CELCIS Centre for excellence for Children's Care and Protection

coramVoice getting young voices heard

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

The Bright Spots programme Scottish pilot



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Introduction

About this report

In this report, we bring together data from the first phase of the Bright Spots pilot in Scotland in 2022 and the second phase in 2024 to explore how care leavers from the participating local authority areas felt about their lives at these points in time. Our findings provide further evidence that supports much of what we already know about the positive and negative aspects of the lives of young people and adults who have been in care in Scotland, and we do not seek to analyse change over time. The findings explore recognised aspects of the lives of care leavers in depth and provide insights into other aspects of their experiences and feelings that are less well known and understood. We hope that corporate parents from all agencies will use our findings to continue to improve the services and support they provide to care leavers, and that the evidence presented will be used to inform the ongoing process of policy development to improve support to care leavers in Scotland. We make recommendations for corporate parents and policy makers, but it is important to acknowledge that the findings do not necessarily represent the position and views of all care leavers in Scotland.

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 26 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. Their responses are combined and analysed in this report.

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.

Your Life Beyond Care: The Bright Spots programme Scottish pilot

Coram Voice, the leading national charity for the voice of children in care in England, has supported local authorities to successfully deliver the Bright Spots Programme in England and Wales since 2015, and CELCIS 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 extended pilot phase in 2024.

A partnership between Coram Voice and the University of Bristol and, subsequently the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford, commenced development of the original Bright Spots' Your Life, Your Care surveys for children in care aged 4 to 17 in 2013, with funding from the Hadley Trust. Led by Professor Julie Selwyn, the surveys were strongly evidence-based and were co-produced with 140 children and young people with experience of care. 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, and was originally funded by Coram-i, through the UK Government's Department for Education Social Care Innovation Fund, with further development and roll-out funded by the Hadley Trust. The survey complements the earlier Your Life, Your Care survey for children and young people in care, and survey questions were co-produced with 30 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 define in this context that subjective wellbeing refers to children and young people's own evaluations of how they feel about their lives. There are questions in the surveys about 'affect', for example, how happy they feel now; cognitive judgements, for example, evaluations of relationships; and feelings about the inner world, that is, life having meaning. Changes to the survey for the pilot in Scotland were kept to a minimum to align with the model developed by Coram Voice, and to allow comparison with care leavers who took the survey in England.

The responses to the Your Life Beyond Care survey help identify the areas where care leavers appear to be flourishing and where things could be improved, and provide an evidence base of care leavers' experience and wellbeing to inform service improvements. 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.

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. The Promise of the Independent Care Review (2020) in Scotland recognises that many children who come into the care system will have experienced trauma to some degree as a result of facing issues such as neglect, abuse and separation from family, and that the care system itself can contribute to trauma.

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 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 place emotionally.

