

# What makes life good?

## Care leavers' views on their well-being

Key findings and recommendations

## Overview

Over the past five years, we have collected over 10,000 care-experienced voices through the *Your Life Beyond Care* and the *Your Life, Your Care* surveys. Children in care and care leavers have told us how they feel about their lives and what they have shared gives an unprecedented insight into their subjective well-being.

*This report analyses 1,804 care leaver responses collected in 21 English local authorities between 2017 and 2019.*

Since we started the analysis for this report, understanding well-being has become ever more important. Although we collected care leavers' responses before the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the issues raised by young people are likely to have been further exacerbated by the current environment. Almost half of working-age adults in the UK report that the pandemic has affected their well-being. It has impacted on people's finances, relationships and rates of depression (ONS 2020e and ONS 2020f). Understanding how care leavers feel about their lives is essential in order to deliver high-quality services. It is now more relevant than ever to focus on well-being to support care leavers effectively through this difficult time and beyond.



## Listen up - Understand what makes life good for care leavers

What do we want for our children? A happy childhood and a chance to grow, develop and learn so that they can become confident young adults able to find their way in the world. To support these aspirations, we need to know our children and young people: what they love doing and their hopes and feelings. But the state, as corporate parent to children in care and care leavers, sadly lacks a full understanding of what matters to the children and young people it cares for.

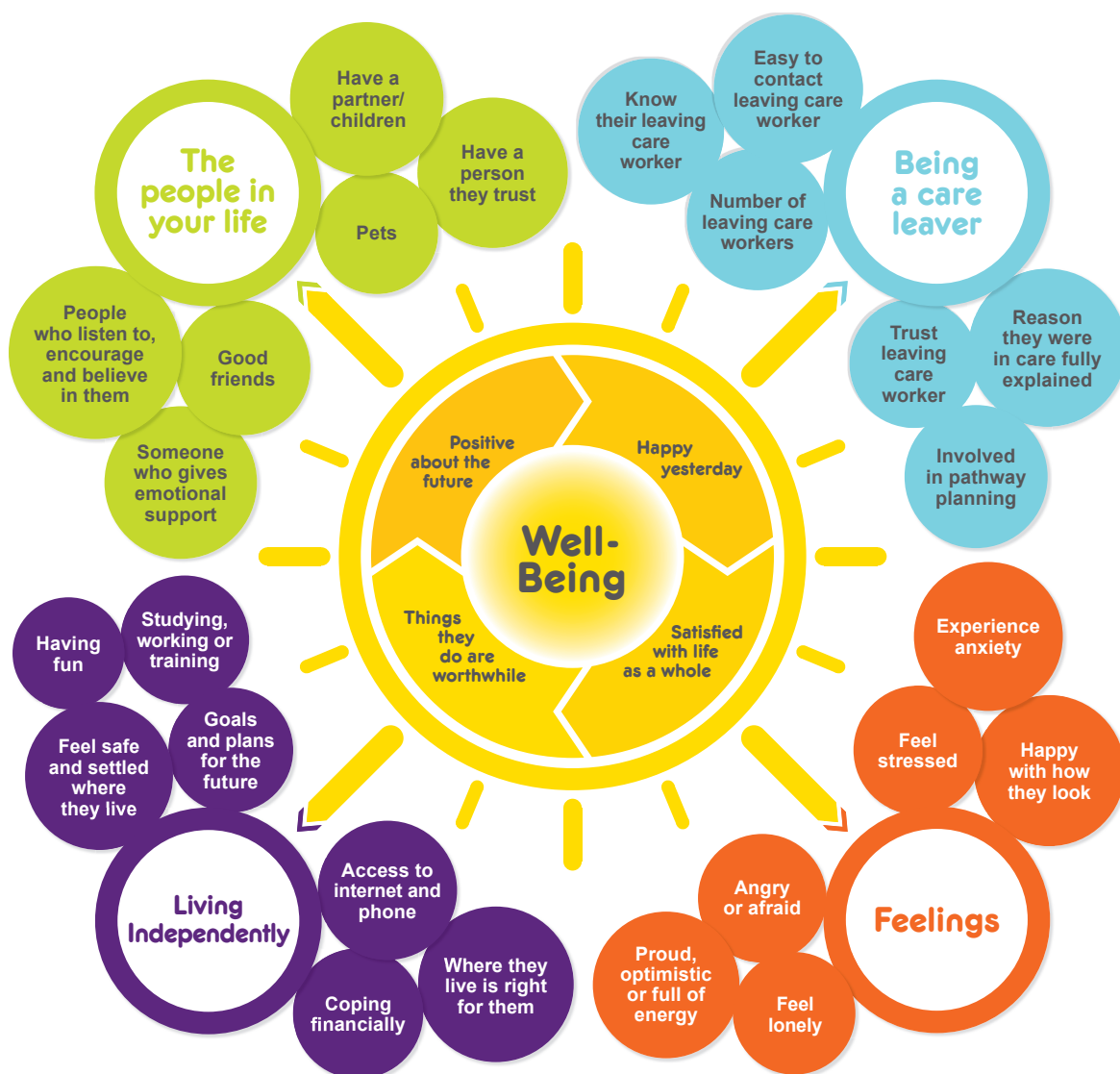
Government statistics provide only a partial picture of care leavers' lives. They focus on objective measures and professional assessments i.e. whether the local authority is in touch with care leavers, if their accommodation is suitable, and if they are in education, employment or training (DfE, 2019). This information does not tell us how young people feel - do they feel happy, safe and think they are doing well? The *Your Life Beyond Care* survey addresses these gaps by focusing on what care leavers say matters in their lives and exploring young people's subjective well-being.

