



# Recovery Plan – Children in care and care leavers

## Summary of key points and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of care experienced young people, with many of them feeling more isolated than ever and worried about their future. It has also brought into sharp focus a number of existing shortcomings in the care system.

To address the impact of COVID-19 on care experienced young people now and in the future, we recommend that the Government:

1. **Protect the rights and entitlements of care experienced young people.** The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (SI445) must expire on 25 September 2020 - instead plans must be put in place backed with appropriate investment to build the capacity of the care system to respond to the needs of children at all times.
2. **Ensure care experienced young people can access education.** A Back to Education plan for children in care should be produced and existing Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) funds and newly announced 'catch-up' funding should be used on targeted support for this group of children.
3. **Support mental health and wellbeing of care experienced young people.** Support for children in care should become a key part of the announced extra mental health support in schools and bespoke mental health assessment and support package for children in care should be extended across the country. Trauma informed approaches should underpin support children in care receive.
4. **Be ambitious for, and supportive of, the needs of care leavers:** ensure fair predicted grades for them; ban eviction from unregulated accommodation, make discretionary payments accessible for all; introduce country-wide council tax exemption for care leavers; ensure access to Discretionary Housing payment or one off grants; and extend priority need for housing to care leavers.
5. **Put children's interests, wishes and experiences at the heart of the Care Review.** The work on addressing the current shortcomings in the care system should start without any further delays. The review should be independent, evidence-based, given sufficient time and resource with cross-government commitment, and have lived experience at its centre. Among many issues the Care Review should address early support work with families, sufficiency and commissioning of care placements, use of unregulated accommodation, trauma-informed practice, and support for social care professionals and carers.

## 1. Introduction

This briefing sets out key concerns about children in care<sup>1</sup> and care leavers and the systems and structures that have been affected by COVID-19. It outlines the short-term and long-term actions that national and/or

local government should prioritise when planning their support for children in care and care leavers in the context of COVID-19.

On March 31 2019 there were 78,150 children in care in England and 26,990 care leavers aged between 19 and 21 years old, with local authorities also now having obligations to provide support to care leavers between the ages of 21 and 25.<sup>2</sup> Whilst the majority of children in care live with foster families, some of the most vulnerable live in children's homes or unregulated accommodation, and more than 4 in 10 are placed outside of their home local authority. Care leavers are also a uniquely disadvantaged group, beginning their adult lives without the networks of support which many of us take for granted. The majority of children become looked after due to abuse or neglect within the family.

Prior COVID-19 concerns were consistently raised about the gaps in support and protection offered to children in care and care leavers. As a result, the Conservative party manifesto included a commitment to undertake a review of the care system which the Secretary of State for Education later promised would be "bold and broad". The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated shortcomings in the system with likely negative outcomes for many care experienced children and young people now and in the future. Concerns have also been raised that easements introduced through the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 are too far-reaching and may breach the rights or further disrupt and reduce the support offered to children and young people during this challenging time.

Recovery planning cannot be seen to be a return to how services were before the pandemic. The plan must be built around addressing concerns that existed with the system before the pandemic, as well as recognise the additional trauma this cohort of children and young people may have experienced due to the pandemic; and ensure sufficient specialised support is made available. It should also be recognised that COVID-19 brought about additional significant stresses on many families and this may be reflected in a future increase in children becoming looked after. The care system needs to be prepared to address their needs.

Sufficient investment in the services, support and workforce that children rely on must be provided. The experiences and voices of children, young people and their carers must be at the heart of recovery planning and delivery.

## **2. Emerging concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on children in care and care leavers**

The extent of the impact of the pandemic and 'lockdown' on the care system and care experienced young people is yet to be fully understood. The following reflects emerging concerns based on available data, evidence collected from professionals working directly with young people in statutory and voluntary services via an online form<sup>3</sup>, and practitioners in voluntary organisations supporting children in care and care leavers.