Piloting Bright Spots in Scotland

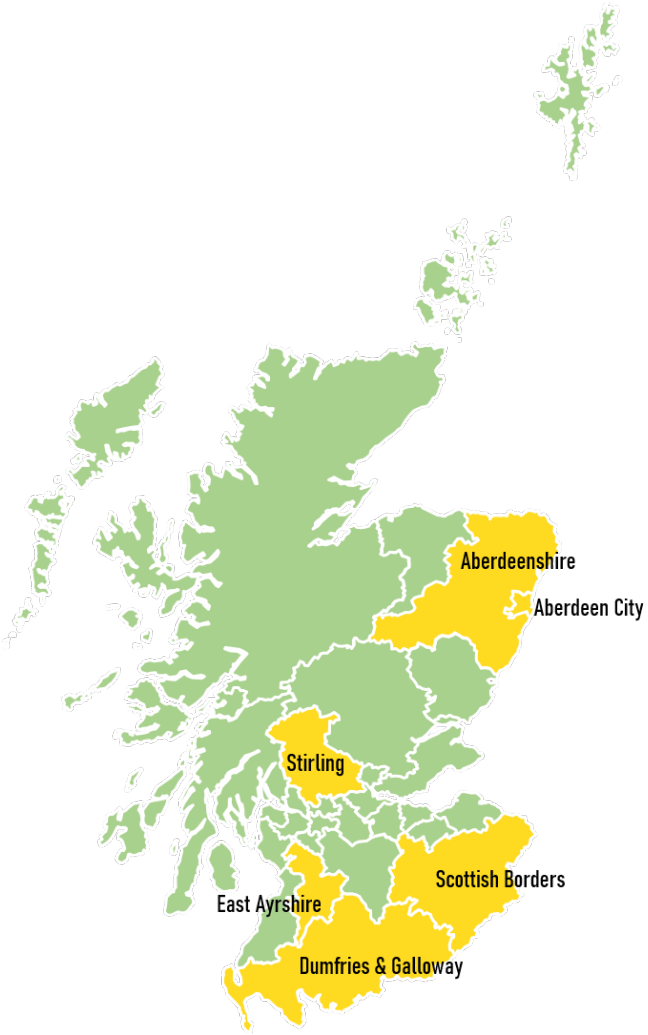


Figure 1. Bright Spots local authority partners in Scotland

In 2021, CELCIS partnered with Coram Voice to pilot the Bright Spots Programme in Scotland. Local authority areas were invited to express their interest in participation, and three local authority areas - Aberdeenshire, Dumfries & Galloway and East Ayrshire - were selected to take part in the initial pilot phase during 2022. Selection criteria covered readiness to participate including identification of an influential local lead and commitment to form a multi-agency working group, strategic buy-in from senior management across agencies providing services, and commitment to responding to the survey findings and embedding the voice of children in local decision-making processes.

The pilot was extended to include a further three local authority areas who expressed interest in 2023. Aberdeen City, Scottish Borders and Stirling were selected to take part in this phase, carrying out the Bright Spots surveys from January to April 2024.

Each of the local 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. Further information on local actions can be found on the CELCIS website: https://www.celcis.org/Brightspots

How to read the findings

The primary purpose of this report is to consider overall findings by combining responses from all six local authority partner areas, rather than to identify and compare differences between local areas. Individual local authorities are therefore not identified.

The extent of variation across local authority areas can however be instructive because it provides evidence that particular experiences are not universal or inevitable. The lowest and highest percentages of children giving specific answers in local authority areas are shown to illustrate the extent of variation where this is noteworthy.

A higher percentage is not always more positive than a lower percentage, so, for example, when comparing the percentage of care leavers who did always feel safe where they were living, a lower percentage indicates that more care leavers did always feel safe in their home.

Comparison is also made with the Bright Spots comparator group, aggregate data from 21 local authority areas that have participated in Bright Spots in England between 2017 and 2019 and, where appropriate, with the general population in Scotland (where Scottish data was available) or the general population in the UK or England.

Some of the survey questions asked respondents if they wanted to say anything else about particular topics. There were also two open-ended questions which asked care leavers what would have made their experience of leaving care better for them, and if there was anything else they wanted to say about leaving care. Their responses provided insights into many aspects of their experience of care. We have provided some of these insights and examples of their comments throughout this report where these were relevant to other questions that respondents were not specifically asked to comment on, to give a rounded representation of what was shared.

Caution should therefore be taken in drawing any inference from these insights as these cannot be generalised to the wider population of care

leavers, and the findings presented in this report should not be considered to represent the position and views of all care leavers in Scotland.

Considerable attention has been focused in recent years on listening to what children and young people and adults with experience of care have to say about their lives, and ensuring participation is a key element of service development. The Bright Spots surveys can complement and expand this important activity by systematically gathering the views of as many children and young people as possible, going beyond those who are already involved in participation processes.

All local authorities participating in Scotland also carried out the Bright Spots Your Life, Your Care survey for children in care between the ages of 4 and 17 (Anderson et al, 2026). A separate companion national report details findings for these children.

In this report, comparison is made with responses children aged 11 to 17 gave to the Your Life, Your Care surveys in order to highlight some of the changes children and young people may experience when they leave care.

