

Written evidence from Become (CSC 191)

Education Select Committee Children's Social Care

Introduction

- 1) Become is the national charity for care-experienced children and young people. We put young people at the heart of everything we do, supporting them to get the help they need now and empowering them to bring about change in their own lives, the care system and society.
- 2) We are delighted that the Education Select Committee has decided to continue the previous Committee's inquiry into children's social care. Our submission builds on our previous written and oral evidence to the Committee, and provides new evidence and analysis. Our submission covers the following:
 - Children in care being moved far from their home community and support networks;
 - Care-experienced young people facing a disproportionate risk of housing insecurity and homelessness; and
 - Our response to the Government's recent proposals to reform the care system.

Children in care being moved far from their home community and support networks

- 3) Over the past two years, through our *Gone Too Far* campaign, Become has been highlighting the increasing number of children in care who are being moved far away from the people and places that matter the most to them.¹ There can be legitimate reasons why children in care are moved miles from their home area, such as to safeguard them from exploitation or harm, or to move in with or closer to wider family connections or existing support networks. However, too often, the reality is that children are moved far from home simply due to a lack of appropriate homes or care options in their local area.²
- 4) The number of children in care in England has increased steadily in recent years, rising by 23% between 2013 and 2024.³ Whilst the overall number of children in care plateaued between 2023 and 2024,⁴ the number of children in care living away from their home communities and support networks continues to rise. In 2024, 18, 040

¹ Become (2023), *Gone Too Far: preventing children in care being moved miles from the people and places that matter to them*

² Ibid

³ Department for Education (2024), *Children looked after in England, including adoptions: reporting year 2024* (and previous releases)

⁴ The total number of children in care in England actually fell between 130 between 2023 and 2024

children in care were living more than 20 miles from home: a 67% increase from 2013.⁵ In 2024, more than a fifth of all children in care were living more than 20 miles from home, and 45% of all children in care were living out of area.⁶ Almost half of all children living in children's homes or secure units (49%) were living more than 20 miles away from home in 2024.⁷

5) In August 2024, we published a new report, *Still Too Far*, which included findings from a number of freedom of information requests to the Department for Education.⁸ These included⁹:

- On average, children in care in England were living 18.5 miles from home on 31st March 2023.
- Children living in children's homes run by private providers were 2.5 times more likely to be living more than 20 miles from home than children living in homes run by the local authority, voluntary sector or other public organisations or agencies.
- Children in care living more than 20 miles from home were significantly more likely to have a 'cause for concern' score and less like to have a 'normal' score on screening tests designed to assess for emotional wellbeing and mental health problems;¹⁰
- On average, children who had experienced multiple recent moves were living further away and were more likely to be living far from home.

6) Being moved away from their support networks and communities can have a variety of negative and long-term impacts on children in care. It can lead to children being disconnected from friends, family and the people that matter to them most; it can disrupt children's education, lives and relationships; it can create or enhance feelings of loneliness, isolation and stigma; it can damage young people's mental health, wellbeing and self-esteem; and it can exacerbate adversity or trauma that children may have experienced before entering the care system.¹¹

7) Our research findings from our *Still Too Far* report underline the need for further reforms to prevent children in care being moved away from their friends, families,

⁵ Department for Education (2024), [Children looked after in England, including adoptions: reporting year 2024](#) (and previous releases)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Become (2024), [Still Too Far: Children in care being moved miles from the people and places that matter to them](#)

⁹ Unless specified all the findings relate to children in care on 31st March 2023.

¹⁰ A Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a brief emotional and behavioural screening questionnaire for children and young people that can be used to assess for emotional wellbeing and mental health problems.

¹¹ Become (2023), [Gone Too Far: preventing children in care being moved miles from the people and places that matter to them](#)

schools and home when it is not in their best interests.¹² We are calling on the Government to:

- Make a national commitment to stop children being moved far from their home area when it is not in their best interests;
- Require all local authorities to develop, publish and update sufficiency strategies;
- Require the collection and publication of data about the number of children who are living more than 20 miles away from home, when this is due to a lack of appropriate options, rather than a purposeful decision to move them away;
- Develop and publish a national sufficiency strategy, setting out the extent to which sufficiency is being delivered across the country, an assessment of what additional provision is needed, and setting out the support that national Government is providing to local authorities to support them to deliver their sufficiency duty.

