Your Life Beyond Care:
The views of care leavers on their wellbeing

The Bright Spots programme Scottish pilot

Summary

Authors: Micky Anderson,
Dr Emma Young,
Sharon McGregor, Carol Ann Anderson,
Dr Heather Ottaway

Editor: Samantha Fiander

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CELCIS Centre for excellence for Children's Care and Protection

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Introduction

The Bright Spots Programme

Developed with and for children and young people with experience of care, the Bright Spots Programme provides local authorities with the opportunity to methodically collect the voices of their children and young people with experience of care to hear about how they feel and what is important to them, so that local agencies can listen to and act on what young people and adults have to say about their lives. Young people and adults from 16 to 25 years of age who were eligible for aftercare support because they left care on or after their sixteenth birthday in six local authority areas in Scotland have responded to the Bright Spots Your Life Beyond Care survey.

Voice is one of five foundations on which The Promise of the Independent Care Review (2020) was built. This pivotal report in Scotland insists that children and young people must be listened to and meaningfully involved in decision-making about their care, and that the data we collect must be improved so that the voices of children and young people and who experience the 'care system' are properly represented and responded to. Coram Voice has supported local authorities to successfully deliver the Bright Spots Programme in England and Wales since 2015, and CELCIS has partnered with Coram Voice to bring the Bright Spots Programme to Scotland. Three Scottish local authorities participated in the initial pilot in 2022, and a further three participated in the second pilot phase in 2024.

This report brings together data from all local authorities participating in 2022 and 2024 to provide key observations and recommendations. More detailed findings can be found in the Your Life, Beyond Care: The views of care leavers on their wellbeing report. Participating local authorities also took part in a companion Bright Spots survey to explore the wellbeing of children in their care. The findings from those surveys have been brought together in the Your Life, Your Care: The views of children in care on their wellbeing full and summary reports.

The wellbeing of children in Scotland is central to the Scottish Government's long-standing Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach to enable every child and young person to reach their full potential. Children and young people who were in care on their sixteenth birthday in Scotland are entitled to have their needs for aftercare support assessed when they are leaving care.

The wellbeing of this particular group of children and young people requires specific consideration because they face additional pressures to their non care experienced peers as they develop into adulthood, including physically moving home as they transition from care to independent living. National statistics tell us how many children and young people move through and leave the 'care system', but these tell us very little about their experiences and almost nothing about how they feel about their lives at this critical stage. The Bright Spots programme looks at these needs and experiences directly. Many care leavers taking part in the Bright Spots survey pilot in Scotland took the opportunity to tell us of their stories in their own words. Their testimony is very powerful and all those involved in delivering this programme wish to acknowledge this valuable input and honour the trust that was placed in us when respondents chose to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences with us. Many wrote about positive life-changing experiences, but too many were in a much less positive space emotionally.

The Bright Spots Your Life Beyond Care survey

The Bright Spots Your Life Beyond Care survey was developed by Coram Voice in 2017 specifically for and with young people and adults who had been in care. The survey complements the earlier Your Life, Your Care survey developed for children and young people in care aged 4 to 17, where the questions had been co-produced with children and young people with experience of care. The survey questions for Your Life Beyond Care were co-produced with young people who had been in care in two local authority areas in England.

The focus of all the Bright Spots surveys is primarily on 'subjective wellbeing'. Coram Voice explain that subjective wellbeing refers to children's own evaluations of how they feel about their lives. There are questions in the surveys about 'affect' (e.g. how happy a child feels now), cognitive judgements (e.g. evaluations of relationships) and the inner world (e.g. life having meaning).

The breadth of coverage allows local authorities to hear from a wide range of their care leavers, and to reach beyond young people and adults already involved in other participation activities the local authorities might be undertaking. By listening to, and, most importantly, acting on what care leavers have said, the programme has led to innovative changes in England, Wales and now Scotland too, and many examples of positive practice can be found in the Bright Spots Resource Library: https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/brightspots/.

Bright Spots wellbeing indicators:

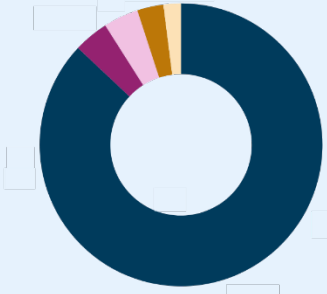


Who took the Bright Spots Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland

428

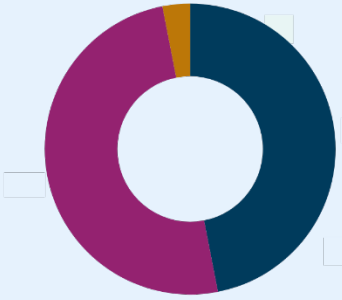
Children, young people and adults who had been in care in Scotland responded to the survey

Ethnicity



- White (87%)
- Mixed ethnicity (4%)
- Asian (4%)
- Black (3%)
- Don't want to say / missing (3%)

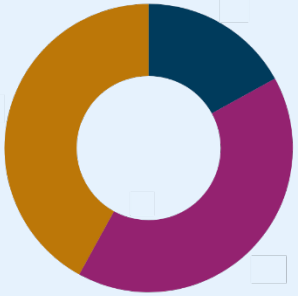
Gender



- Female (46%)
- Male (49%)
- Don't want to say / missing (3%)

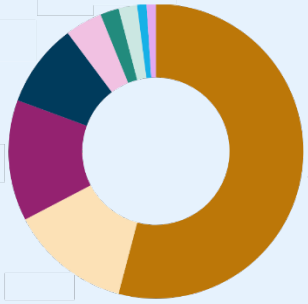
16% were a parent or expecting

Age



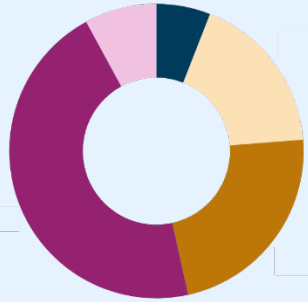
- 16-17 years (17%)
- 18-20 years (41%)
- 21 years + (42%)

Where the young people were living



- Rented flat / house (53%)
- With parent(s) / other relative (13%)
- Supported accomodation (13%)
- Continuing care (9%)
- Homeless (4%)
- Owned flat / house (2%)
- Short stay / emergency (2%)
- Custody (1%)
- Student accomodation (1%)

Length of time in care



- Less than 1 year (6%)
- 1 to 3 years (18%)
- 4 - 7 years (23%)
- More than 7 years (46%)
- Don't know (8%)

How care leavers felt they were doing

Two important findings stand out. Positively, a large majority of care leavers in Scotland feel they are doing well or thriving. Conversely, too many were struggling, evidenced by a much higher proportion of care leavers experiencing low wellbeing compared to their peers in the general UK population. This needs to change, and the variation we saw across local authority areas indicates that it is possible to get it right for more young people transitioning out of the care system. There is no universal experience of the care system, so it is important to avoid generalisations and to recognise the range of children and young people's experiences, and to attend to factors that are strongly linked to feelings of wellbeing.

