in education, employment or training. This is more than three times the 11 per cent of all other 19- to 21-year-olds.²⁴² By the age of 27, only 22 per cent of care leavers are in employment, compared to 57 per cent of non-care leavers.²⁴³

The DfE published a report in May 2022 looking at the outcomes of children in need – including children in care – in the first eight years after leaving secondary school. It was found that looked after children were the least likely group to have participated in higher education, KS5 education or employment, and were the most likely to be claiming out-of-work benefits.²⁴⁴

The report found that the most common pathway for the general population of young people was one year of KS5 (age 17-18), followed by three years in higher education (age 18-21) and four years of employment (age 21-25).

In contrast, the most common pathway for care experienced children is one year of mixed/no sustained activity (age 17-18), followed by seven years of claiming benefits (age 18-25).²⁴⁵

Care experienced individuals had the highest rate (77 per cent) on benefits and were six times as likely than average to claim benefits for multiple consecutive years – with 36 per cent remaining on benefits for at least four years, compared to six per cent of all individuals.²⁴⁶

236 Briheim-Crookall, L. et al (2020) *What makes life good? Care leavers' views on their well-being*. Coram Voice and Rees Centre. Available at: coramvoice.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

237 Crous, G., Montserrat, C., and Balaban, A. (2021) 'Young people leaving care with intellectual disabilities or mental health problems: strengths and weaknesses in their transitions', *Social Work and Society International Online Journal*, 18(3), pp.1-19. Available at: ejournals.bib.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/sws/article/view/680 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

238 Purtell, J., Mendes, P., and Saunders, B.J. (2020) 'Care leavers, ambiguous loss and early parenting: explaining high rates of pregnancy and parenting amongst young people transitioning from out-of-home care', *Children Australia*, 45(4), pp.241-248. Available at: www.cambridge.org/core/journals/children-australia/article/abs/care-leavers-ambiguous-loss-and-early-parenting-explaining-high-rates-of-pregnancy-and-parenting-amongst-young-people-transitioning-from-outofhome-care/f1d0f51592807d085ab4807d70763d5a (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

239 Fitzpatrick, C. and Williams, P. (2017) 'The neglected needs of care leavers in the criminal justice system: Practitioners' perspectives and the persistence of problem (corporate) parenting', *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 17(2), pp.175-191. Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1748895816659324 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

240 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children's social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

241 Ibid.

242 [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) (2022) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

243 House of Commons Education Committee (2022) *Educational poverty: how children in residential care have been let down and what to do about it. Second report of Session 2022-23*. House of Commons. Available at: committees.parliament.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

244 Ahmed, N. et al (2022) *Post-16 educational and employment outcomes of children in need*. Department for Education. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

245 Ibid.

246 Ibid.

Average earnings

Employed care experienced individuals have lower earnings compared to those who have never been in the care system. The British Cohort Study found that they earn approximately one third less than individuals who have never been in care, both 11 years after GCSE (aged 27) and at age 42.²⁴⁷

This outcome is partly a consequence of the choice of profession and partly because the employment that care experienced individuals obtain tends to be with zero-hour or temporary contracts.²⁴⁸ This is because the immediate concerns of financial security and housing lead young people into low-quality work without possibility of progression, with an absence of clear career goals leading to a possibility of 'drift'.²⁴⁹ A good workplace can be extremely positive for young people, with important social opportunities, an integrated support network, and informal mentoring.²⁵⁰

Educational outcomes

The educational outcomes of children in the care system are well researched and analysed later on this report. Even at the early years foundation stage, looked after children are already far behind their peers: the DfE found that in 2018/19, 44 per cent of looked after children reached a good level of development at the early years foundation stage, compared to 72 per cent of all pupils. This gap widens at each of the main points of assessment from KS1 to KS2 to KS4 – at KS4 looked after children are five times less likely to receive at least a grade 5 in English and maths. This results in just 15 per cent of looked after children going on to study A-Levels and just 14 per cent going to university.²⁵¹

Health outcomes

Individuals who have been in care tend to suffer worse outcomes in terms of physical and mental health.