The language used in this report

There are a few words and phrases used throughout the report which have been used to aid consistency in interpreting and understanding themes and patterns in the findings, to reflect the variety of children and young people's experiences, and to recognise the legal context of children's care in Scotland. Some of the terms we have used are explained here. We have also explained a few of the technical terms used for understanding and analysing the data.

The language used when describing the experience of children, young people and families who are supported by services is important. Language can be stigmatising. Where possible, we have tried to avoid using terms that could contribute to this. Where we have quoted children and young people directly from their responses to the Bright Spots Your Life Beyond Care survey, this is in their own words.

Care Leaver

The term 'care leaver' used in this report specifically refers to children, young people and adults who have spent some of their childhood in the care of a local authority (for example, being cared for by foster carers, living with wider family or friends in kinship care, living in a children's home or other residential accommodation known as residential child care, or living at home with their parents (for example with a Compulsory Supervision Order put in

place by a Children's Hearing), and left care on or after their sixteenth birthday.

For this programme, the young people taking part were 'care leavers' rather than 'care experienced' as the term 'care experienced' is a broader definition which includes all children who no longer required local authority support for their care *before* their sixteenth birthday.

Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO)

In Scotland, this is a legal document which means that the local authority is responsible for looking after and helping a child. It might say where the child must live or other conditions which must be followed.

Continuing Care

In Scotland, children and young people have the right to stay with their foster carers, kinship carers or in residential child care until their twenty-first birthday if this is right for them and what they want. This commitment is called 'Continuing Care' and is set out by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. It is designed to respond to the needs of young people and enable young people to be supported through the relationships they have developed so that they can live more independently when they feel ready.

Corporate Parents

Corporate parent is the term used in Scotland to refer to organisations (and individuals who work for them) who have a legal duty to respond to and support the care and protection needs of all children and young people. Their duties are laid out in Part 9 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. This covers over 90 local and national public bodies and agencies.

Children

In this report, the word children is used to describe all children under the age of 18. This is in recognition of the rights of children under the United Nations Convention on The Rights of The Child which covers all children up to the age of 18 and is now incorporated into Scots Law and the responsibilities of public authorities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. It is important to understand and acknowledge however that some adolescents and teenagers see themselves as young people and prefer to use that phrase.

Kinship Care

Kinship Care is where a child or young person lives with and is cared for by members of their extended family or friends.

Residential child care

In Scotland, residential child care is the term used to describe a care and home environment experienced by children who cannot be cared for by their parent, with carers providing 24/7 support, supervision and assistance. This will include residential schools for children with complex or specialist needs, and will also alternatively be called children's homes, children's houses or group homes.

Regression analysis

Regression analysis is a technique that is used to establish with reasonable certainty the strength of a relationship between two or more things, such as factors or features in the population and experiences of something. Regression can estimate how several factors together can influence something else.

Statistically significant

As this report includes an analysis of what children and young people shared through the surveys, in part to understand where there might be differences between ages, gender or types of care, for example, statistical tests allow us to assess the likelihood that these differences have not arisen purely by chance. Where we say that a difference is statistically significant in this report, this means that there is a 95% probability that it is not due to chance and only 5% probability that the difference we see is due to chance. Statistical significance does not tell us how important or strong a difference is, it simply tells us the likelihood that the difference between groups is not because of chance.

Tests of association

A test of association is where one of a number of different techniques can be used to find out if two or more things are linked. These can show, for example, a change or pattern in one thing relates to another thing.

Transitions/transitioning

In the context of this report and its findings, transitions and transitioning is used to describe the points and experiences where children in care and care leavers needing the support of services may either need to move between one service and another, or where their personal development has reached a particular stage, for example, from childhood to adulthood.

Survey content

The Your Life Beyond Care online survey examines the views of care leavers aged sixteen to twenty-five on their wellbeing and other aspects of life that influenced wellbeing: the people in their lives, being a care leaver, living independently and their feelings. These wellbeing indicators were co-developed by care leavers and reflect what was important to them.