Key factors we found that were critically important to the wellbeing of care leavers responding to the Bright Spots survey in Scotland included having strong supportive relationships with family, carers, friends, and practitioners providing support, living in a safe and secure environment, and feeling able to cope financially.

Positives



What young people had to say

"It's been an amazing journey, I've grown a lot and that's thanks to the great people I've had around me. (Male, 22+yrs)

"I have a small but strong network of people. (Female, 16-18yrs)

"My key worker is good, my teacher was good, my social worker is good, my football coach from street soccer is brilliant, the people who play football with me are also really good. My friends are good. (Male, 16-18yrs)

It is encouraging that a large majority of care leavers in Scotland felt that they had positive relationships which provided them with the support they needed.



24 out of 25 were getting emotional support from at least one person



16 out of 17 had a person who listened to them



7 out of 8 had a person they trusted, a person who told them they'd done well, or a person who believed they were a success



5 out of 6 had a really good friend

However, not every care leaver felt supported by other people, and the impact of the absence of supportive relationships came through in their survey comments. Care leavers wrote about how difficult it can be to establish and maintain relationships, how transient relationships can be, and how this affects the quality of relationships and their ability to trust others.

Many care leavers valued the relationship they had with their support practitioner, with seven in 10 of those who had a support practitioner trusting this worker all or most of the time. Many emphasised how critically important this relationship was.

It was also seven in 10 care leavers responding to the survey who felt that where they lived was mainly right for them and who felt that financially they were getting by, doing all right or living comfortably.

What young people had to say

> I've moved in with a friend and feel safe. Feel happy. (Female, 16-18yrs)

> It's difficult 'cause nobody really stays around, friends leave, people kick you out, so folk are there but they'll only stay so long. (Female, 16-18yrs)

> My mum (she was my foster mum) has been there for me all my life and has always had my back. She is a great support who goes above and beyond whenever I need her. I am really happy to have been raised by her. (Male, 22+yrs)

Wellbeing

At the core of the Your Life Beyond Care survey are four wellbeing scales that tell us how care leavers feel about their lives. These also allow comparison with their peers aged 16-24yrs in the general UK population using data published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020).

Wellbeing scales

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

Each question asks respondents to rate how they feel on a scale of 0 to 10. High ratings are more positive except for the question about feeling anxious, where low ratings are more positive, as these indicate lower levels of anxiety. Scores of 9 and 10 are considered to be very high (0 and 1 for feeling anxious), and scores of 0 to 4 are considered to be low (6 to 10 for feeling anxious).

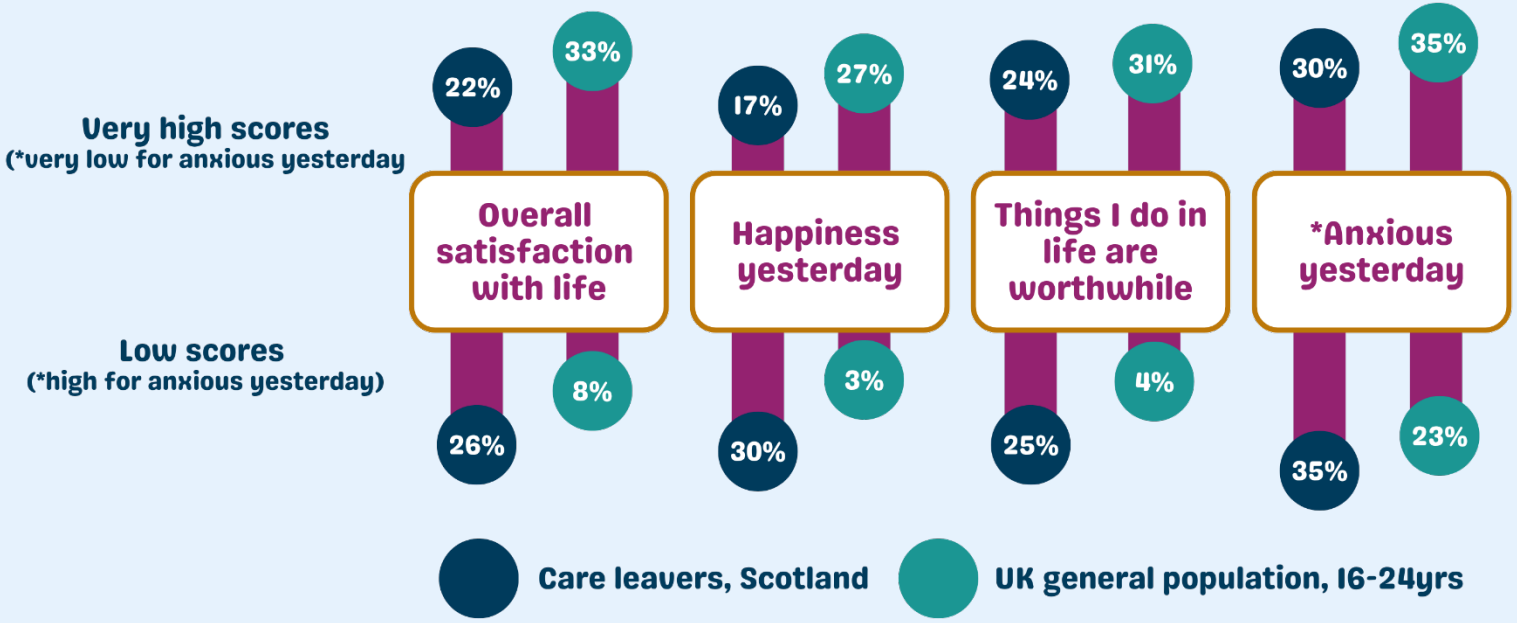
What young people had to say

> I have no supports at all and no matter how many times I've asked no one will help me. (Male, 22+yrs)

> I always appreciated the help and support I got from everyone. This includes financial and emotional support. This makes me very happy. (Male, 22+yrs)

We saw a degree of polarisation in the responses from care leavers in Scotland that contrasted with the general UK population. A substantial number who had been in care in Scotland gave very high scores (very low for anxiety) for each question, although percentages were below those of the general population. A larger group of care leavers in Scotland were however doing much less well for each of these wellbeing indicators, and the difference to the general population for low scores was particularly stark. Three times as many care leavers gave low scores for how happy they felt yesterday, ten times as many gave low scores for life satisfaction, and six times as many gave low scores for feeling that the things they did in life were worthwhile.