Those who have been in the care system are at significantly higher risk of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression and are at far higher risks of death each year throughout their adulthood compared to other adults. A longitudinal study from the ONS found that in the 42 years between leaving care and turning 60, care leavers are over 70 per cent more likely to die than those who have not been in care.²⁵²

There is also a much higher incidence of drug and alcohol abuse amongst care leavers than the general population.

Nuffield Foundation research from 2021²⁵³ found that in mid-early adulthood, eight per cent of those who had not been in care had limiting long-term illnesses, compared with 14 per cent who had been in kinship care, 17 per cent who had been in foster care and 32 per cent who had been in residential care.

247 Nelson, M. and Anderson, O. (2021) *Post-16 Education and labour market outcomes for Looked After Children (LEO)*. Department for Education. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

248 Dixon, J. (2016) 'Opportunities and challenges: supporting journeys into education and employment for young people leaving care in England', *Spanish Journal of Pedagogy*, 74(263), pp.13-29. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/24711266 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

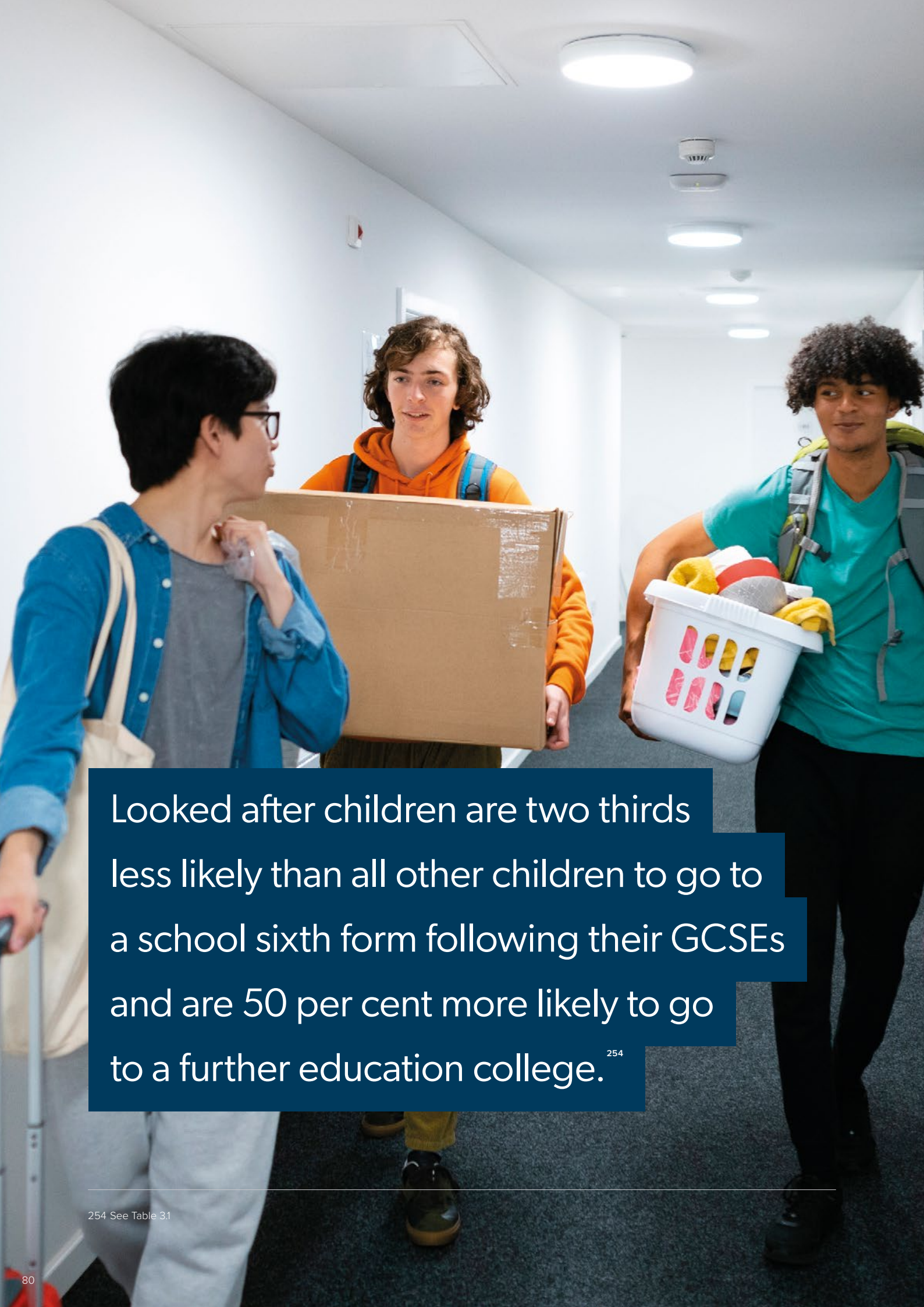
249 Göbel, S. Hansmeyer, A., Lunz, M., and Peters, U. (2019) 'Occupational aspirations of care leavers and their pathways to work', *Social Work and Society*, 17(2) pp.1-20. Available at: ejournals.bib.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/sws/article/view/666 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