### ***Placement breakdowns***

Finding the right placement for a child contributes to greater placement stability. However, children in care frequently experience placement changes resulting in poor care outcomes for a child and poor relationships with professionals, with all the stresses and uncertainty that this creates.<sup>4</sup>

COVID-19 has become an additional factor in placement breakdowns. Frontline services report that some children in care and care leavers have been struggling with adherence to social distancing requirements, particularly, in placements that young people did not feel positive about. Others may have not been receiving the right support and will have felt lonely and isolated, missing their families or friends. This may have resulted in them seeking contact outside their placements leading to placement providers ending placements given worries about coronavirus. As a result, an increased number of vulnerable young people are likely to be living in emergency and unregulated accommodation. Such placements may not always meet young people's needs.

We are concerned that some of the amendments made under the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (SI445) may negatively impact further on placement stability, including relaxing the child's rights, safety timeframes for preparation of a placement plan and welfare checks.

### ***Safeguarding of children and young people in unregulated accommodation***

Unregulated or semi-independent accommodation is provision which is there to support older children in the care system to make a gradual transition to independent living. At its best semi-independent provision can provide structured support to older young people to help them gain the skills to live independently before

moving on to their own tenancy. However, we have serious concerns that this accommodation is too frequently being used for some of the most vulnerable young people, for example those who are at risk of exploitation, and is being used because local authorities struggle to find anywhere else to place a young person rather than because a move to semi-independent provision is right for the young person. This concern was a problem pre-COVID, but has been compounded by the epidemic due to reported staff shortages and changes in contact with social workers.<sup>5</sup>

Children living in independent or semi-independent accommodation are more likely than other children in care to feel lonely during the lockdown.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from NSPCC's Childline highlights that feelings of isolation associated with living in unregulated accommodation is impacting on young people's mental health during the pandemic.

*"I'm going through a lot and am getting suicidal thoughts. I'm in semi-independent accommodation and have tried speaking to my social worker about my mental health but they don't care about this sort of thing – I also overheard them saying hurtful things about me with the manager. I was receiving therapy but due to lockdown it's been put on hold. I'm finding it hard to cope." (Boy, aged 17)*

Additionally, children in care and care leavers living in unregulated accommodation are not protected against evictions. Evidence from Just for Kids Law suggests that prior to COVID-19, young people experienced evictions from supported/semi-independent accommodation with as little as 48 hours' notice, in some cases for minor breaches of their placement rules, with no guarantee that the local authority would find alternative accommodation for them. The Government's advice provided by the DFE and MHCLG<sup>7</sup> expressed 'hope' that instead of focussing on evictions during COVID-19 the providers of accommodation would work with the young person under the threat of eviction and the local authority to support the young person to remain in the placement. This is far from an adequate safeguard and falls significantly below what care leavers should expect during this time of crisis. It also contrasts starkly with the ban on evictions for adults living in private rented or social housing which has been in place since March.

### ***Children missing from care***

Children living in local authority care are more likely to go missing compared to children living with their own families.<sup>8</sup> Around 11% of all children in care - 11,830 children in care – went missing at least once between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019. Not being happy with their placement<sup>9</sup> or being groomed or exploited are the key reasons for children going missing. No reliable data on children missing from care during COVID-19 is available and will not be available till 2021. According to the Ministerial letter children's homes did not report increase in missing episode and some reported a reduction in numbers.<sup>10</sup>

Many return home interview services reported a decrease in referrals at the beginning of lockdown, currently the number of referrals is returning to pre-COVID-19 levels, an indication that more children are starting to go missing.

Feedback from practitioners in voluntary sector organisations also suggests that the risk of exploitation remained high despite the lockdown restrictions. In addition children who go missing may not be able to go to relatives or friends as those people may be shielding. In those cases children are more likely to be at risk of relying on strangers or sleeping rough.

Concerns have also been raised about some disagreements between the police and care providers on the response to children going missing, particularly where care providers either due to staff shortages or due to concerns about coronavirus feel unable to undertake initial searches to locate a child. Coronavirus guidance for children's social care services does not include any information on how to respond to children missing from care during COVID-19.