8) Over the past nine months, Become have been undertaking research to identify examples of positive practice where local authorities have taken purposeful action that has led to a reduction in the number of children under their care who are moved far from home. We hope to be able to be able to share a summary of these examples of best practice with the Committee, in a separate submission, later this month.

Care-experienced young people facing a disproportionate risk of housing insecurity and homelessness

9) Last summer we carried out research to examine the level and type of support that care-experienced young people receive to help them to secure and maintain appropriate and secure housing after leaving care. This included a number of workshops and semi-structured interviews with 33 care-experienced young people to hear about their housing journeys after leaving care; and freedom of information requests to all tier-one local authorities in England to find out about the housing support they provide to care leavers.¹³ The findings from our research and policy report are summarised below.

10) In 2024, there were an estimated 92,970 care leavers aged 17-25 in England.¹⁴ Every year, thousands of young people aged 18, or sometimes younger, face a care cliff when leaving the care system, where vital support and relationships fall away, and they are expected to become 'independent' abruptly. Care leavers are significantly more likely to live independently at a younger age compared to their non-care-experienced peers. For instance, while the average age of leaving the parental home in England is now 24,¹⁵

¹² Become (2024), [Still Too Far: Children in care being moved miles from the people and places that matter to them](#)

¹³ The full research findings and methodology can be found here: Become (2024), [Support Every Step of the Way](#)

¹⁴ Department for Education (2024), [Children looked after in England, including adoptions: reporting year 2024](#)

¹⁵ Office for National Statistics, (2022) [Milestones: journeying through modern life](#);

only 20% of care leavers aged 19-21 live with parents, relatives, or former foster carers in 2024.¹⁶

11) The Staying Put and Staying Close schemes can be invaluable in providing stability and improving outcomes. In 2023, despite being eligible to stay with foster carers until the age of 21 through the Government's 'Staying Put' scheme almost two-thirds of eligible 19-year-olds were not living with their foster carers;¹⁷ and only around 30% of local authorities in England had a 'Staying Close' scheme.¹⁸ We welcome the proposed extension of Staying Close to 25 within the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill,¹⁹ however we think that these schemes should be extended further. **We recommend that the Staying Put scheme be extended to age 25 to provide further continuity of support; and that the Staying Put and Staying Close schemes are made into opt-out legal entitlements.**²⁰

12) Local authorities have a statutory duty to help young people prepare for independent living, including finding suitable accommodation.²¹ Despite this, transition planning for young people leaving care is often rushed or insufficiently managed, leaving many unprepared. Through our Care Advice Line and research with care-experienced young people, we have heard how young people have felt disempowered during transition planning: that they have not been actively and meaningfully involved in decision-making about where they would live or adequately informed about the different options available to them.²² In 2024, almost two-thirds of care leavers aged 22-25 (63%) were not in contact with their local authority.²³ **We recommend that the Government strengthen the role of Personal Advisers to improve the support provided to young people: by introducing standardised training, development and qualifications, with a focus on supporting young people to secure safe, appropriate and affordable housing options.**²⁴

13) The shortage of affordable housing is a significant barrier for care leavers. Social housing, typically the most affordable option, is increasingly scarce across England.²⁵

¹⁶ Department for Education (2024), [Children looked after in England, including adoptions: reporting year 2024](#)

¹⁷ Department for Education (2024), [Children looked after in England, including adoptions: reporting year 2024](#) (and previous releases)

¹⁸ Department for Education (2023), [Children's social care reform accelerates with more support for care leavers](#) (press release: 21st September 2023).