250 Arnau-Sabatés, L. and Gilligan, R. (2020) 'Support in the workplace: How relationships with bosses and co-workers may benefit care leavers and young people in care', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 111. Available at: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740919308400#:~:text=Support%20received%20from%20bosses%20and,given%20recognition%2C%20and%20being%20mentored.&text=It%20appears%20that%20such%20support,the%20workplace%20and%20more%20widely (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

251 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children's social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

252 Murray, E. T. et al (2020). 'Association of childhood out-of-home care status with all-cause mortality up to 42-years later: Office of National Statistics Longitudinal Study', *BMC Public Health*, 20(1). Available at: doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08867-3 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

253 Sacker, A. et al (2021) *The lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories of people who have been in care: Findings from the Looked-after Children Grown up Project*. Nuffield Foundation. Available at: www.nuffieldfoundation.org (Accessed: 20 June 2023).



Looked after children are two thirds less likely than all other children to go to a school sixth form following their GCSEs and are 50 per cent more likely to go to a further education college.²⁵⁴

254 See Table 3.1

Homelessness

Care leavers are over-represented in homelessness statistics. Despite data suggesting that less than one per cent of under 18s enter care each year²⁵⁵ – and that care leavers are thought to only represent two per cent of the adult population²⁵⁶ – **over one-quarter (26 per cent) of the homeless population are estimated to have been in care at some point during their childhood**,²⁵⁷ and approximately one-third of care leavers become homeless within two years after leaving the system.²⁵⁸ This is another example of the ‘cliff-edge’ that care leavers face at the end of their childhood.

Homelessness charity Centrepoin also conducted a survey of care leavers and found that, since leaving care, more than one-quarter (26 per cent) had sofa surfed, while 14 per cent said they had slept rough.²⁵⁹

Crime

Care leavers are also overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Over a quarter (27 per cent) of those currently in the custody system are believed to have been in care,²⁶⁰ whilst **24 per cent of the female prison population and 31 per cent of the male prison population are thought to have previously been in care**.²⁶¹ Moreover, almost half of individuals under 21-years-old who are in contact with the criminal justice system have spent time in care.²⁶²

More than half (52 per cent) of looked after children who were born in the 1993/1994 academic year and went to school in England had a criminal conviction by the age of 24, compared with 13 per cent of children who had not been in care.²⁶³ This particularly related to special educational needs (SEN) – 92 per cent of looked after children who received custodial sentences by age 24 years were identified as having SEN.