The *Your Life Beyond Care* survey was co-designed with 30 care leavers from two local authorities. The survey questions are grounded in research and reflect what care leavers told us made their lives good (see Figure 1).

**“Listen to young people views and thoughts. They know what’s going on, you don’t!”**

(Care leaver)

Figure 1: Bright Spots Well-Being Indicators



Local authorities have used the survey to understand their young people's well-being and explore how it can be improved. To date, over 13,500 children and young people have completed the Bright Spots surveys for children in care and care leavers. This same approach should be taken to national policy and practice development – in order to have a care system that works for those it cares for, we need to focus on the issues that are important to care-experienced young people themselves.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:**



When developing policy and practice in the care system the key question should be - will children in care and care leavers feel that their lives improved as a result? Care should prioritise what is important to young people. We need to use the Bright Spots well-being indicators and what we have learned from the 10,000 voices to establish a care system that not only keeps young people safe but helps them to flourish by designing services and providing support with a clearer focus on children and young people's well-being.

## Focus in - Be led by what care leavers say makes their lives good

*The Your Life Beyond Care survey helps decision-makers understand the experiences of care leavers so that they can focus on what matters to young people.*

To compare care leavers' experience to the young people in the general population, we asked care leavers questions that the Office of National Statistics use to measure subjective well-being (ONS 2017a). The four questions use 0 (low) to 10 (high) scales and ask:

- a) Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
- b) Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
- c) How happy did you feel yesterday?
- d) How anxious did you feel yesterday?

*The majority of care leavers had moderate to high well-being, but 30% had low well-being, giving low scores (high on anxiety) on two or more of the four scales.<sup>1</sup>*

We explored what was associated with well-being and what predicted low well-being. Care leavers with low well-being were more likely compared with other care leavers to be lonely, struggle with finances, feel unhappy about their appearance, feel unsettled where they lived, experience higher levels of stress and feel very negative emotions and few positive ones. Previous research on the general population (Clark and Watson, 1991) indicates that this group is likely to be suffering from depression and/or anxiety.

Care leavers with low well-being had few supportive people in their lives and fewer had a person who listened to them, praised them, or believed they would be a success. Care leavers who were from an ethnic minority or those with small support networks more frequently reported that they lacked a supportive person in their lives.