### ***Impact on children and young people's mental health***

The number of children in care not able to access mental health services when needed, or who are left without support when their needs do not meet service thresholds<sup>11</sup>, or due to their placement being out of area,<sup>12</sup> is a long-standing and serious issue. The COVID-19 pandemic is creating additional anxiety and uncertainty as well as making it more difficult for those with existing mental health needs to access support.<sup>13</sup> Children living in care and care leavers have reported feeling 45% and 86% more anxious during the lockdown, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

*“Mentally I am so stressed about the virus that my brain is refusing to cope with reality”* Care-experienced young person supported by Become

Professionals report that placements made during COVID-19 were being made without ensuring access to much-needed mental health support. Where services are available, new referrals are sometimes not being taken and thresholds for support have been raised.

### **Contact with families**

Care experienced young people frequently report that being supported to keep in touch with friends and family is extremely important to their well-being. Not being supported to do so is often cited as the reason why children and young people go missing from care,<sup>15</sup> or feel unhappy about their placement.

Regulatory changes have helped to ensure that private communication on the phone, via video-link or using other electronic communication methods can happen where face-to-face meeting is not possible. This has been a positive intervention for some children in care. However, despite this, insights from practice show that young people have not always been supported to maintain contact with friends, family and social workers during this time. Many care experienced young people have not had access to functional technology to keep in contact with family and friends.

### **Out of area placements**

At 31 March 2019, 38% (29,390 of 78,150) of children in care were placed outside of home local authority areas. The APPG for runaway and missing children and adults’ inquiry into out of area placements found that placing a child out of area puts them at increased risk of exploitation. In addition, the inquiry raised concerns around the emotional toll and additional trauma of being placed out of area can have on a child.<sup>16</sup>

Out of area placements need to be approved by a nominated officer who must be satisfied that child’s wishes and feelings have been taken into account, that the placement is the most appropriate placement for the child, that relatives have been consulted where appropriate, that the receiving area have been notified, and that the IRO has been consulted. This rule does not apply to placement with a person connected to a child or an approved foster carer.

The temporary children’s social care regulations allow placements out of area without the approval of a nominated officer with a non-connected temporary carers, and relaxes the timeframes for ascertaining the child’s wishes and feelings if they are placed in an emergency.

Whilst data on the number of out of area placements made during the pandemic is not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that they are happening and there may be an increase in them due to a reduction in availability of foster placements as a result of pandemic due to issues such as existing foster carers not able to take placements due to shielding and health concerns. There is no data on how many of these placements may be happening under the SI445 relaxed rule or how many children may be receiving a reduced service in out of area placements as permitted under SI445, for example, reduced frequency of visits from their social worker.

### **Care leavers**

Since the onset of COVID-19, children and young people have reported problems contacting children’s social care services, including social workers/PAs not responding to calls or visiting young people less frequently, and sending text messages rather than having conversation on the phone. In some cases, social workers/PAs have refused to support children and young people with problems they are facing – it is often unclear whether this is due to lack of capacity or other reasons.

*“Since the pandemic started I have been left to my own devices as my PA left me and I have had no support.”*  
(young person, Just for Kids Law)

Statutory services are often falling short in relation to care leavers’ needs for urgent practical and financial support to pay for basic necessities as a result of the pandemic. On 18th April 2020 the Government announced an additional £1.6bn for local authorities to help them address pressures arising from COVID-19. The *Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for children’s social care services* states that “we would encourage local authorities to utilise some of this funding to provide discretionary payments to care leavers to cover items such as food, utilities and rent during this period, if required. However, during the lockdown, Become, Just for Kids Law and Barnardo’s have made payments and provided other essential supplies to care leavers

who have not been able to obtain funding through their local authority leaving care team, to cover basic items including food, gas/electricity and essential household items and nappies for babies.

Many care leavers are in an extremely precarious financial situation, with benefits as their only source of income. They often have to rely on food banks and voluntary sector schemes to get by. Additionally, large numbers of young people leaving care and existing care leavers will be facing continued unemployment and are especially financially vulnerable.

Research suggests that care-experienced students in higher education are at risk of financial destitution over the summer as they cannot work, and can not access sufficient money from institutional hardship funds or claim Universal Credit as full-time students.<sup>17</sup>

Evidence from Become's Care Advice Line suggests that some care leavers have experienced reduced access to their entitlements at this time, such as the Setting Up Home Allowance, due to ongoing delays in processes within leaving care teams and very restrictive policies around their use. This has meant some care leavers have been unable to get essential items for living, learning or working at home during lockdown, such as white goods and furniture.