Most of these children were not imprisoned, however the rates of imprisonment were much higher than for children who had not been in care. Fifteen per cent had received an immediately custodial sentence by the age of 24, which is over 10 times the proportion of children who had not been in care.²⁶⁴

Male looked after children were 12 times as likely to receive an immediate custodial sentence than those not in the care system, with a quarter (24 per cent) of looked after male children receiving an immediate custodial sentence, compared with two per cent of male children who had not been in care.²⁶⁵ For females, one in 20 (five per cent) looked after children received an immediate custodial sentence, compared with less than one in 500 children who had not been in care. This is 25 times higher.

Looked after children also appear to enter the criminal justice system at an earlier age compared to children not in the care system. On average, looked after children who received a custodial sentence did so in the year they turned 18. In contrast, for those who had not been in the care system, the average age was the year they turned 20.

255 House of Commons Education Committee (2016) *Mental health and well-being of looked-after children: Fourth Report of Session 2015–16*. House of Commons. Available at: committees.parliament.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

256 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children's social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

257 Ibid.

258 PwC (2021) *The investment of a lifetime: Delivering better outcomes for children in care*. Available at: www.pwc.co.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

259 Centrepoin (2017) *From care to where? Care leavers' access to accommodation*. Available at: www.basw.co.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

260 PwC (2021) *The investment of a lifetime: Delivering better outcomes for children in care*. Available at: www.pwc.co.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

261 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children's social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

262 Children in Care Working Group (2008) *Couldn't Care Less*. Centre for Social Justice. Available at: www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

263 ONS (2022) *The education background of looked-after children who interact with the criminal justice system*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/theeducationbackgroundoflookedafterchildrenwhointeractwiththecriminaljusticesystem/december2022 (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

264 Ibid.

265 Ibid.

Additionally, of the children in care who received a custodial sentence, nearly one-fifth (18 per cent) were under 16 when they were imprisoned for the first time, compared to only four per cent of children not in care.²⁶⁶

Intergenerational cycle of care

Care leavers are much more likely to have their own children enter the care system than the general population. A recent study from PwC suggests that **32 per cent of looked after children have a parent who is a care leaver.**²⁶⁷

This is particularly associated with early parenthood. Research from the US suggests that 19 per cent of mothers aged 25 or 26 with care experience were living apart from at least one of their biological children.²⁶⁸

Economic cost of social care

Adverse outcomes across a range of social and economic measures for care leavers are estimated to **cost the taxpayer around £23 billion a year**, according to analysis conducted by Alma Economics in a study commissioned by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.²⁶⁹

This analysis also estimated the total cost of the children's social care system is approximately £13.1 billion per year, a figure likely to rise to 'more than £15 billion' in the coming years.²⁷⁰ The review estimated that local authorities across England spend £10.5 billion in direct costs associated with children's social care, with half (£5.3 billion) spent on children taken directly into local authority care.²⁷¹

Alma Economics assessed the lifetime social costs of adverse outcomes for care leavers. These estimates suggest an average lifetime cost of £720,000²⁷² (or £14,000 per annum)²⁷³ for children with a social worker (around three per cent of children in England) – rising to **£1.2 million for children taken into local authority care.** These figures give some indication of the savings that could be made by improving outcomes for care leavers through increasing their participation in higher education and improving educational outcomes.

In 2018 the CSJ think tank commissioned an analysis to calculate the cost to the taxpayer of poorer outcomes for care leavers. This analysis suggested a total cost to the state (based upon 2016/17 data and prices) of £9.63 billion. This was made up of £3.83 billion of current costs of the children's social care system, £2.27 billion of 'near-term costs' and an additional £3.53 billion for the medium- to long-term costs.²⁷⁴

266 Children's Commissioner (2022) *New findings on how children in care interact with the criminal justice system*. Available at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/new-findings-on-how-children-in-care-interact-with-the-criminal-justice-system (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

267 PwC (2021) *The investment of a lifetime: Delivering better outcomes for children in care*. Available at: www.pwc.co.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

268 Courtney, M. et al (2011) *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth Outcomes at Age 26*. University of Chicago. Available at: rhyclearinghouse.acf.hhs.gov (Accessed: 20 June 2023).