Young people with very high well-being had the opposite experience in many ways. They were less lonely and stressed, happier with how they looked, felt settled, were positive about the future and experienced positive feelings and emotions. They had more people in their lives providing emotional support, especially partners. In addition, they felt they were treated the same or better than other young people and felt safe where they were living.

Our findings show that care leavers' experiences and the percentage who report low well-being vary greatly between local authorities. Focusing on addressing the specific issues identified by care leavers locally is most likely to improve their well-being. Local authorities should seek care leavers' views not just about the issues they face, but also about the solutions that are most likely to address these issues. The *Your Life Beyond Care* survey continues to be a tool for individual local authorities to achieve this. For example, Coram Voice's New Belongings programme currently works with eight local authorities who are using the survey to inform action plans co-produced with their young people to improve leaving care support.<sup>2</sup>

**"It's really good. Some of it I feel pressured by like suddenly I have to do everything by my [self]. However, I have a great group around me, they support me and help me."**

(Care leaver)

**30%**



**of care leavers have low well-being.**

**"Constantly feeling like I'm exhausted emotionally and physically ...It's mostly an alone feeling like I can't go anywhere or do anything because of the way I look and having nobody."**

(Care leaver)

<sup>1</sup>Low well-being is (0-4) on questions a-c and high on question d. Very high well-being is 9-10 on the first three scales and 0-1 on the anxiety scale

<sup>2</sup>See <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/newbelongings/>.

Although there is variation in care leavers' responses, there are also some consistent messages across the country. Good services will be aware of and seek to ensure that their care leavers feel positive on all the Bright Spots well-being indicators. Particular attention should be paid to the 10 key issues particularly associated with well-being (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: What makes life good for care leavers? Issues most strongly associated with high well-being**



**“Listen more to the people’s needs. And give more support by talking.”**  
(Care leaver)

**RECOMMENDATION 2:**



Ensure services are guided by the factors that make life good for care leavers and that this knowledge informs individual pathway plans as well as local offers, corporate strategic plans, and service development.

Adapt national guidance, inspections and policy initiatives to reinforce this approach, such as ensuring that guidance encourages local authorities to structure local offers around the factors that promote well-being.

Pay particular attention to the specific areas care leavers highlight locally, as well as the ten key issues we find are associated with well-being, i.e.

- Improve connections and relationships (to develop friendships, trusting supportive relationships and addressing loneliness);
- Provide emotional and mental health support (to address stress, high negativity and low positivity and help care leavers feel good about their future);
- Provide money management and financial support (to support care leavers to cope financially);
- Improve accommodation support (to help care leavers feel safe and settled in their homes).



## If you step in, you must step up - Aspire to give care leavers the same opportunities as other young people

Young people need to trust those who care for them to be there for them when they need it. Being a care leaver should benefit, rather than disadvantage young people. The state should aspire to give care leavers the same opportunities and experiences as other young people.

*Many care leavers do worse than young people in the general population. Yet local authority variation shows that this is not inevitable. Where care leavers felt that their care status had benefited them, this was associated with very high well-being.*

Most young people rely on their families for emotional and practical support well into adulthood, with two-thirds of 16-24-year-olds still living at home (ONS 2019d). In comparison, care leavers often live independently much earlier than their peers. Many care leavers reported having small support networks, 6% had no one providing emotional support and nearly one in ten young people only had support from their leaving care worker. Care leavers reported higher levels of stress and chronic loneliness that rose with age compared with young people in the general population where both stress and feelings of loneliness decrease with age, perhaps because support services ceased and care leavers were also feeling the long term impact of maltreatment and trauma experienced as children.

When the state steps in to look after a child, it is down to the state as their corporate parent, to step up to support care leavers to reach their full potential. Local authorities should want their children to do (at least) as well as other young people. When we compare how care leavers feel they are doing to other young adults, the difference is stark (Figure 3).