Figure 2. Your Life Beyond Care dimensions

Questions in the survey ask care leavers about each of these four areas (Figure 2) and these areas therefore provide the framework for this report. Where possible, comparisons are made with the general population. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) regularly publishes data from a variety of sources on the wellbeing of young people in the general population (ONS, 2023a), and other sources of population information are used when relevant. We have compared responses from young people and adults who have been in care in Scotland to those from a comparator group of 21 local authorities

in England who participated in Your Life Beyond Care survey in 2017-19 (Briheim-Crookall et al., 2020) and we highlight where findings differ significantly after applying statistical tests. For particular questions, we have also compared responses to the responses of young people in care (aged 11 to 17 years) who completed the Your Life, Your Care survey in our partner areas in Scotland.

To allow care leavers to make their own decisions about which questions they answered, all the questions in the survey were optional. Because of this, the number of responses for each question can differ, so the base number of responses (n) is provided for each figure and table.

The Your Life Beyond Care Survey



Who took part in the 'Your Life Beyond Care' Survey?

Who are care leavers?

We use the term 'care leavers' in this report because it specifically refers to children, young people and adults who have spent some of their childhood in the care of a local authority (for example, being cared for by foster carers, living with wider family or friends in kinship care, living in a children's home or other residential accommodation known as residential child care, or living at home with their parents, usually with a Compulsory Supervision Order put in place by a Children's Hearing), and left care on or after their sixteenth birthday. For this programme, the young people taking part were 'care leavers' rather than 'care experienced' as the term 'care experienced' is a broader definition which includes all children who no longer required local authority support for their care *before* their sixteenth birthday.

At the time the surveys were carried out, all local authorities in Scotland were legally obliged to assess the need for, and provide advice and assistance to children and young people who left care on or after their sixteenth birthday. This is known as aftercare support and any young person who ceases to be looked after on or after their sixteenth birthday and is less than twenty-six years of age is eligible (between sixteen and nineteen) or potentially eligible (between nineteen and twenty-six) These duties are described in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (as amended by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014). The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning (Scotland) Act 2026, when it comes into force, will extend the potential eligibility for aftercare to anyone who was 'looked after' – whether they left care before, on, or after their sixteenth birthday.

The Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland was aimed at care leavers who were eligible for aftercare support under existing legislation, and also included young people who are cared for under the 'Continuing Care' policy which is where young people in care when they turn sixteen are no longer formally 'looked after' but continue to live with their carer/s in foster care, kinship care or residential child care up to the age of twenty one, if this is something they want to do (Scottish Government, 2024a).

The number of care leavers who took the Scotland survey

The six partner areas taking part in the Scotland pilot identified 806 young people and adults who were eligible to participate in the 'Your Life Beyond

Care' survey. Responses were received from 428 young people and adults who had left care, which represents an overall response rate of 53%. Response rates ranged from 35% to 70% across the six local authority areas.

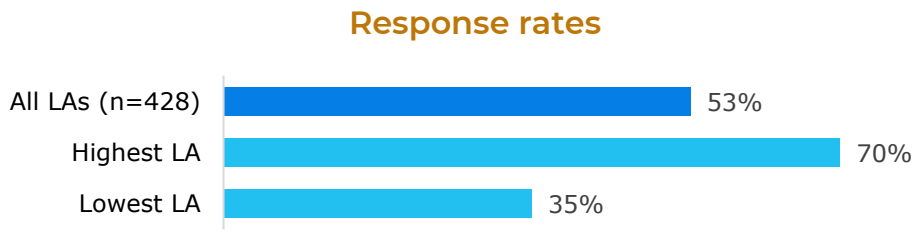


Figure 3. Response rates in Scotland

Gender of survey respondents

Almost half (49%) of young people and adults who took the Bright Spots Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland described themselves as male and 46% as female. 3% did not want to say or chose not to answer the question, and 2% described themselves as non-binary, gender fluid or transgender. National data on care leavers in Scotland does not include a gender breakdown, but 54% of children in care in Scotland in 2023 were male and 46% were female (Scottish Government, 2024b). Care leavers who chose not to describe themselves as female or male are not included in analysis by gender in this report because of the comparatively small number in this group.