Four core questions



What young people had to say

"I lead a normal lifestyle just like any other 21-year-old would do! (Male, 19-21yrs)

"I live with my uncle who treats me really well and with respect. (Male, 19-21yrs)

"I live in [name of flats] flats, the close is always disgusting, the neighbours are difficult, and there's always something going on here. It's horrible and I wish I never took this flat. (Female, 22+yrs)

Overall wellbeing of care leavers in Scotland

Responses to the four core wellbeing questions were combined to identify care leavers who appeared to be thriving, as well as those who appeared to be doing much less well. Care leavers who gave very positive responses on two or more of the four scales were considered to have very high overall wellbeing, and those who gave negative responses on two or more of the scales were considered to have low overall wellbeing.

One in four (26%) care leavers were in the very high wellbeing category and appeared to be thriving, but one in three (33%) were in the low wellbeing category which indicates they were struggling.

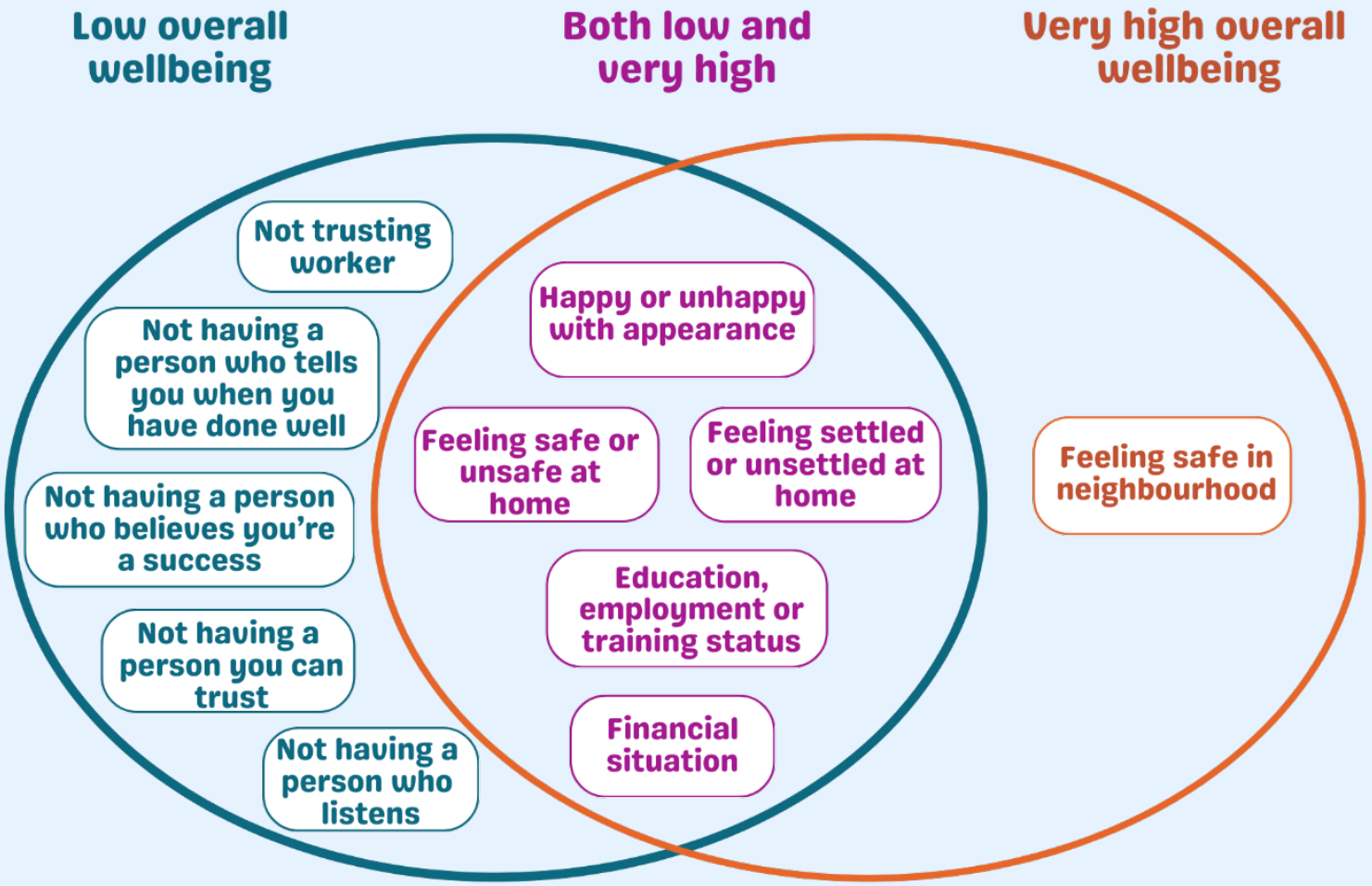
To identify factors which could help improve overall wellbeing, responses to other survey questions were explored using statistical tests of association: factors associated with very high wellbeing were identified, and factors associated with low wellbeing were identified separately. Not surprisingly, many of the factors covered by the survey were associated with both low and very high wellbeing to some degree, so, for example, a care leaver who felt unhappy with their appearance was more likely to have low overall wellbeing, and one who was happy with their appearance was more likely to have very high overall wellbeing.

How happy care leavers were with their appearance, the extent to which they felt safe and settled at home, how they were coping financially and whether or not they were in education, employment or training, were strongly associated with both high and low wellbeing. The absence of supportive relationships had a particularly strong influence on low wellbeing, meaning that care leavers who did not have a person who they believed felt they were a success, told them they'd done well, and/or who listened to them were much more likely to have low overall wellbeing. Not having a person who they could trust and not trusting their support worker were also strongly linked to low wellbeing,

> Self esteem still floors me daily. It's the only anxieties I struggle with is my appearance. (Female, 22+yrs)

> It feels really good to have a stable and secure home. It makes me feel accomplished in a way. (Female, 22+yrs)

whereas feeling safe in the neighbourhood where they were living was more strongly associated with very high overall wellbeing.