### ***Sufficiency and operational capacity***

Social care services that were already stretched beyond capacity pre-pandemic, largely due to the funding available to councils to run children's and young people's services falling by £2.2 billion over the past 10 years<sup>18</sup>. There is also a well evidenced lack of residential care placements for children and young people<sup>19</sup> and shortage of foster placements<sup>20</sup> as well as of insufficient support for foster carers<sup>21</sup>.

Since the beginning of pandemic Barnardo's has seen a marked increase in referrals to its fostering services, while experiencing a sharp reduction in foster care inquiries, leading to them raising concerns about a 'state of emergency' for children in foster care. From March 1st - April 23rd 2020, there were 2,349 referrals to Barnardo's fostering services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, a figure which shot up from 1,629 for the same period in 2019. Meanwhile the number of enquiries from people looking to become foster parents for the charity fell from 302 to 161 - a dramatic 47% drop. We also remain concerned that many children who would previously be receiving help from children's services are not doing so due to the majority of children still not attending schools, which act as an important safeguarding mechanism. There is therefore a real risk there will be a further substantial rise in the number of children entering the care system in the autumn and it is important that children's services are given the resources now to ensure they are well equipped to deal with any potential influx.

Concerns about capacity of social care services to support children in care during the pandemic is also recognised in the introduction of a number of easements in SI455, designed in anticipation of shortages of staff or increased level of need resulting from COVID-19 local authorities may not have been able to respond to. The amendments to the regulatory framework have been received with some significant concern from organisations working with children. The overall message from Government is that they have been used infrequently, although no monitoring data is publicly available.

The impact on the court system has also been significant, for example Barnardo's has a number of children who were matched up for adoption before the pandemic who have had these proceedings delayed due to the restrictions of the lockdown. Remote hearings have also been termed 'not meeting the requirements of a fair trial'. There is a real risk of a serious backlog of cases with all the consequences that this will have on children and their families.

## **3. Planning recovery responses**

As lockdown restrictions continue to be lifted, it is expected that there will be an increase in the number of children referred to social care due to safeguarding concerns and subsequent increase in children entering local authority care.

Local authorities are already struggling with finding sufficient number of placements close to home for many children in care, particularly older teenagers with complex needs. This has led to increases in the use of unregulated provision and out of area placements. Any increase in the number of children in care is likely to contribute further to the use of inappropriate settings and those located far from where children call home.

There will be also more young people leaving care, particularly if current guidance to local authorities on allowing children turning 18 to remain in their current placements is not maintained. We shouldn't accept an abrupt return to an expectation that all children should leave care at age 18. With unemployment rates predicted to rise in the near future this is very likely to pose particular challenges for children leaving care.

The full impact of life during lockdown will start to be felt by children in care with many of them continuing to struggle with the issues referred to above, particularly as we face uncertainty as to the continued impact of the pandemic with the risk of further local lockdowns that can be imposed suddenly. For others, the challenge of returning to the stresses of school will be significant. COVID-19 is likely to result in greater need for mental health support for all care experienced young people.

To ease both ongoing pressures on the system and the predicted impact of COVID-19 on the numbers of children entering care, there needs to be a system-wide focus on ensuring that the care system is prepared and resourced for the challenges identified above. The lack of preparedness for the pandemic is a significant lesson.

There also needs to be a focus on how the care system can address the needs of all children, including those with more complex care needs, this includes older young people, as well as those with disabilities and significant mental health concerns.