269 Professional Social Work magazine (2021) *£23 billion a year is the cost of adverse childhood, says England's children's social care review report*. Available at: www.basw.co.uk/resources/psw-magazine/psw-online/%C2%A323-billion-year-cost-adverse-childhood-says-englands-childrens (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

270 MacAlister, J. (2022) *The independent review of children's social care: Final report*, UK Government. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

271 Professional Social Work magazine (2021) *£23 billion a year is the cost of adverse childhood, says England's children's social care review report*. Available at: www.basw.co.uk/resources/psw-magazine/psw-online/%C2%A323-billion-year-cost-adverse-childhood-says-englands-childrens (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

272 Ibid.

273 Ibid.

274 Centre for Social Justice (2020) *12by24*. Available at: www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk (Accessed: 20 June 2023). P34-36.



Female care leavers are **three and half times as likely** to apply to university as male care leavers. ²⁷⁵

275 UCAS (2022), 'Next Steps', Available at: UCAS (2022) 'Next Steps', download (ucas.com), 66 per cent of care experienced university applicants are female whilst 64 per cent of 18-year-old care leavers in 2021 were male. Using $(66/36)/(34/64) = 3.45$ this suggests that a given female care leaver is 3.45 times more likely to apply to university.

Appendix A: Roundtable discussion with experts and policy makers

In May 2023, the Children and Families Unit hosted a virtual roundtable discussion on widening participation of care-experienced individuals at university with a panel of experts.

Barriers to care-experienced young people accessing higher education

Stability was raised as an important factor for young people thinking about higher education. A lack of stability potentially made higher education a low priority for young people. Also, young people from care backgrounds who have found stability through their own housing or a job can be unwilling to put this at risk by applying to university.

Participants noted that most looked after children have been put off university by a negative experience of education at school. There was also concern over a lack of positive role models – that is, other young people from similar backgrounds in higher education.

There was some concern that too little organised advice, tailored to looked after children, on applying for higher education was offered by schools, particularly on the process of applying to university. Topics such as which subjects to study, what sort of options are available (foundation courses, degree apprenticeships, and so forth) and how to fill in a UCAS form.

It was raised that there is often inconsistency in the support young people receive, particularly at a local authority level. Some looked after children received much better support from their local authorities than others.

There was also conversation about the role of social workers, with differing levels of experience and attitudes to higher education.

Some felt that the different support packages offered by universities had an impact on the likelihood a care leaver will apply to university, the variation in university support ranges from universal to non-existent.

There was concern over age caps related to additional support. Support into higher education offered by universities tends to be capped at the age of 25, while many care-experienced university applicants tend to be over 25.

Effective strategies in helping care-experienced young people accessing higher education.

There was call for universities to demonstrate a commitment to increasing the number of care leavers at a strategic level, with outreach programmes and resources for universities to have a named contact for prospective students from a care background. Local authorities, foster carers and social workers all have an important role to play in helping young people through the application process and providing encouragement and support.

Aspiration was a key theme that was raised. Too many cared for children simply don't consider university to be a realistic option, largely because of how expensive it can be. Participants discussed how financial support (including tuition fees) and year-round accommodation support have a large impact on decision-making for young people.

Schemes that include financial support, such as bursaries, fee relief and year-round subsidised accommodation, were all cited as a positive inducement to encourage young people to consider university. A number of attendees also mentioned the importance of full-time staff dedicated to, and with experience of, care-experienced students.