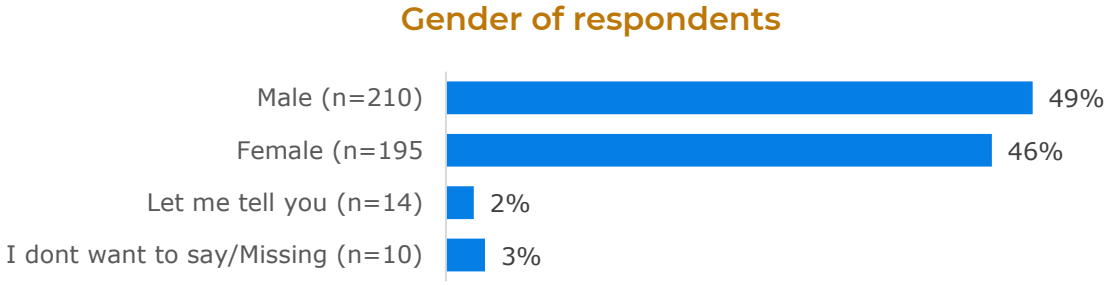


Figure 4. Gender of respondents

Age of survey respondents

The ages of the young people and adults who completed the Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland is shown in Figure 3. Six care leavers did not provide their age.

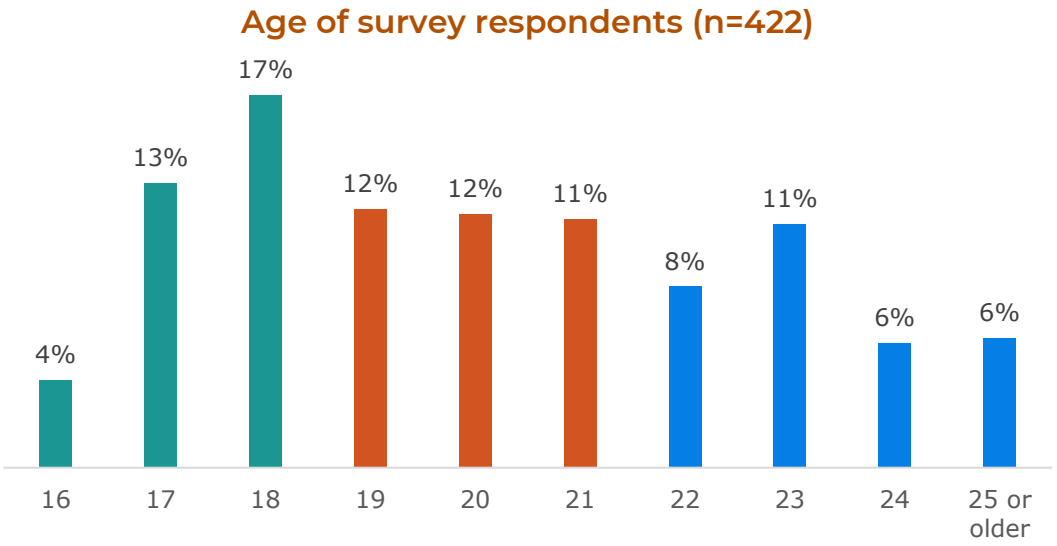


Figure 5. Age of care leavers completing the survey

All ages were well represented. Care leavers aged 16 to 18 made up 34% of those responding, 19–21-year-olds made up 35%, and care leavers aged 22 and over made up 31% (Figure 6).