**“Please don’t forget about us. We are people too and although we may be incredibly marginalised it does not mean we are not worthy or deserving ...Often we require more support and care than the general population because of our experiences, though in reality we get much less. Please fix that.”**  
(Care leaver)

**“More support. I felt alone as soon as I left care.”**  
(Care leaver)

Figure 3: Comparative well-being – care leavers compared with peers in the general population



“Since young people in care are more likely to live independently than an average young person, I think it’s important to provide them with enough practical support for money/paying bills and how to maintain looking after yourself.”  
(Care leaver)

“Just easier to get advice, know who to call in a need of stress and also been shown how we should appreciate what we have, as others have nothing.”  
(Care leaver)

“We get opportunities to improve our life so that we can have what others have.”  
(Care leaver)

Young people called for more practical and emotional support in a range of areas.

Nearly a fifth of care leavers (17%) reported they were treated better than other young people. This suggested that, for some, their care status meant additional support was available and they benefitted from being a care leaver.

There was an association between very high well-being and care leavers feeling that they had been treated the same or better than other young people. This suggests that services that actively seek to compensate for the additional challenges that their care leavers face are likely to help make their lives better.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:**



Corporate parents should not accept that their care leavers do worse than other young people.

- They should promote a culture where services aspire for young people to do well and they aim to be the best parent possible.
- Local authorities should seek to compensate for the additional challenges that their care leavers face to help make their lives the best they can be.
- Services should develop trauma-informed practice to support care leavers to deal with the long-term impact of maltreatment or trauma in their past.

## Make it fair - Address variation between local authorities

The disparity in the quality of support care leavers receive between local authorities is a widely acknowledged, longstanding issue (Baker, 2017b). In 2018/19 Ofsted found that half of local authorities were inadequate or required improvement, whilst 8% were outstanding (Ofsted, 2020a).

*Our findings starkly illustrate the variation between different local authorities from care leavers' perspectives, but the variation also suggests that the right circumstances can help care leavers do well.*



The variation between local authorities is illustrated throughout the main report. For example, we found that the percentage of care leavers with low well-being in a local authority ranged from 14% to 44%.

### Percentage of care leavers with low well-being



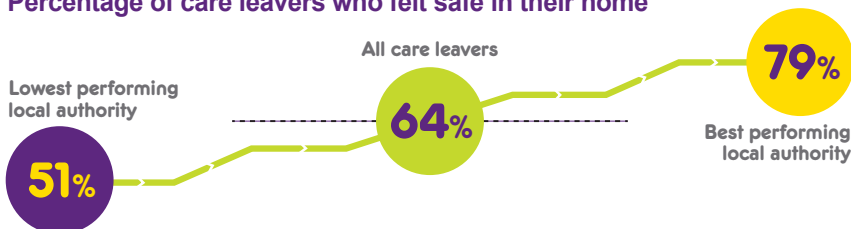
We saw a similar variation in care leavers' understanding of why they were in care. The percentage of care leavers who felt that they had not had an explanation or wanted to know more about why they were in care ranged from 4% to 39%, almost 10 times higher.

### Percentage of care leavers who do not know why they were in care or would like to know more



Similarly, in one authority we found that half of young people did not always feel safe in their home, compared with another where the same was true for fewer care leavers (one in five).

### Percentage of care leavers who felt safe in their home



These are all stark differences. Such 'territorial injustice' is not acceptable (Stein, 2012).



*A major challenge for care leaver services, is how to 'level up' the quality of their offer to young people. The positive news is that many care leavers tell us that the system can get it right.*

We need to focus on replicating positive experiences for all young people. To address this postcode lottery, each local authority should identify where their care leavers struggle and where they do better. We should explore what support may be making a difference to young people and share practice from the areas where young people report a more positive experience. By asking the same questions in local authorities across the country the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey allows us to identify the 'Bright Spots' and areas for improvement in each local authority. Later this year Coram Voice and the Rees Centre will establish a knowledge bank to share the positive practice we have identified.