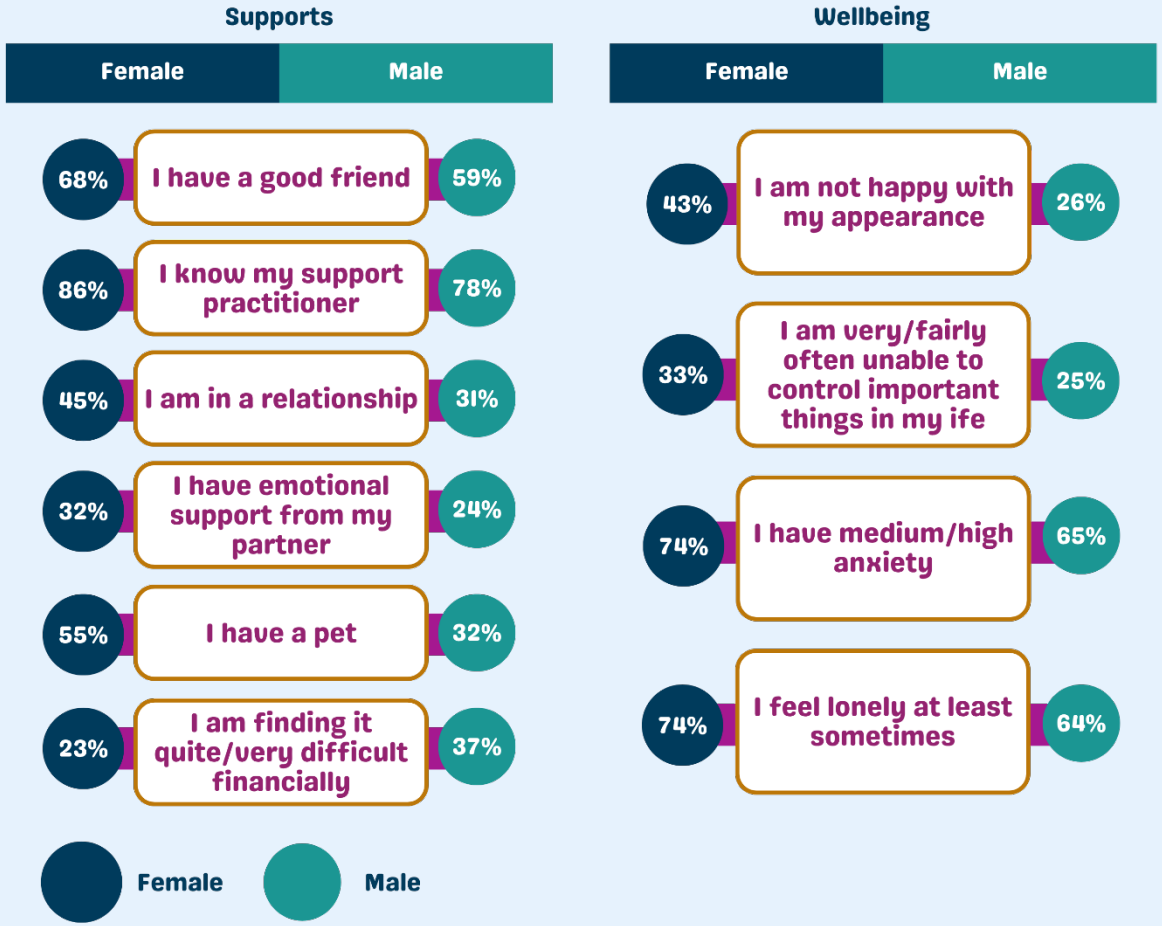


Differences in experiences and wellbeing

Experiences are not the same for all care leavers. We found differences linked to gender, which local authority area a young person lived in, and some differences between care leavers in Scotland and those who took the Bright Spots survey in England.

Gender

Female care leavers tended to have more supports than males, and fewer females had financial difficulties.



What young people had to say

> I do my make up every day as I like myself more. I just feel like you get judged by teenagers if I'm not wearing make up. (Female, 16-18yrs)

> I do have people in my life but don't trust them. (Female, 16-18yrs)

> I would like to participate in more social activities like clubbing or even just going for it with friends however I'm too anxious to reach out to people. (Female, 19-21yrs)

A higher proportion of female care leavers than male care leavers said that they had a good friend, knew who their worker was, were in a relationship and received emotional support from their partner, and had a pet. Despite these supports, females did less well than males on some important indicators of wellbeing, including feeling lonely more of the time. More females also felt less happy with how they looked, had higher levels of anxiety, and more often felt unable to control the important things in their lives.

Difference in experience across local authority areas

The overall findings which combine responses for all local authorities can mask substantial variability in experiences based on the local authority who was responsible for meeting the needs of care leavers. Variability in provision is often referred to as the 'postcode lottery' of experiences, supports and services in Scotland, signifying the lack of equity in opportunities when leaving care. The extent of variation indicates that there may be substantial room for improvement in some local authority areas.



Differences between Scotland and England

Care leavers in Scotland generally gave responses which were very similar to their counterparts in England who took the Bright Spots survey, showing how consistent, pervasive and persistent nature of the challenges care leavers face. There were, however, some notable differences:



Care leavers in Scotland were more likely to be living in a flat or house they rent or own and were less likely to be living in supported accommodation than care leavers from England were when they responded to the survey.

Care leavers in Scotland were less likely to report that they knew who their support worker was (or that they have been involved in their pathway planning).

The responses also showed that more care leavers in Scotland reported that they found it quite or very difficult to cope financially, and more reported having a long-term health condition or disability.

Care leavers in Scotland were less likely to report that they knew who their support worker was (or that they have been involved in their pathway planning.