Attendees stressed de-mystifying university as important, as well as changing perceptions around who goes to university. It was suggested that helping more young people experience a university campus, before they even consider applying, would help to dispel these myths. Summer outreach programmes were commended, providing an opportunity to visit a university and spend time on campus in a non-intimidating way.

Some of our experts felt that universities needed to commit to giving consistent offers to local young people from care backgrounds if they want to increase the number of care-experienced students in higher education.

Policy recommendations in helping care-experienced young people accessing higher education.

Many of the panel highlighted the importance of terminology. A consistent term, '*care-experienced*' was desired, as well as using '*cared for children*' over '*children looked after*'.

Some also highlighted whether upper-age limits for support for individuals with care experience applying to university needs review.

There was some discussion around funding and requirements for local authorities and universities to provide aspiration building support for young people of school age. The group also discussed widening the measures used to access university, beyond simple academic achievement and qualifications considering life experience.

The attendees were: **Philippa Manning**, Widening Participation Officer, De Montfort University. **Wendy Price OBE**, Head of Widening Access and Participation, University of Sunderland. **Natalie Bracher**, Access & Success Officer, University of Exeter. **Beth Taswell**, Student Inclusion Consultant, Kingston University. **Vanessa Conman**, Access and Outreach Manager, University of York. **Claire Cooke**, Access Projects Manager, Oxford Brookes University. **Sian Edwards**, Communication and Administration Officer, National Network for the Education of Care Leavers. **Rahima Begum**, Office for the Children's Commissioner. **Rachel Wright**, Senior Policy Advisor, Participation Access and Equality, Office for Students. **Harriette Cradock**, Strategic Advisor to the Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students.

Appendix B: Roundtable discussion with young people with experience of care

In June 2023, the Children and Families Unit hosted a virtual roundtable discussion on aspirations of university for care-experienced young people with a panel of First Star scholars²⁷⁶ currently in Key Stage 4.

There was clear determination and ambition for the future in the group, with a consensus that university is a realistic option for most people, including people in care.

'Just because we're in care and we may not have had good upbringings or whatever, it doesn't mean because of that you're being stopped from having a good future or going to university. The label 'care' shouldn't stop you from doing it.'

'Anything is a realistic option for anyone, regardless of their background.'

Panellists raised the harmful effect of a 'stigma' or stereotype surrounding people in care.

'You know what really annoys me, when people in school find out you're in care, or just people in general, they put that stereotype on you that you're not capable of doing it [going to university].'

Some had experience of a social worker talking to them about university, while some did not. More conversations about going to university had been had informally with foster families and friends.

'Yeah, people have actually said if you go to university you'll do quite well, and that's coming from my friends who have had siblings who have gone to university with a similar experience.'

Most had been spoken to about the next step (Key Stage 5) at their school. There was clear strategy among attendees over how best to take the next steps for their future.

'Lately I've been thinking about getting into forensic pathology, I think, and I just decided to search it up myself and it turns out that you need to do biology and chemistry and you need to go to medical university and get experience and then another five years in forensic training.'

There were sporadic examples of role models for the participants, there was experience of educational success but most of their experience was educational difficulties.

'I know that my carers' other foster daughter, she's 24 now and she went to university to do nursing; she's a nurse now.'

'I've never known anyone because my older brothers dropped out of school and they don't care, and then I've only got a little brother who's eight, so I don't actually know anyone who's been to university since I've been older.'

'One or two of my friends has a few cousins who were in foster care and they've gone to university but they've dropped out because of some things that people have said about them and they didn't like it.'

On policy and what more universities and government can do, aspiration and awareness were highlighted. Telling children in the care system what is possible and that they can achieve it.

'Spread more information [about university] to people in care, even like little posters, really anything I think could help because I feel like some people don't even think about going to university. And also, trying to fight that stereotype of people saying children in foster care can't go to university because they've come from this background [of care].'

276 First Star Scholars UK is a charity established to support care experienced young people into higher education: www.firststaruk.org

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