### **3.1 Short term responses (between now and early autumn when all children return to schools)**

#### **Ensuring children in care have support to access education, employment and training**

- **Back to Education plan for children in care.** The Department for Education should coordinate joint-working with Virtual School Heads, local authorities and carers to organise a comprehensive Back to Education plan for children in care. This will enable children in care to overcome barriers and address worries about falling behind peers or returning to education. Alongside this, they should assess how many children have been missing out on education and focus on those transitioning between primary-secondary schools and secondary school –college, as well as those in Alternative Provision (AP). This needs a coordinated joint working approach from all to provide appropriate holistic care. The Government should consider how support to help ease children back into education and address emotional and mental health concerns can begin over the summer period with looked after children central in the plans for the promised summer programme.
- **Use of existing Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) funds and newly-announced 'catch-up' funding on targeted support.** For those care experienced young people who have not attended school and whose education may have suffered, the government should encourage schools to use existing Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) funds and newly-announced 'catch-up' funding on targeted support. Guidance should be provided to schools that allows for a flexible approach, highlighting the value of directing funds into practical and emotional support for these young people. Guidance must encourage a stronger link between the physical and virtual school.
- **Fair predicted grades.** For children in care and care leavers who have not been able to sit their exams and will be waiting for calculated grades, schools and colleges must work closely with Virtual School Heads, designated teachers and other social care professionals who support children in care's education, to ensure any predictions submitted are fair, understanding previous attainment isn't often reflective of potential and issues in schools around stereotypes/negative perceptions of children in care.<sup>22</sup> There is a real risk that COVID-19 could exacerbate the existing gap in progression to further and higher education.<sup>23</sup>
- **Rollout of technology support to children in care and care leavers.** The government should continue and extend its rollout of technology support to children in care and care leavers, and provide sufficient operational and funding support to local authorities so the devices can be properly maintained and used (e.g. paying for ongoing licences for educational software). Where vulnerable children continue to learn where they live, it is important that local authorities ensure that vulnerable children have equipment and can connect through online platforms to learning opportunities and receive additional support from schools and colleges to prevent children falling behind their peers.

Emergency amendments brought in through the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 are expected to remain in place until 25 September. Children's charities are concerned that Statutory Instrument 445 removes important protections and certainties for vulnerable children. It is vital that the amendments are not extended beyond 25 September and that children's rights and protections are fully reinstated. Some have called for the Instrument to be revoked immediately.<sup>24</sup> Others have additionally or alternatively proposed some of the measures below to minimise any potential negative impact on children while the instrument is in place and ensure transparency of implementation.

The Department for Education (DfE) should ensure that the easements are only used as a last resort and for the shortest time possible and introduce safeguards within guidance to children's social care services to ensure that:

- the application of any easements are subject to rigorous scrutiny by the Principal Children and Families Social Worker, the IRO and other relevant decision makers and there is a national register of the easements used in practice;
- there is clear accountability on the use of easements to children and families who are subject to them, including an expectation that children's services will communicate with them where services are affected by easements – in line with practice in adults' social care;
- restrictions are put in place on the number of easements in services that an individual child or family may experience at a time; and
- the application of any easements in practice is done in a transparent way with local and national monitoring and reporting in place, and data made publicly available on easements implemented, including the numbers and characteristics of service users who receive responses subject to these regulations.

### ***Support for BAME care experienced young people***

- The government must identify and raise awareness in all agencies working with care experienced young people of the disproportionate effect that COVID-19 has had on those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Advice must be made available on **how children should be protected in light of research on the impact of COVID-19 on these communities**.
- Plans must be put in place to provide targeted support for BAME young people who are care experienced who may have a lost family member, or any other person with whom they had a significant relationship, due to COVID-19.

### ***Unregulated accommodation***

- To address the issues of loneliness and isolation felt by some young people all children living in unregulated placements should be provided with additional support from their social workers and have access to **independent advocates** to ensure that they are able to express any concerns with these placements during the pandemic and that their voices are heard in future decisions made about them.
- The **ban on evictions** should be extended to include all children in care and care leavers in semi-independent/supported accommodation. Where there are circumstances which mean a young person must be moved from a particular setting (e.g. due to risk of harm to themselves or another young person), the local authority should ensure that a suitable and safe alternative placement is found in good time to ensure a smooth transition. Accessible information should be provided to young people in those cases.