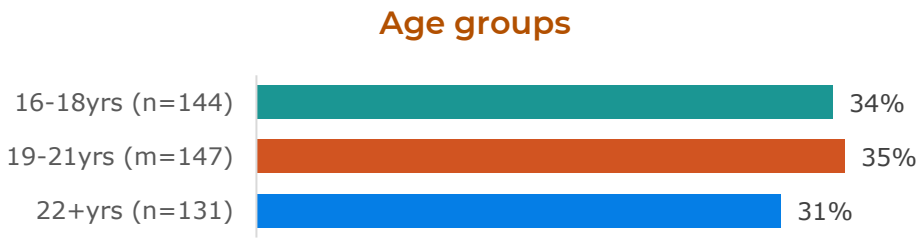


Figure 6. Participants grouped by age

Ethnicity of the survey respondents

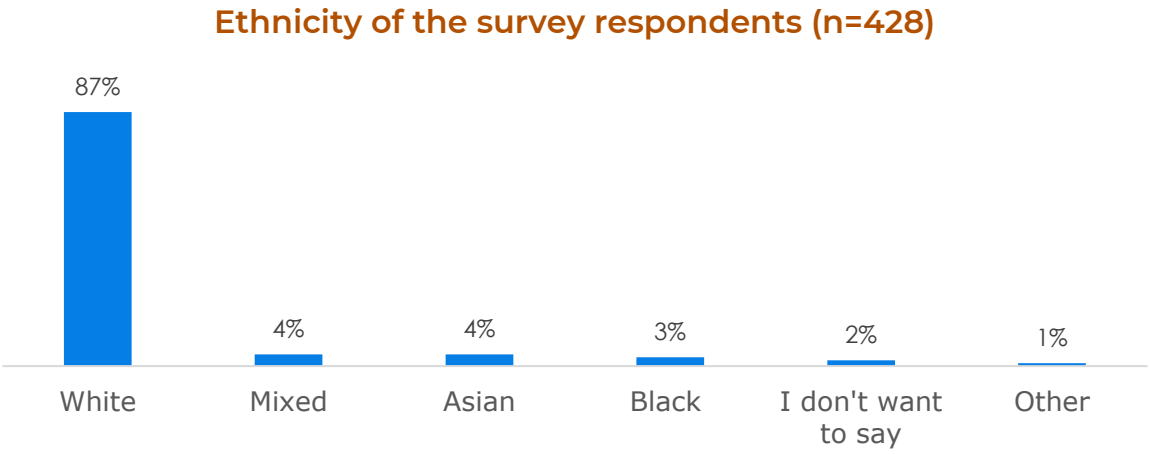


Figure 7. Ethnicity of the survey respondents

The majority (87%) of care leavers who completed the survey provided their ethnicity as white and 11% identified as being from an ethnic minority; a substantially smaller proportion than the 32% of those responding to the survey in England (Coram Voice, 2020). Coram Voice have been able to look at variation by ethnicity when reporting at a national level in England, but due to the relatively small numbers in Scotland this was not possible for our analysis. 2% of care leavers did not wish to say what their ethnicity was.

The 2022 Census (National Records of Scotland, 2024) showed that 11% of 16–24-year-olds in Scotland were non-white. The Scottish Government collects but does not routinely publish data on the ethnicity of children and young people leaving the care system, but it does publish the ethnicity of young people and adults receiving aftercare services. 18% of these young people and adults were from non-white ethnic backgrounds. Scotland's cities have the highest proportions of people from ethnic minorities, and of the six areas involved in the Bright Spots pilot programme in Scotland only one major city was represented. This would explain the lower proportion of survey participants from non-white ethnic backgrounds and this finding was expected.

Long term health problems or disability of survey respondents

The Children's Health in Care Scotland (CHiCS) project has found that care experienced children and young people are more likely to experience poor mental health and chronic conditions than their peers in the general population, and the need for mental health services is greater at the age when young people leave care and start living independently (Allik et al., 2022). Young people who grow up in care and 'age out' of care are recognised as a particularly vulnerable group who are at increased risk of mental health problems (Phillips et al., 2024).

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they had a long-term health problem or disability that limited their day-to-day activities. 'Long-term' in this context meant lasting at least 12 months. Respondents could answer 'Yes', 'No' and 'I don't want to say'.

On language, for consistency, the wording used in England was also used in Scotland, but we recognise that neurodiversity is better described as difference, and that 'conditions' would be a more appropriate and inclusive term than 'problems'.

