

‘You really are on your own’

A study of the early deaths of young people who were in care – September 2026

Please be aware this presentation contains strong themes of death and suicide

Study of early deaths of care leavers

- **112** notifications of deaths of care leavers aged 18 to 24 in 2025 in England
- **1.3 per 1,000** care leavers – 3 or 4 times the population average
- One fifth occurred at age 18, about **half under 21**
- **42%** were female and 58% were male
- Slight over representation of Black and mixed ethnicity
- **Four** deaths related to knife crime, **seven** involved road traffic accidents and **eight** involved young people who were known to have had diabetes. **Three** were murdered. **Fifteen** had identified mental health needs.

Suicide

- **36%** of the care leavers likely died by taking their own lives – **5x** higher than the population average.
- Women significantly over-represented in suicide rates, potentially **15x** higher than female rate for the general population
- **Six** young people were living in adult prisons and had died as a result of drug overdose or suicide
- **Six** of the young care-experienced women had experienced their own children being removed through a court order and had chosen to take their own lives.
- **Three** young people were experiencing or had experienced transgender transitions
- **Eleven** were seeking asylum

Living 'independently'

- Young people often very keen to live by themselves. Professionals working with them may also believe that this is the best option.
- This desire has underpinning reasons and is understandable, but with freedom, can come isolation and loneliness. Without stable and strong relationships, the sense of being alone can be overwhelming
- Semi-independent or independent accommodation, and some experienced periods of homelessness
- Stark challenges and pressures faced by 18-year-olds when they leave care
- **"Readiness is not dependent on age. Support needs to be needs-based, not age-based"** – care leaver



Life experiences

- **Custody**
  - The need for awareness, care and support, training in prisons
- **Pregnancy and removal**
  - "Young parents with care experience … felt scared and judged instead of the pregnancy being seen as a time of excitement and celebration"
  - What can we do to help parents keep their children
  - If that is not possible, then help such women deal with the enormous loss
- **Transgender transition**
- **Seeking asylum**
  - Impact of negative age assessments
- **Mental health needs**
  - Potential impact of prolonged deprivation of liberty – need for therapeutic work

Loneliness

- Lost the organic social connections which most children enjoy
- Rely on support from the state rather than family and friends
- Significant drop in support upon reaching adulthood and receive hit and miss services from those working with them
- Young care leavers continue to say that they feel abandoned when they reach 18 – the 'care cliff'

"On my 18th birthday, I had a short placement at a hostel. It was just terrible. My memory of turning 18 was a formal discharge from children's social care and signing up for Universal Credit"

Being alone – readiness for adulthood

- The experience of the care system, together with adolescent development drivers, pushes young people towards living independently. **“You really are on your own then”**.
- Trauma and rejection in childhood can lead to a genuine difficulty in making and keeping relationships in adult life
- Lifelong Links, Staying Put and Staying Close are positive
- Improvements needed to health services



Cast adrift – huge drop in levels of support

- There just isn't an equivalence between what is available for children in care, and what is available for an adult care leaver
- culture and focus on relationship-based work can be absent in adult services
- children's services felt that their colleagues in adult services gave up too quickly and that more empathy and tenacity was needed
- There are real shortfalls in adult services for this group of young people.
- Do local authorities have to compound the change in every other area of a young person's life at 18, such as health and education, by also changing the existing relationships for the young person by transferring them to leaving care teams?

Workforce

- Support provided by PAs can vary greatly from place to place. The workforce is not fit for purpose for those with greatest need
- It's not just practicalities, there is a need for more investment in the workforce, more of a multidisciplinary approach including mental health expertise.
- Ensure understanding of systemic practice, mental health expertise, and recognising the need to build trusted relationships with young people and, where possible, help them to reconnect with their families
- Are the commissioning arrangements working well enough to provide sensitive, skilled, empathic support for 17- and 18-year olds in supported accommodation who still require considerable help to move into adulthood and may be living on their own for the first time?



"In some places the staff we spoke to demonstrated in-depth knowledge about the young person, empathy, care and commitment. In others they appeared to know very little about the young person and seemed sketchy about the detail of the work they had done."



So, **what will we do...?**