### ***Learning from positive experiences during COVID-19***

- It is important to note that restrictions introduced as a result of coronavirus in some cases have resulted in positive experiences for children. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that some children have found that not facing the academic and social pressures of being at school has meant they are better able to manage stress and anxiety, and have had the opportunity to build stronger relationships with their carers. Smaller class sizes and school days with a greater focus on well-being and creative activities may have also resulted in more positive experiences of education. Similar advantages have been reported in not having to adhere to strict medical assessment schedules. Some children in care and care leavers they work with have felt video calls have been a positive form of contact and allowed more flexibility to arrange meetings around the young person's schedule. The Department for Education should work with local authorities to **enable young people to document their positive experiences to inform how care and support are provided in future**.

## **Supporting children's mental health and well-being**

- Recognising the impact COVID-19 has had on the mental health of young people in care, recovery planning should **prioritise a trauma-informed approach to addressing mental and emotional needs, both in collective and individual approaches**. As a first step, the Department for Education's announcement of extra mental health support in schools<sup>25</sup> is welcome but the government must make sure that it meets the specific needs of care experienced young people and must utilise trauma-informed practices and approaches.
- In light of the mental health concerns experienced by looked-after children during the pandemic, the Department for Education's pilot scheme with the Anna Freud Centre, which trials a new bespoke mental health assessment and support package for looked-after children, should be extended across the country with learning from this pilot used to fast-track innovative approaches to mental health in the care system.<sup>26</sup>

## **Supporting the workforce to support children**

- **Face-to-face contact** between the social care workforce and children must resume, when it is identified as safe, in order to rebuild and strengthen relationships and reassess needs and support. The government and local authorities should work together to ensure that appropriate and sufficient PPE provision is available for face-to-face interventions and that health risks for BAME social care workers are assessed.
- To mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on mental health and wellbeing on children the government must provide **advice, guidance and support for carers and the wider social care workforce** so they can provide support to meet their emotional and behavioural needs. Staff should be given specialist training in caring for older children and young people, including training in trauma-informed approaches that are age-appropriate to ensure a better understanding of emotional triggers and complex needs. The DfE should ensure that learning from good practice, such as the NSPCC's reflective fostering program, is shared widely.
- The wider social **care workforce must be offered emotional support and consistent clinical supervision to prevent burn-out** which could have a long term negative impact on the workforce as a whole.
- There should be an immediate focus on **rebuilding relationships** that might have been damaged due to lack of contact during lockdown between care experienced young people and their family. As face-to-face contact restarts, clear guidance must be issued to social care staff on how to manage and support socially distanced reintroductions with family members using a trauma-informed approach.

## **Support for care leavers**

- Local authorities should **proactively contact all care leavers in their area**, including those who are no longer receiving support, to identify whether they have any support needs which have arisen as a result of coronavirus.
- The DfE should provide further guidance to local authorities on **discretionary payments to care leavers**, clarifying that they should be provided at short notice if necessary and that payments should be authorised unless there is a clear reason not to. This additional guidance could be provided through updating the *Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for children's social care services* and/or a letter to Directors of Children's Services. Local authorities should also publish details of their discretionary payments schemes online.
- Local authorities should make sure that other forms of financial support for care leavers including **Setting Up Home Allowances** can continue to be accessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and should speed up timeframes and relax restrictions on these where necessary.
- Local authorities should **update their local offer** to care leavers to show their entitlements during COVID-19, including access to discretionary funding if needed and their entitlement to proactive contact from their personal adviser in line with the new coronavirus guidance.
- **Targeted financial support** should be provided to care leavers at risk of homelessness, including sofa surfing and hidden homelessness. The DfE should work closely with MHCLG to ensure care leavers at risk of homelessness receive the support they need during the COVID-19 outbreak and as the lockdown measures are lifted.
- With huge pressures on council/social housing stock following COVID-19 and in relaxing current guidance that no child should have to leave care at this time, more young adults leaving care are likely to be pushed into the private rental market in the near future. The government should support

local authorities to enable this by providing **deposit and guarantor schemes**, and advice with the processes for finding and securing somewhere to live.

### Targeted guidance and information for children

- The government must produce and disseminate guidance and information for children in care and care leavers in the context of COVID-19 outlining their rights and responsibilities on social care as restrictions start to be lifted. Any guidance must be tailored to include the needs of the most vulnerable groups, e.g. unaccompanied asylum seeking care leavers, and children in unregulated accommodation.