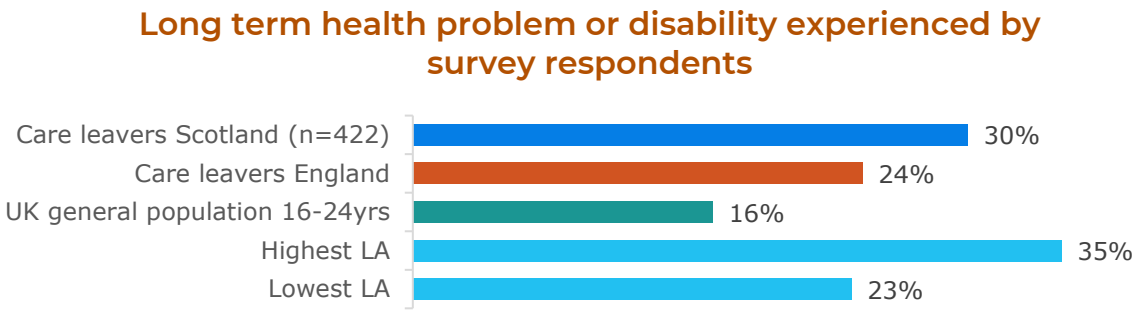


Figure 8. Long term health problem or disability experienced by survey respondents

Three in ten (30%) care leavers taking the Your Life Beyond Care survey in the Scottish pilot of the Bright Spots programme reported that they had a long-term health problem or disability which limited their day-to-day activities. Compared to care leavers responding to the survey in England between 2017 and 2019, significantly more young care leavers in Scotland were living with a long-term health problem or disability (30% vs 24%), and the percentage was approaching double that of their non care experienced peers in the general population (16%). Coram Voice have found that the proportion of care leavers reporting that they had a long-term health problem of disability has been increasing each year, and that more recent Bright Spots data shows a similar percentage to Scotland in England and Wales (Baker & Briheim-Crookhall, 2024). Care leavers in Scotland most frequently cited living with anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, mental ill health, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia and asthma. Neurodiversity and the impact of living with cognitive differences were also described by care leavers responding to the survey, and many reported living with more than one long-term health condition or disability. Some were awaiting diagnosis.

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

Care leavers described the impact 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:

> *"Poor Mental Health which limits my opportunities and puts me at risk (physical health) by not looking after myself." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I deal with a lot of trauma, depression, bpd [bipolar disorder] and autism all of which severely impacts my day-to-day life." (Non-binary, 19-21yrs)*

"I am autistic, and I have anxiety and depression. This limits me in where I can go and what I can do." (Male, 19-21yrs)

Survey respondents who were parents or expecting

Parental Status	n	%
Not a Parent	355	83.5
Parent	61	14.4
Pregnant (or partner is pregnant)	8	1.9
Parent and Pregnant (or partner is pregnant)	1	0.2
Total	425	100

Table 1. Survey respondents' parental status

Sixty-one care leavers who responded to the survey were parents. Eight were pregnant or their partner was pregnant, and one was a parent and pregnant (or partner is pregnant). No official data exists in Scotland about the number of care leavers (aged 16-25yrs+) who are parents.

Length of time respondents had been in care

Just under half (46%) of the care leavers who responded to the Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland had been in care for more than seven years. 6% had been in care for less than a year and 8% didn't know how long they had been in care.