#### RECOMMENDATION 4:



Address the continued postcode lottery by each local authority systematically measuring care leavers' subjective well-being and identifying where their care leavers struggle and where they do better. Share the practices that promote positive experiences.

**"Leaving care has been a lot easier than I expected I've still had all the support I needed from [name] and my experience with leaving care has been brilliant! I have a settled home, a job and a family! That's all I need :-)."**

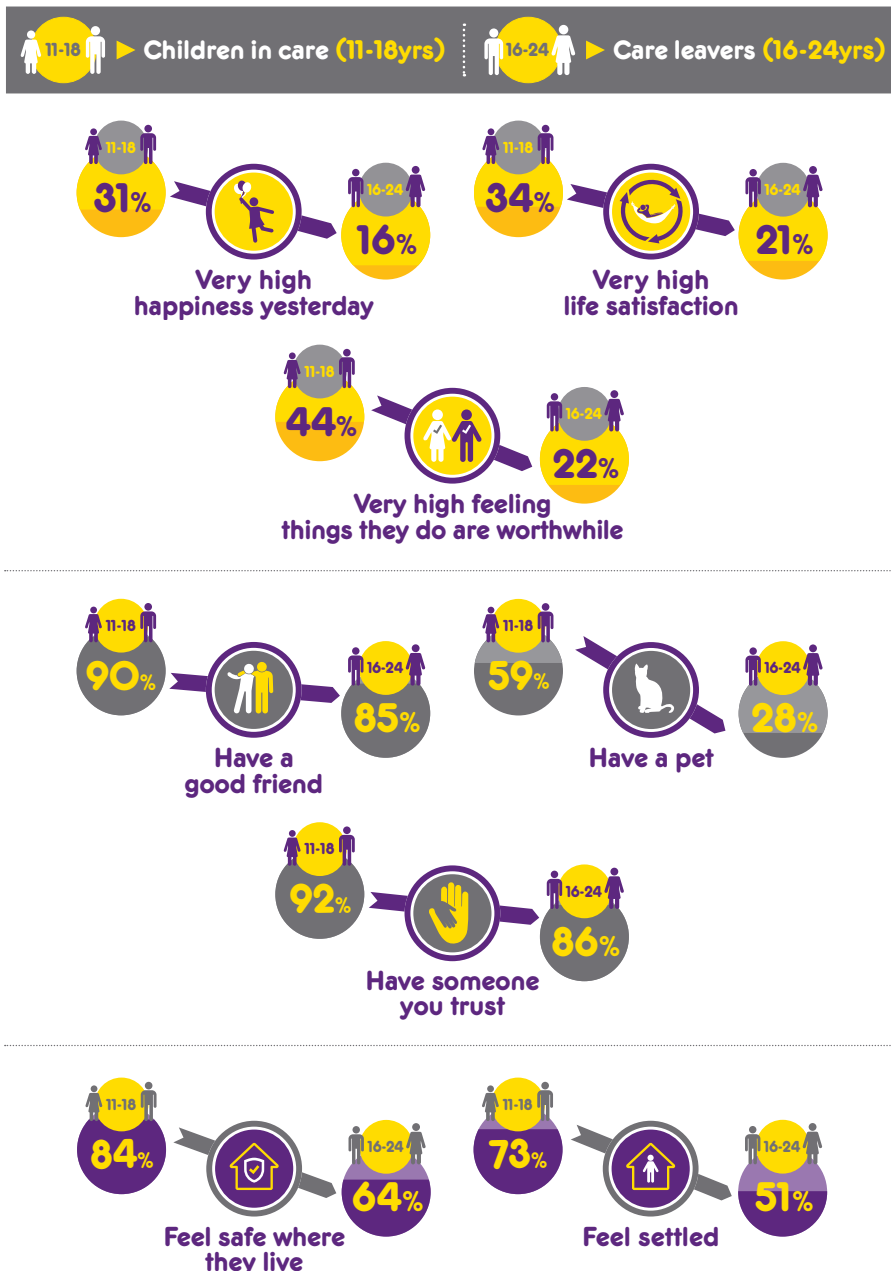
(Care leaver)

## Cliff edge of care - Counter the drop in well-being

*Well-being drops off steeply after young people have left care.*

A higher percentage of care leavers reported low well-being than children in care (11 to 18 years). Fewer care leavers also had a good friend, a pet, a person they trusted or felt safe and settled where they lived compared with older young people in care.