## 3.2 The key issues in the longer term

### *Care Review*

- Given that many of the issues exacerbated by the pandemic were pre-existing, there is a clear need for the government to prioritise the Care Review as part of a long term recovery plan. The review should be independent, evidence-based, given sufficient time and resource with cross-government commitment, and have lived experience at its centre. It should have an ambition to deliver meaningful and lasting change, allowing for bold and radical reform whilst protecting the rights of children and young people, and consider the experiences of children and families including those not legally 'looked after'. Care-experienced people must be meaningfully included and represented at all levels of the review's lifecycle. Among many issues, the care review should address early support work with families, sufficiency and commissioning of care placements, use of unregulated accommodation, trauma-informed practice, and support for social care professionals and carers. An exact scope should be determined organically in the early stages of the review by listening to those with lived experience of care.
- As part of the Care Review the government must address the long-term impact of COVID-19 on care experienced children and young people, their safety, their health and wellbeing and long-term prospects. They must take steps to prevent increases in inequalities across this group, in particular addressing the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on people from BAME communities.
- **Commissioning reform.** The way care services are commissioned and procured is causing profound problems for children and the corporate parents who struggle to find them the right placement in the right location. Issues of placement sufficiency, distribution and cost stem from a 'marketplace' that leaves local authorities with little power over the range of providers and placement options available to them, drives prices down (even where actual costs remain high) and makes placement-finding a transaction rather than a decision in the child's best interests. As the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee urged last year<sup>27</sup>, this system should be reviewed and re-designed to ensure that it is children's best interests that are at the heart of any placement decision. With the unsustainability of the care market exacerbated by the current crisis, a more robust system for placement provision that centres of the safety and needs of the child must be the primary driver. The Care Review must work with care experienced people and professionals to design a system that puts power in the hands of children and their corporate parents.
- **A Multiple Professional Perspective.** The care system is a multiple professional system that combines the expertise of a range of professionals and services. The system as a whole is not well coordinated although there are many examples of effective case by case working together. The Care Review must explore how a multiple professional and multi-agency perspective becomes the driver for service provision into the future.

### *Ensuring housing provision for care leavers*

- **Council tax exemption.** Care leavers are a particularly vulnerable group and often face difficulties keeping up with council tax payments (and other bills, as they transition to independent living). The government should introduce a national council tax exemption for care leavers till they are 25 which is available to care leavers no matter where they go on to live as young adults. As a priority bill, the enforcement measures available to councils to collect unpaid council tax are severe, which at its most extreme can result in a committal to prison. Over 100 councils in England have now exempted care leavers from paying council tax until they are 25, as well as Wales and Scotland introducing national exemptions. However, in some areas, councils say that the exemptions no longer apply if a young person moves from their home area.

- **Shared accommodation rate and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP).** The Chancellor's announcement in the budget around the extension of the Shared Accommodation Rate exemption to 25 is welcome for care leavers, but does not come into effect until 2023. In the interim, many care leavers aged 22-25 are potentially living in shared accommodation, reducing chances for them to be able to practice social distancing. We would recommend that care leavers are automatically supported through DHP or through one-off grants to help with the cost of rent, so these young people have a level of security during these times.
- **Extending priority need for housing for care leavers.** The current legal criteria for priority need for housing should be extended to include all care leavers up to 25, not just those who are 21+ and can evidence vulnerability as is currently the case. During the pandemic the government made a commitment to house all rough sleepers through the 'Everyone In' scheme. Now lockdown measures are being lifted, funding for the scheme is expected to come to an end and young people who have been temporarily housed will no longer have an automatic right to access housing and may be at risk of returning to the streets. Those who are 'hidden homeless' and have been sofa surfing with friends and family as a temporary measure during the coronavirus crisis may also be at risk of becoming street homeless if they are a care leaver over 21 and do not meet their local authority's threshold for what is considered 'vulnerable' – which can often be set very high. There is a risk of a wave of care-experienced young people becoming homeless once temporary lockdown measures for homeless people are lifted.