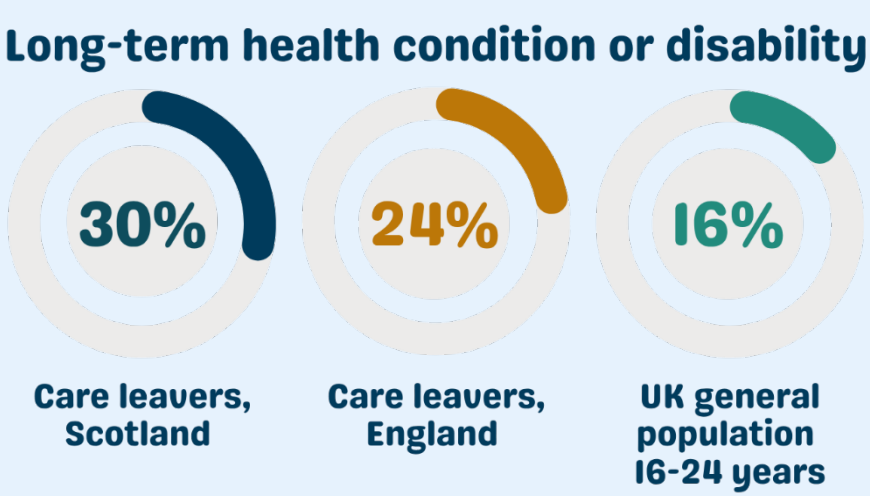
A higher proportion of care leavers in Scotland felt that they were never or almost never able to handle their personal problems, and a lower proportion were happy with their appearance.

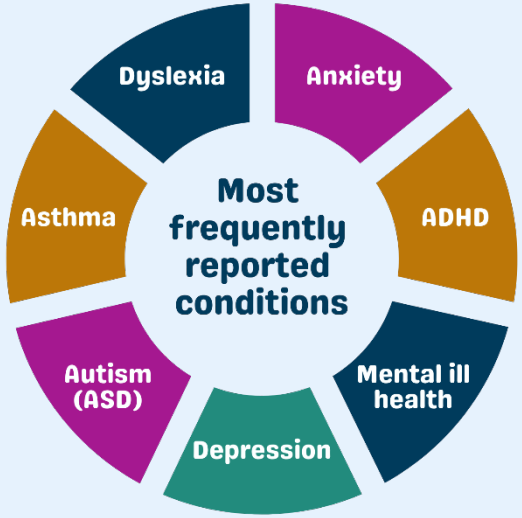
Having a pet can be an important relationship that contributes to wellbeing and substantially more care leavers in Scotland had a pet than care leavers in England.

Challenges

Health and disability

Three in 10 care leavers taking the Bright Spots survey in Scotland reported that they had a long-term health problem or disability which limited their day-to-day activities. Significantly more care leavers in Scotland were living with a long-term health condition or disability than care leavers who responded in England, and the percentage was approaching double that of their peers in the general UK population.





Care leavers in Scotland most frequently said they were living with anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, mental ill health, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia and asthma. Many reported living with more than one long-term health condition or disability.

Care leavers described the impact that their health had on their ability to make and sustain relationships, to take part in social activities, and to participate in education, training or employment.

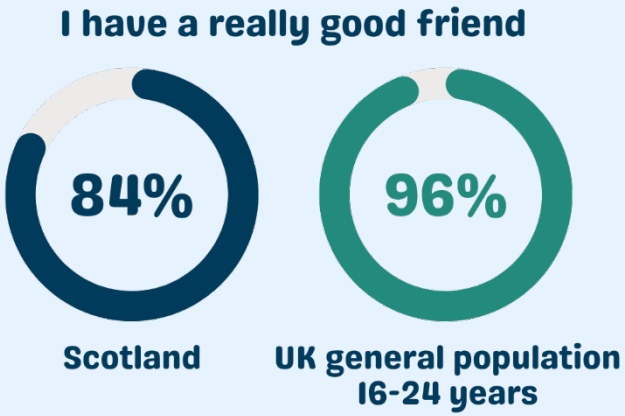
What young people had to say

> Mental health problems for the last 5 years. I've got anxiety, depression, short-term memory loss & I'm dyslexic. (Male, 19-21yrs)

> Better mental health support offered. I got kicked out of kinship and then got made to feel like I should be fixed. I never got the right mental health support and I'm still struggling to this day. (Male, 19-21yrs)

Friendship

It is encouraging that a large majority (84%) of care leavers in Scotland had a really good friend but concerning that the proportion who did not have a really good friend was four times higher than that of 16-24-year-olds in the general UK population. One in six (16%) did not have a good friend compared to just one in 25 of the general UK population (4%).



Half (51%) of the care leavers responding to the Brights Spots survey in Scotland felt lonely at least some of the time, and their comments pointed to limited finances and physical and particularly mental health issues as barriers to them socialising and making new friends with shared interests.



What young people had to say

"I have found it very lonely and isolating and this has affected my confidence and ability to be social. (Male, 16-18yrs)

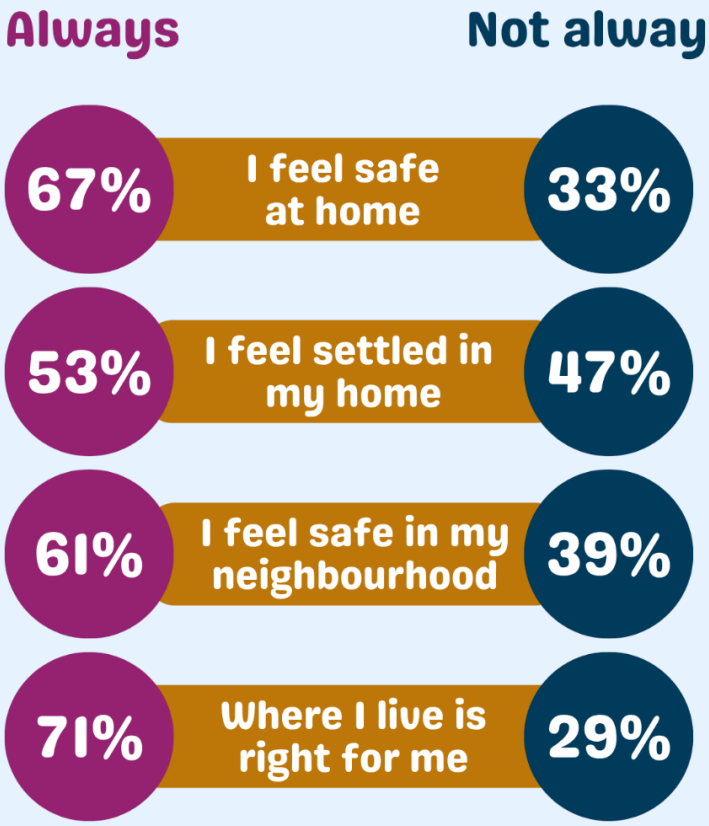
"Making friends is probably the hardest part of adult life. (Female, 19-21yrs)

"...I felt really different, strange, weird or not like my peers and I think I internally stigmatised myself a lot. I have definitely found my support system through trial and error... (Female, 22+yrs)

"I don't talk to anyone in my family and am only just beginning to make friends so other than my partner I feel really lonely. (Non-binary, 19-21yrs)

Feeling safe and settled at home

Most care leavers in Scotland said they always felt safe in their homes but one in three did not (33%). Two in five did not always feel safe in their neighbourhood. Half said they always felt settled in their homes (53%), but three in 10 did not feel that where they lived was right for them.