Figure 4: Comparative well-being: care leavers (16-24yrs) compared with children in care (11-18yrs)



Comparative data for children in care from Selwyn et.al (2018)

“The amount of support drops off massively from being in care and it’s overwhelming.”  
(Care leaver)

Transitions from care continue to be 'compressed and accelerated' (Stein, 2008). Young people report an abrupt end to much of the support available to them as looked after children once they turn 18. Although parents do not tend to see becoming a legal adult as a signal to cut off support, for children in care this age-led cliff-edge is very real.

Significantly less is spent on care leavers than on children in care (NAO, 2014; NAO, 2015). By not continuing to invest in support for care leavers as they move into adulthood, there is a risk that the good work to improve well-being while young people are in care is undone. Whilst recognising that young people are becoming adults who will increasingly be able to take responsibility for their lives, support should not disappear overnight.

As the National Audit Office has pointed out, services that support care leavers well are not necessarily the ones that spend the most money (NAO, 2015). The important thing is to use resources in the right way, providing emotional as well as practical support, just as good parents do.

Research has long shown the need for the transition to independence to be gradual, go at the young person's pace and not be done in a hurry (Baker, 2017a). We need to question the rationale for so many services ending at 18 and make sure that there is ongoing support in the key areas that influence care leavers well-being. If the transition to adult services is necessary that transition needs to be well managed and supported.

#### RECOMMENDATION 5:



Ensure that the transition to independence is gradual and goes at the young person's pace. To do this national and local government must:

- Review the rationale for services ending at 18 at both a national and local level and identify those that should continue for longer.
- Invest in leaving care support to ensure care leavers do not face a cliff-edge in care when they turn 18.
- Improve transitions from children's to adult services, such as CAMHS to adult mental health support.

**"Up until the age of 18 we're given special treatment (...clothes allowance and pocket money etc.) and turning 18 throws us into a bit of a dark pit really..."**

(Care leaver)

**"[I wish] that [local authority] would actually be there for us, but instead they just brush us off and act like we never existed to them. This hurts because when we are growing up in the care system, they love to tell us that they're our parents and then do absolutely nothing for us once we turn 18 years old."**

(Care leaver)

**"Almost weaning me off of my social worker and the general support rather than it feeling like an abrupt stop."**

(Care leaver)

## Recognise additional need - Identify and support care leavers with a disability or long term health condition

Care leavers are not a homogenous group. National statistics report the age, gender and ethnic group of care leavers in England, but not their disability or health status (DfE, 2019). In our survey, 24% of care leavers reported that they had a disability or long-term health problem that limited their daily activities compared with 14% of those aged 16 to 24 in the general population (ONS, 2020d).

*Care leavers appear more likely than other young people to have disabilities or health problems. Care leavers that define themselves this way also report lower well-being in a range of areas.*



There is evidence that this group of care leavers have poorer outcomes than other care leavers and other young people. Our findings show they were lonelier, more isolated, and less likely to report they had goals and plans for the future. Fewer disabled care leavers felt settled and safe where they live and more were finding it difficult to manage financially. They were more likely to rely on professionals for support, but also more likely to have more changes of workers.

Because their experience appears distinctive, it is important that frontline staff, commissioners, service managers and decision-makers at local and national levels understand how this group of care leavers is doing. However, they often appear invisible in the system. Data on disability are not systematically collected locally or centrally on children in care or on care leavers.

### RECOMMENDATION 6:



Local commissioners and national decision-makers should actively identify care leavers who feel they have a disability or long-term health condition and work with them to understand more about their experiences and how services can offer additional support. This will require introducing identifiers on case management systems, if not already in place, and regularly reporting on and scrutinizing the outcomes for this group.