¹⁹ [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) (2024);

²⁰ As recommended by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. See: MacAlister, J (2022), [The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report](#)

²¹ Department for Education (2018), [Extending Personal Adviser support to all care leavers to age 25 Statutory guidance for local authorities](#)

²² Become (2024), [Support Every Step of the Way](#)

²³ Department for Education (2024), [Children looked after in England, including adoptions: reporting year 2024](#)

²⁴ Become (2024), [Support Every Step of the Way](#)

²⁵ House of Commons Library (2024), [Research Briefing: Social rented housing in England: Past trends and prospects](#)

Through the findings of our Freedom of Information requests to local authorities, we found that, while most local authorities stated that they provided some level of prioritisation for social housing to care leavers, there was significant variation in the extent that care leavers were prioritised, how this worked in practice and any qualifying criteria or requirement.²⁶ This is also complicated by the fact that almost half of children in care are placed outside of their local area.²⁷ When leaving care, young people may struggle to access social housing where they currently live due to local area connection rules. They may only qualify for social housing in their ‘home’ local authority, a place they may not have lived in for years, lack connections to, or find triggering due to past trauma.²⁸ We welcomed the commitment by the Prime Minister in September 2024 that the Government would exempt care leavers from local area connection requirements.²⁹ **We recommend that these regulations are introduced without delay, and as part of these reforms, guidance should be updated for local authorities to make clear that care leavers who are living or connected to their area should be prioritised for social housing, instead of just able to apply for social housing.**

14) Many care leavers face financial hardship, often living on or below the poverty line. In 2024 39% of care leavers aged 19-21 were not in education, employment or training, compared to around 13% of all young people aged 19-21.³⁰ Currently the national minimum wage is set at a lower rate for young people under 21,³¹ and young people under 25 who are in receipt of universal credit receive a lower rate than adults aged 25 or over.³² These differences in financial entitlements are based on the assumption that young people between the ages of 18-25 will continue to receive financial support from their family or won’t have the same financial responsibilities associated with living independently – this is often not the case for care leavers.³³ **We recommend that the higher standard allowance within universal credit be extended to all eligible care leavers below the age of 25, to reflect the absence of a familial financial safety net.**

15) Our research shows that care-experienced young people are nine times more likely to face homelessness than other young people.³⁴ The number of 18-20-year-old care leavers receiving a statutory homelessness duty increased by 54% between 2018/19 and 2023/24, far outpacing increases among other groups.³⁵ From our work with care

²⁶ Become (2024), [Support Every Step of the Way](#)

²⁷ Department for Education (2024), [Children looked after in England, including adoptions: reporting year 2024](#)

²⁸ Become (2024), [Support Every Step of the Way](#)

²⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Defence (2024) [UK Armed Forces Veterans given social housing exemption \(24 September 2024\)](#)

³⁰ Department for Education (2024), [Children looked after in England, including adoptions: reporting year 2024](#)

³¹ Low Pay Commission (2024), [The National Minimum Wage in 2024](#)

³² Department for Work and Pensions (2023), [Benefit and pension rates 2024 to 2025](#)

³³ Become (2024), [Support Every Step of the Way](#)

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Become (2024), [Press release: 54% increase in homelessness amongst care leavers](#)

experienced young people, we know this is just the tip of the iceberg and beyond these statistics are many more who are 'hidden homeless', sofa surfing or rough sleeping. Our research revealed that while most local authorities have published joint housing protocols for care leavers, implementation and awareness of updated guidance aimed at improving housing and homelessness support for care leavers remains inconsistent. More action is needed to provide a robust safety net to prevent care leavers from facing homelessness, and ensuring they receive adequate support if they do. We strongly welcome the Government's proposed amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to disapply homelessness intentionality rules for care leavers.³⁶ **We recommend that homelessness legislation is amended further to extend 'priority need' to all care leavers under the age of 25, regardless of any vulnerability.**³⁷

Our response to the Government's recent proposals to reform the care system

16) We welcome many of the provisions within the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill³⁸ aimed at strengthening the regulation of the children's social care system and improving support for care-experienced children and young people. In this submission, we highlight three areas in which we think the provisions of the Bill need to be strengthened further to improve the care system and the experiences, opportunities and outcomes of care-experienced young people:

- a) Strengthening Staying Close support (clause 7 of the Bill);
- b) Improving accountability about the sufficiency of places; and
- c) Extending corporate parenting responsibilities across the public sector.