Many of the comments about where they were living were positive, and reasons for this included liking their home and neighbourhood, being happy with who they lived with, and proximity to support networks including friends, family and carers, and to work, college or university.

However, a concerning number of care leavers did not feel safe, settled or comfortable where they lived, with the main reasons being the condition of their homes, and dissatisfaction with their neighbours or their wider neighbourhood. Some felt that they had no choice but to accept accommodation that they did not consider suitable for them. Issues included housing conditions such as dampness and condensation, heating issues and energy costs and difficulties with neighbours and the neighbourhoods they lived in where they experienced anti-social behaviour such as violence or the threat of violence, the impact of the use of drugs, and safety concerns in communal areas.

What young people had to say

> I don't like where I live due to antisocial behaviour that goes on between neighbours. (Female, 22+yrs)

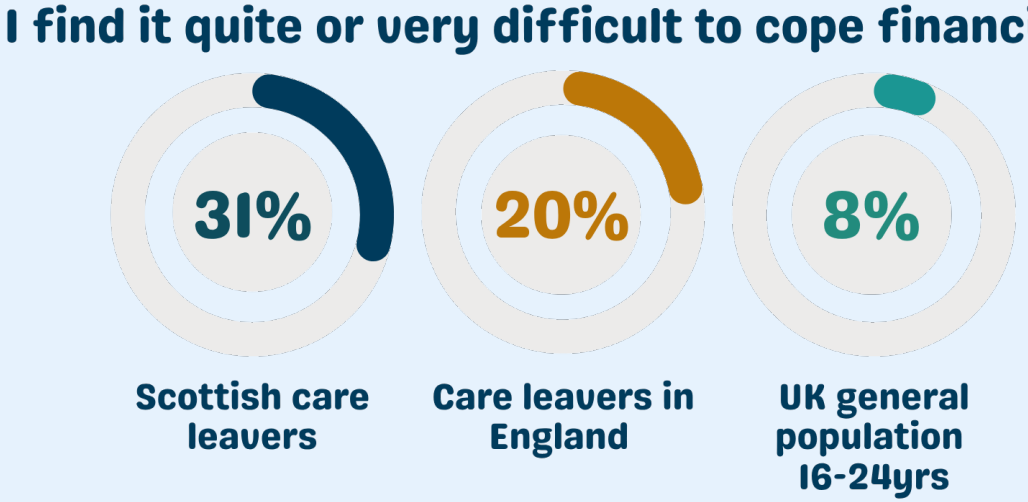
> Windows smashed a lot and condensation in the building that keeps coming. (Male, 19-21yrs)

> Safe place with everything I need, I have everyone I want around me and never have any major concerns. (Female, 19-21yrs)

> I've recently moved into my own flat, and I enjoy it very very much. It's been amazing having my friends round, my keyworker(s) and my social worker and just generally my family. (Male, 16-18yrs)

Finances

When asked how they were coping financially, most care leavers in Scotland said they were getting by, doing all right or living comfortably (69%). The remaining three in 10 were finding it quite or very difficult to cope financially. This was significantly higher than the two in 10 care leavers in England who said they struggled financially, and over three times the less than one in 10 struggling in the general population of 16-24-year-olds (ONS, 2023).



Care leavers in Scotland described how their financial situation limited their ability to see friends and socialise, and prevented them participating in leisure and sports activities, and from travelling and having holidays. Financial constraints also contributed to some care leavers feeling less comfortable in their homes because they could not afford to make them more comfortable physically or pay for heating.

What young people had to say

> I manage my money for food and gas/electric, but for clothes, shoes and other items for education like books, I can't afford. (Male, 16-18yrs)

> Debts will be the death of me, seem to just be going in a cycle. (Female, 19-21yrs)

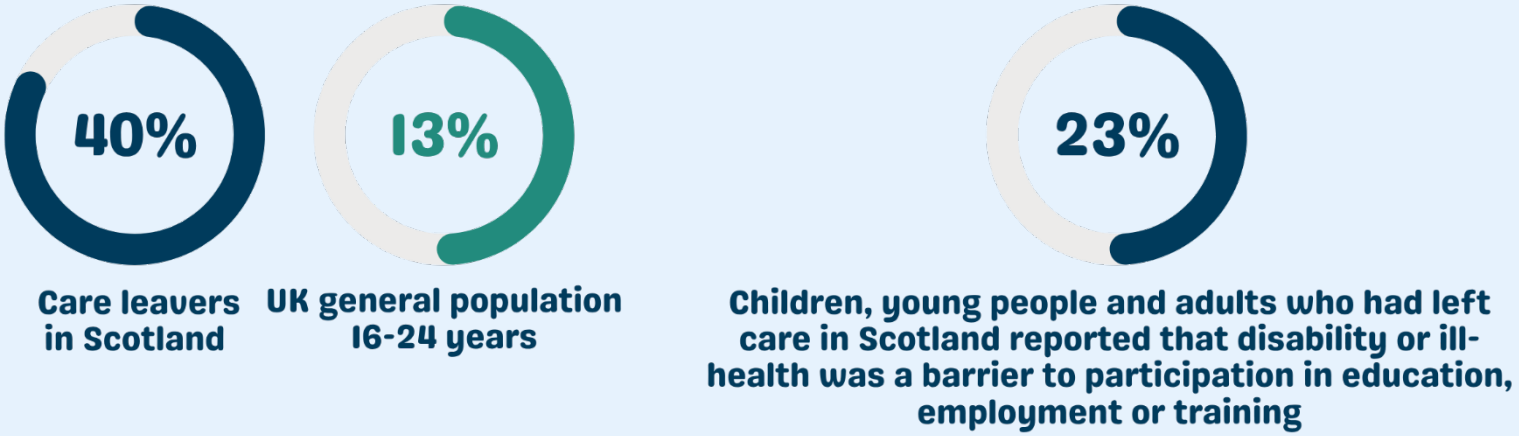
> It's hard never having any money, I struggle to manage and have to at times not eat as I can't afford to food shop. Male, 19-21yrs)

> I am inclined to save as much as possible, as I recognise the importance of doing so for the future - the cost of living continues to rise at an alarming rate! But yes, I am comfortable financially. (Male, 19-21yrs)

Education, Employment and Training

Significant attention has been given to widening access opportunities to education, employment and training for care leavers in Scotland, but we found from this survey that two in five (40%) were not in education, employment or training. This is three times higher than the one in eight figure for their peers in the UK general population of children and young people aged 16-24 (13%).