### ***Addressing sufficiency of placements***

- The Department for Education should develop an Emergency Action Plan to address the issue of the lack of placements for children in care and children in need. The Government must take responsibility for **ensuring that there are sufficient local placements to meet the needs of children in care** and 16 and 17 year olds accommodated due to homelessness. The plan should address the supply and the distribution of children's homes nationally, and the use of unregulated semi-independent provision for children in care and those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It must be backed by funding.
- The Government should commit to resourcing a nationwide campaign to increase awareness of fostering and encourage a greater range of people to come forward as carers. The new intake will need specialist training to deal with additional traumas associated with the impact of lockdown.
- Appropriate support should be provided to kinship carers. A new local Kinship Care Crisis Fund for local authorities to respond to the needs of all kinship families in their locality should be established.

### ***The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (SI445)***

- **The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (SI445) must expire on 25 September 2020.** The Government must invest in building the capacity of social care to respond rather than cutting rights and protections for children in care.

### ***Continuing positive narrative around children in care and care leavers in public communications and policy development***

- Throughout the pandemic it has been encouraging to see a generally positive narrative around providing support for groups most likely to be affected by its socioeconomic impacts, including children in care and care leavers. The importance of positive communications about children in care is often overlooked. It has the potential to lead to long lasting positive change such as destigmatising care experience and contributing towards an increase in registered foster carers. The government should be encouraged to retain this focus in future policymaking across government, supported through the cross-departmental Care Leaver Covenant Board.

<sup>1</sup> Children in care is used across the document and refers both to children accommodated under S20 and children on care orders

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019>

<sup>3</sup>

<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=SOAKNBzYq06lpLdJH6ikCHR939zAbv9Aq3I6KKCCb1xUNVhYUks1WTE5MVC2VTNUMkw1SEFLWThQTS4u>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/appg-inquiry-into-children-missing-from-out-of-area-placements>

<sup>5</sup> Anne Longfield, The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/children-care-coronavirus-sexual-abuse-anne-longfield-a9551596.html> accessed 11.06.20

<sup>6</sup> NYAS Mental Health Report. <https://www.nyas.net/wp-content/uploads/NYAS-Coronavirus-Survey-Report-Young-Lives-in-Lockdown-May-2020.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The DfE and MHCLG *Factsheet for care leavers on changes to housing during coronavirus (COVID-19)* The DfE and MHCLG *Factsheet for care leavers on changes to housing during coronavirus (COVID-19)* states that: “If you are living in supported/semi-independent accommodation classified as hostel accommodation, including homeless hostels, who hold a licence agreement (not a tenancy), this is known as an ‘excluded group’ and in these circumstances you don’t have cover in the new protections from eviction legislation. However, all the current government guidance directs people to stay at home, and therefore, we would hope that providers are working with you and the local authority to support you to remain where you are, particularly in the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis, rather than to focus on eviction.”

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/still\\_running\\_3\\_full\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/still_running_3_full_report_final.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/no-place-at-home.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> [http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2020-0364/Vicky\\_Ford\\_MP\\_to\\_Emma\\_Lewell-Buck\\_MP.pdf](http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2020-0364/Vicky_Ford_MP_to_Emma_Lewell-Buck_MP.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.scie.org.uk/children/care/mental-health/report>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/appg-inquiry-into-children-missing-from-out-of-area-placements>

<sup>13</sup> [https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report\\_march2020.pdf](https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report_march2020.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> NYAS Mental Health Report. <https://www.nyas.net/wp-content/uploads/NYAS-Coronavirus-Survey-Report-Young-Lives-in-Lockdown-May-2020.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/no-place-at-home.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/no-place-at-home.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://becomecharity.org.uk/media/2279/supporting-care-experienced-and-estranged-students-in-higher-education-responding-to-COVID-19.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/under-pressure>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/no-place-at-home.pdf>

<sup>20</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/679320/Foster\\_Care\\_in\\_England\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/679320/Foster_Care_in_England_Review.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.frg.org.uk/press-releases#press50>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/teachers-who-care-2018/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/12by24-Publication.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Including Just for Kids Law and Children England

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/extra-mental-health-support-for-pupils-and-teachers>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.annafreud.org/insights/news/2018/10/improving-mental-health-assessments-for-children-entering-care-pilot-project/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1638/163811.htm%E2%80%8B>