**“Being a care leaver, especially with no family support is 5x harder than an average young person. It’s even more harder if you suffer from a disability.”**

(Care leaver)

**“My rights are often ignored because I am very disabled I [am] expected to fit into a system that I can’t fit into.”**

(Care leaver)

**“I am hearing impaired and there is no accessible way for me to access the service in an emergency.”**

(Care leaver)

## Making the difference - Recognise the importance of leaving care workers

The good news story in our findings is how positive many care leavers were about their leaving care workers / Personal Advisers (PAs).

*Second, only to friends and family members, PAs were among the most common source of emotional support, cited by 45% of care leavers. Care leavers reported higher levels of trust and more stability of workers compared with children in care.*



Most care leavers felt it was easy to get in touch with workers at least some of the time, but some care leavers struggled more – including those in prison, with a disability or long-term health problem, in college or university, or in supported accommodation or supported lodgings. This suggests a complex picture where young people who appear to be doing well (e.g. in education), or have additional support needs, can both miss out on support from leaving care workers.

Nurturing and supportive leaving care workers have a positive impact on young people and services need to continue to build on this positive finding, ensuring that all groups of care leavers have workers who stay with them and have the skills and time to actively support them.

### RECOMMENDATION 7:



Continue to build services that foster the stability of workers and give them the time and support needed to develop trusting relationships with all the young people they support.

Ensure workers have the time and skills to reach out to and engage all young people on their caseload whether they are living locally or not, appear to be doing well or need additional support or have other services in their lives.

**“She is amazing! Always goes above and beyond for you, always makes sure you’re okay and lets you know she’s always around.”**

(Care leaver)

**“I feel my social worker neglected me but my leaving care worker helps me a lot and I am very grateful for it, but if I didn’t have my leaving care worker I would probably be homeless or in prison.”**

(Care leaver)

**“He will call me regularly to check in with me and make sure I am ok which makes me feel very secure.”**

(Care leaver)



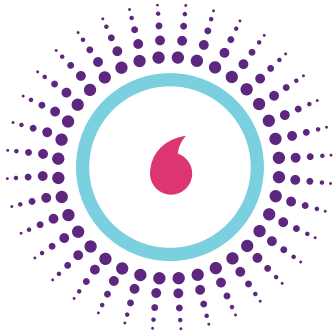
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This report was written by: Coram's Impact and Evaluation team; Professor Julie Selwyn at the Rees Centre, Department of Education, University of Oxford; and the Voices Improving Care team at Coram Voice. It was funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the Hadley Trust. We gratefully acknowledge the advice of Dr Jake Anders of UCL, but responsibility for the report's contents rests with the authors.

Special thanks to all the young people who took the time to participate in the surveys to share their experiences. We would also like to thank the 21 local authorities who worked with us to roll out the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey in their areas, making great efforts to ensure as many of their young people responded as possible. We are especially grateful to the two pilot local authority areas who helped bring together young people to develop and pilot the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey with us.





## Further information

The full report **What makes life good? Care leavers' views on their well-being** is available at <https://coramvoice.org.uk/whatmakeslifegood> and <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/bright-spots/>

For further information about the Bright Spots programme and the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey contact [brightspots@coramvoice.org.uk](mailto:brightspots@coramvoice.org.uk) or go to [www.coramvoice.org.uk/brightspots](http://www.coramvoice.org.uk/brightspots)

The Bright Spots programme is a partnership between Coram Voice & the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford, funded by the Hadley Trust.

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Coram Voice is a leading children's rights organisation, championing the rights of children in care, care leavers and others who depend upon the help of the state. We get young voices heard in decisions that matter to them and work to improve their lives.



The Rees Centre aim to improve the education, wellbeing and life outcomes of those who are, or have been supported by children's social care services, with a focus on children in need (including those in care), adoptive and special guardianship families and care experienced adults.