Care leavers not in education, employment or training



Almost one in four (23%) care leavers in Scotland reported that disability or ill-health was a barrier to participation in education, employment or training. These findings suggest that further consideration needs to be given to how children and young people with different characteristics and needs are supported into education, employment or training as they leave care.

What young people had to say

> I am caring for my child and my ADHD and mental health stops me from working. (Female, 19-21yrs)

> I am trying to find a job but every time I apply I get rejected so it's hard. (Female, 16-18yrs)

> I need additional support to look for and be supported in employment because of my needs. (Female, 22+yrs)

> I am seeking asylum and am not allowed to work and I sometimes struggle to attend my work placement due to anxiety. (Male, 19-21yrs)

Cliff edge of care

The term 'cliff edge of care' has been used to draw attention to the abrupt changes experienced by children and young people leaving care, and the direct impact this has on their wellbeing. Comparing responses from care leavers to those from children and young people in care in Scotland who responded to the Your Life, Your Care survey provides further evidence to support observations from the Bright Spots programme in England that there is a dramatic change in wellbeing when children and young people leave care. Care leavers had a rate of 26% for high overall wellbeing, compared to 42% of the 11-17-year-olds who were in care.



What young people had to say

"I had a lot of support in leaving care, I still am in contact with my foster family. (Male, 22+yrs)

"Don't leave care till u are ready. Don't let so called friends influence u. (Male, 19-21yrs)

"I was happy to leave care and I finally felt free but looking back at 16 I wasn't prepared for it at all. (Female, 22+yrs)

"Social worker actually helping you and not just throwing you out a system and leaving you to get on with it, especially with having no life skills, experiences or even any guidance. (Female, 22+yrs)

The striking differences across many indicators emphasise the need for support which allows children and young people to make a more gradual and extended transition from care into independent living. Care leavers in Scotland gave many examples of difficult experiences when they left care. They described leaving care too early and too abruptly, with insufficient planning, preparation and communication in advance. Some felt that they were not aware of the options they had, and some felt pressured to accept arrangements that they felt weren't in their best interests.

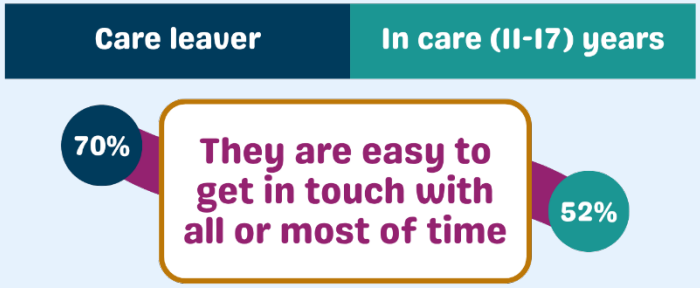
Relationships with practitioners providing support

Different structures were in place in different local authority areas to provide support to care leavers, including dedicated throughcare and aftercare or youth team services and practitioners, and continuation of support from social workers who already supported children and young people while they were in care. Here we're using the term support practitioners to cover all these roles.

The relationship they had with their support practitioner was vitally important for many care leavers in Scotland. Four in five (81%) knew who their support practitioner was, and in responding to the survey, only friends (68%) were more frequently selected as a source of emotional support than leaving care practitioners (38%).

When comparing experiences of care leavers to children and young people in care, the relationship with their support practitioner was a notable positive difference. More care leavers trusted their practitioner and found it easier to get in touch with them than children and young people in care in Scotland.





The importance of relationships with support practitioners came through in many of the care leavers' comments in their survey responses. Care leavers described the support they received to resolve practical issues, but more often commented on emotional support and the quality of the relationship in terms of friendliness, approachability and availability, and empathy. Continuity of the relationship was important for care leavers, though others said they felt that new relationships had also been very positive and productive. Feeling involved and listened to when decisions were being made was critical for some care leavers.

Not every care leaver felt supported by a practitioner in this way. Some described poor relationships with their support practitioners, and some felt that they were difficult to contact and either did not have, or did not make, time for them.

What young people had to say

"She has been a big help with helping me getting my house and stuff for my house. (Female, 19-21yrs)

"I feel unable to talk to my social worker… she makes me feel like a child. (Genderfluid, 19-21yrs)

"She is great. Is always there when I need support or help with anything. It feels like she genuinely cares about me. (Female, 22+yrs)

"She has completely helped me solve my issues, and she's been crucial in the support she gave me when moving out… (Male, 16-18yrs)

Discussion and Recommendations

The primary purpose of the Bright Spots programme is to enable corporate parents and partner agencies to improve the services and support they provide to children in care and care leavers, based on the evidence provided by the Bright Spots surveys. Each of the local authority areas that took part in the Bright Spots Programme pilot in Scotland received the responses to the surveys and the analysis of these shortly after the end of their phase of the pilot. The areas have been working to address the feedback the children and young people they care for and their care leavers have given them, through their local services to support them. By bringing together the survey results from all six local authority areas that participated in Scotland in 2022 and 2024, we also have a new, broader knowledge base that complements and often reinforces other sources of information about the wellbeing of children in care and care leavers in Scotland in recent years. There are key learning points and general recommendations for corporate parents and agencies supporting care leavers based on this evidence and this knowledge base can also be used to inform ongoing policy development to improve support of care leavers in Scotland.

