

Written evidence from Dr Neil Harrison (SFF0010)

I am an Associate Professor in Education and Social Justice at the University of Exeter. My particular area of salient expertise is the educational pathways and outcomes of young people who have had experience of local authority care.

I am seeking to present evidence with respect to the following question posed by the inquiry:

- *What incentives do individuals have to involve themselves in apprenticeships and training? Is the system available and attractive enough to encourage individuals to seek training, and if not, what can be done to improve this?*

Source of evidence

I am drawing primarily on a report completed for the Nuffield Foundation in 2023 entitled 'Care leavers' transition into the labour market in England' and completed with colleagues from the University of York and the University of Oxford.

Our report focuses on young people who spent time in local authority care (e.g. foster care or children's residential care), usually due to neglect or maltreatment within their birth family. This group has educational and occupational outcomes that are substantially below national averages. The reasons for this are complex, but include the impact of trauma, social upheaval, stigma and educational disruption.

Our report explores the educational and occupational activities of care-experienced young people between the ages of 16 and 21 through a novel analysis of national administrative data and interviews with young people and the professionals working with them. Our full report is available here: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/care-leavers-transition-into-the-labour-market-in-england>.

Key findings relevant to the inquiry

1. Care-experienced young people are heavy users of further education, with around 68% doing so between the ages of 16 and 21 (compared to 57% of other young people). This likely reflects the educational disruption of their earlier lives and that further education offers a 'second opportunity' in early adulthood for learning and preparation for a career.

2. Their engagement with further education indicates a strong underlying desire to accumulate qualifications that will enable them to enter the labour market. However, we found that they were significantly less likely to secure stable work and more likely to become economically inactive than other young people, even after background factors were taken into account.
3. There is therefore an important role for apprenticeships in 'bridging the gap' for care-experienced young people and providing them with a clear and positive pathway into the labour market. However, we heard accounts from young people and professionals that apprenticeships were not currently being accessed extensively and the underlying reasons for this. Some of these reasons applied to all young people (e.g. availability), but others were distinct to care-experienced young people.
4. Firstly, the level of financial support was insufficient. Care-experienced young people are generally not able to draw on family resources in early adulthood, whereas apprenticeships are still tacitly predicated on the apprentice living at home while they are qualifying. Many care-experienced young people are in high-cost semi-independent or independent housing during early adulthood and we heard that apprenticeships were therefore not seen as a viable option. Additional financial support from local authorities or national government (e.g. Care Leaver Apprenticeship Bursary) was reported to be patchy and/or insufficient to incentivise apprenticeships.
5. Secondly, many care-experienced young people have poor mental health (e.g. depression and anxiety) due to their traumatic experiences before, during or after being in care. We heard accounts that this was a significant barrier to accessing workplaces, including through apprenticeships. This could lead to a reluctance to take on a care-experienced apprentice or difficulties with meeting ongoing expectations, potentially due to low understanding about mental health or trauma-informed practice.
6. In addition, our report highlights the important distinction between young people who hold the statutory status of a 'care leaver' and those who leave care prior to 16 and therefore do not. We demonstrated that educational and occupational outcomes for the latter group were generally similar to those for the former – and sometimes worse. However, care-experienced young people who are not care leavers are generally not able to access local authority and national government support.

Recommendations

Our report makes 17 recommendations to improve the pathways into the labour market for care-experienced young people. The most directly salient to this inquiry are summarised below:

- Care-experienced young people should be a priority group for national initiatives designed to support transition into work, accounting for any additional barriers and support needs.
- National government should provide additional 'top up' funding to participate in apprenticeships and other schemes to ensure that they are not financially disadvantaged (NB: We note the recent increase in the Care Leaver Apprenticeship Bursary).
- Leaving care services in local authorities should have a dedicated specialist role focusing on education, employment and training.
- Targeted pre-employment and pre-apprenticeship support should be provided to prepare young people with the most complex needs to take steps towards work-related opportunities.
- Education providers and employers should have greater awareness of trauma and other mental health needs for care-experienced young people.
- Young people leaving care between 14 and 16 should be considered as a specific 'at risk' group with respect to their transitions into adulthood as they do not receive the support offered to care leavers.

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