Strengthening Staying Close support

17) We welcome the extension of Staying Close support within Clause 7 of the Bill.³⁹ This is a vital change, that Become have long campaigned for. Despite this, we remain concerned that the lack of clarity or specificity on the face of the Bill, could lead to significant inconsistencies in the way and extent to which this entitlement is upheld. To provide real impact, we believe there needs to be stronger clarity about what this entitlement means for care-experienced young people in legislation, rather than guidance.

- **Assessment of whether support is required** - Subsection 7(2) states that the local authority must assess whether staying close support is required in the interest of a young person's welfare. The criteria for this assessment is not set out and we are concerned that this could lead to rationing of this support or a postcode lottery.

³⁶ [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill \(2024\)](#);

³⁷ Become (2024), [Support Every Step of the Way](#)

³⁸ [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill \(2024\)](#);

³⁹ Ibid

- **Lack of young person’s voice** – The young person’s voice, wishes and preferences are not referenced on the face of the Bill. We think that any assessment about the type of support that is provided should pay due consideration to young people’s wishes and preferences.
- **Definition of staying close support** - Under the current wording, Staying Close support is defined as providing advice or information, or making representations on behalf of a care-experienced young person for the purpose of helping the young person to find and keep suitable accommodation, or access relevant services. This definition of support is too limited and should be broadened to reflect the broad type of support provided under staying close pilots.

18) **We recommend that Clause 7 of the Bill be amended to make the offer of Staying Close support a strong legal entitlement for all care leavers unless they don’t require it; to broaden the type of support that could be provided; and to centre the wishes and preferences of young people themselves as part of any decisions about the type of support available.**

Improving accountability about the sufficiency of places

19) In recent years, local authorities across the country have faced increasing challenges in delivering sufficiency of care places to meet the needs of children in their care.⁴⁰ This can have a significant impact on where children in care live: often leading to them living in care settings unable to meet all of their needs, or leading to children experiencing frequent moves or instability that can exacerbate complexity, adversity or trauma they experienced before entering care.

20) The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes a number of welcome provisions aimed at addressing some of the challenges local authorities face in delivering sufficiency, such as provider and financial oversight measures, a profit cap and increased enforcement of unregistered provision.⁴¹ However, the Bill does not provide any provisions that will significantly boost capacity in the system.

21) The failure to deliver sufficiency across the country is a national problem. Yet, there remains an absence of a national strategy for delivering sufficiency or robust national oversight. **We recommend that a new requirement is introduced requiring the Department for Education to develop and publish a national sufficiency plan to truly understand how many children in care are living in placements unable to meet their**

⁴⁰ Ofsted (2022), [How local authorities plan for sufficiency of accommodation that meets the needs of children in care and care leavers](#)

⁴¹ [Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) (2024);

needs, the provision needed to address this, and a strategy setting out how national Government will support local authorities to deliver this.

Extending corporate parenting responsibilities across the public sector.

22) Given recent commitments from the Government that they are planning to extend corporate parenting responsibilities to a range of Government Departments and public bodies,⁴² we were disappointed that these proposals were not included in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

23) Become provides the secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Care-Experienced Children and Young People.⁴³ Last year the APPG carried out an inquiry into the extension of corporate parenting responsibilities, which received evidence from over 200 individuals and organisations, including over 160 care-experienced young people.⁴⁴ The APPG's inquiry report highlighted widespread support for these proposals, which have the potential to transform the scaffolding and culture of support for care-experienced young people.⁴⁵ **We recommend that the Government introduces legislation to extend corporate parenting responsibilities to a range of public bodies and organisations as soon as possible, and ensures that these reforms are meaningfully informed by the views, experiences and insights of care-experienced young people.**

February 2025

⁴² Department for Education (2024), [Keeping children safe, helping families thrive](#)

⁴³ Become (2025), [All-Party Parliamentary Group](#)

⁴⁴ Become (2024), [APPG Corporate Parenting Inquiry](#)

⁴⁵ Ibid