Enable more young people leaving care to thrive

In the data derived from the responses to the Bright Spots Programme Scotland pilot we can see a polarisation between care leavers who felt supported and were thriving, and care leavers who felt less supported and were struggling. Furthermore, we could also see that a much higher proportion of young people who had left care in Scotland had been experiencing low wellbeing compared to their peers in the general UK population. The disparity observed in Scotland is very similar to the situation of care leavers in England. The factors which help children and young people with experience of care to thrive when leaving care included: having supportive relationships with friends, family and carers, and with support practitioners who support them; feeling safe and settled where they live; having financial security; and having opportunities to learn and develop. These factors are key

leverage points for ensuring a more positive wellbeing for supporting young people leaving care which are likely to have a positive impact on their wellbeing.

Everyone who has needed care and protection as a child needs, and has a right to, the supportive relationships, a safe and comfortable home, sufficient income, and the opportunities to develop and learn that will give them every opportunity to thrive.

Recommendation 1

Corporate parents from all agencies in Scotland need to ensure that there is sufficient and equitable support across the board. This is a basic principle embedded within The Promise of the Independent Care Review (2020) and its aspirations. While it should be recognised that many young people and adults who have been in care in Scotland feel supported and are doing well or thriving, too many do not. National and local government needs to commit to investing in long-term, sustainable funding and services that are required to ensure there is the right 'scaffolding' in place to provide high-quality care, resourced workforces and effective inter-agency working, in every area of Scotland.

Address the cliff edge of care and improve aftercare support

The findings from the Bright Spots pilot in Scotland provide vital, first-hand experience which add further weight to the concept of a 'cliff edge of care', with care leavers consistently reporting lower wellbeing in comparison to how younger children and young people aged 11-17 years in care are feeling.

Young people and adults leaving care must be supported to make more gradual and extended transitions into adulthood and independence.

Recommendation 2

Corporate parents should ensure that young people leaving care experience gradual, well-

planned and extended transitions into adulthood and independence. This should include support for being able to maintain and develop enduring relationships; early preparation, to help overcome any barriers to education, employment and training; and specific support to enable them to develop the skills and confidence to manage their finances.

End the 'postcode lottery' of support

The findings give further evidence of a 'postcode lottery' of experiences, services and supports for care leavers in Scotland, with the data demonstrating substantial variability in different aspects of experiences and support within the six different local authority areas responsible for meeting their needs that took part in the piloting of the surveys in Scotland.

Recommendation 3

To get it right for every child, young person and adult who has been in care, their experience of care and the support they are given should not be dependent on which the local authority area they happen live in. Much more needs to be done to ensure equity across Scotland, and to pick up on and spread positive practice and improvements in approaches and services that the results of survey demonstrate have made a difference to care leavers' experiences.

Improve financial support

By comparing the findings from the survey in Scotland with the surveys in England, it can be seen that too many young people and adults who had left care in Scotland were struggling financially compared to their peers in England, and, moreover, to the general UK population. Financial pressures and instability are impacting on their levels of stress, their ability to socialise and consequently their feelings of loneliness and isolation. This limits how

these young people and adults can live their lives and the cost-of-living crisis has made financial challenges much more acute for many care leavers in Scotland.

Recommendation 4

The clear link between financial insecurity and poor wellbeing felt by care leavers needs to be more fully recognised by Scottish Government and corporate parents across Scotland. Some care leavers benefit from the Care Experienced Bursary and council tax exemption. Further progress has been made with the introduction of the Care Leaver Payment, but further consideration needs to be given by Scottish Government and corporate parents to the financial support care leavers receive to improve financial security. This could include reviewing the adequacy of current financial support for care leavers, extending eligibility to care leavers for different schemes such as a national minimum income guarantee should this be introduced, and improving consistency of provision across Scotland.

Remove health and disability barriers

In the responses to the Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland, many more care leavers reported that they had a long-term health condition or disability compared to the percentage of young people with a long-term health condition or disability in the general UK population, and many experienced poor mental health, sometimes combined with other conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia or asthma. Many of these young people and adults felt that they did not receive the support they needed, and that this was one of the primary barriers preventing their participation in education, employment or training.

Recommendation 5

The physical and mental health challenges facing children and young people in care in Scotland are well documented, yet there remains a need to establish and provide

appropriate supports to them and address their needs. Support practitioners should create space for meaningful conversations about disability and long-term health conditions with the children in care and care leavers that they work with, and they should be supported to develop their confidence, skills and knowledge in this area. Data must be improved, with better identification and recording of long-term health conditions and disability in order to plan and invest in appropriate support. Children and young people in care who are living with a long-term condition or disability deserve individual support tailored to their needs, and preparation and continuing support to improve their access to education, employment or training. This requires more effective planning and joined-up, multi-agency working between services including those provided by local authorities and the NHS in Scotland, including between children's and adults' services: support must continue as children and young people leave care and transition into adulthood and may need the support of adult services.

Staying put and moving on to safe and comfortable homes

Most care leavers responding to the survey in Scotland felt that their home was right for them but almost a third did not. Many children and young people leaving care live independently at a much earlier age than their peers in the general population, and some of our respondents felt that they were not ready to leave the care and homes of their carers when they did. Unsuitable accommodation sets those leaving the care system up to fail, hindering their transition to independence and affecting their wellbeing, particularly when they are financially insecure.

Recommendation 6

All corporate parents and relevant agencies must work together to ensure that care leavers can stay in their homes as long as they need to and want to in Continuing Care, and are

able to move to an appropriate home when they are ready. The right to alternative accommodation where young people cannot stay in the same home beyond aged sixteen is enshrined in the new Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 and must be upheld by corporate parents.

Planning for moving into adulthood must be pro-active and involve all necessary, multidisciplinary services, including social work, health, housing and welfare rights to ensure that children and young people do not 'fall through the cracks' as they move between children's and adults' services, and if they move between geographic and health board areas. New, clear guidance for corporate parents to support this period of transition for children and young people would be useful and would need to be followed by all services within all corporate parenting bodies.

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About Bright Spots

To find out more about the Bright Spots Programme see:
https://coramvoice.org.uk/bright-spots-programme/

About CELCIS

CELCIS is a leading improvement, innovation and research centre for children and young people's support, care and protection, based at the University of Strathclyde. We work with local, national and international partners to improve the lives of children, young people and families by strengthening the systems, services and practices that support them, helping to address their needs and realise their rights. Working alongside people and organisations responsible for their care and protection, we bring together evidence, lived experience and practical insight to facilitate and enable change, support the implementation of policy into practice, and drive meaningful and lasting improvement.

For more information

Visit: http://www.celcis.org Email: celcis@strath.ac.uk Tel: 0141 444 8500