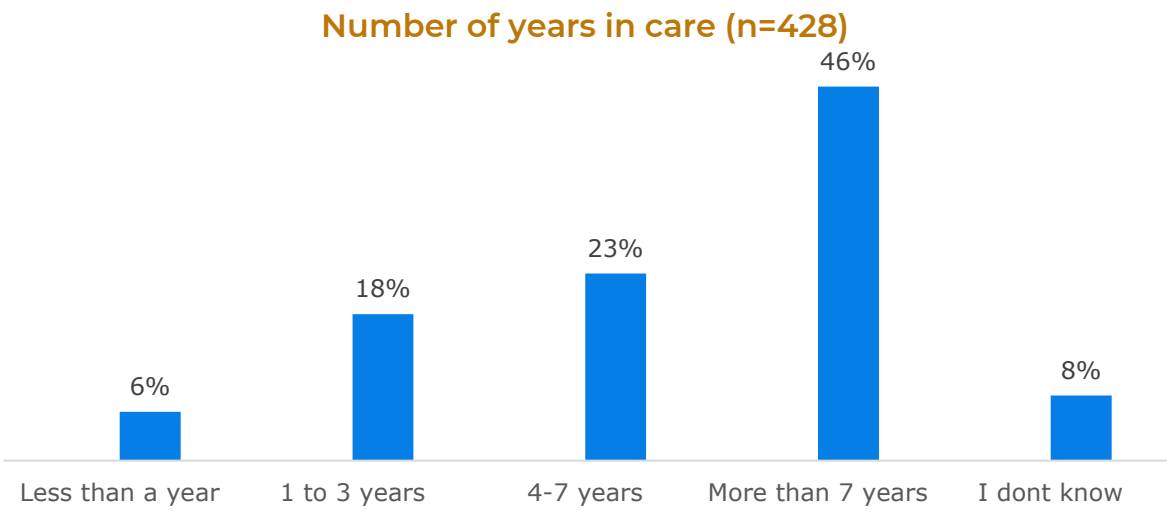


Figure 9. Number of years in care

Summary – Who Took the 'Your Life Beyond Care' Survey

- The combined response rate for the 'Your Life Beyond Care' survey was 53%, ranging from 35% to 70% across the local authority areas in Scotland.
- All ages of care leavers from 16 to 25 and over were well represented.
- The majority (87%) of the care leavers reported their ethnicity as white, and 11% were from ethnic minorities.
- Just under a third of respondents in Scotland (30%) had a long-term health problem or disability, which was substantially higher than the comparator group of care leavers in England, and almost double the percentage in the UK general population of 16–24-year-olds.
- 14% of respondents were parents and 2% were pregnant or their partner was pregnant at the time of taking the survey.
- Just under half (46%) of the care leavers who responded to the survey had been in care for more than seven years.

Daily life and transitioning to living independently

Being happy where you live and feeling safe, settled and secure in your home and the area you live in contributes to care leavers' sense of wellbeing. Experiences of education, employment and training can have a particularly strong influence on wellbeing and on the financial security of young people and adults, which impacts on how they feel about their lives. Digital inclusion by way of having access to a smartphone and the internet is important in today's society where many social interactions and everyday tasks happen online, whether it's applying for jobs, contacting friends or arranging appointments. Everyone also benefits from having opportunities to relax and enjoy themselves in their spare time by, for example, taking part in sports or activities, having the time to spend on a hobby, spending time with friends or family or just being outdoors in nature, something recognised by and enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948).

In Scotland, the average age of children and young people leaving care is between 16 and 18 years old, but the average age for their non care experienced peers leaving home to live independently is 25 years old (CELCIS, 2023). The number of care leavers who remain where they were living when they were in care under 'Continuing Care' has been growing in Scotland, reaching 38% of eligible care leavers in 2024/25 (Scottish Government, 2026a), but this arrangement only applies until care leavers turn twenty-one years of age. The majority of care leavers move to live somewhere else when they leave care, and even those in Continuing Care will leave home before many of their peers who have not been in care. This highlights the expectation that young people will leave care, live independently and take on responsibilities that they may not be ready for several years before their peers.

> *In Scotland's Route Map to keeping The Promise by 2030, 'Plan24-30', it states that: 'By 2030, Scotland's care experienced young people will feel safe, happy, loved and prepared as they move from childhood to adulthood and care experienced adults will be able to access help and support when they need it.' (The Promise Scotland, 2023).*

Many of the care leavers in Scotland who responded to the Bright Spots survey told us they were doing well, were happy where they lived, and felt, safe, happy and prepared for their transition into adulthood.

But there were also some care leavers who were struggling. Not necessarily with the idea of living independently but because of the lack of the supports they require to enable them to thrive in all aspects of their daily life as they transition into adulthood. For example, some care leavers were living in inappropriate and/or inadequate housing or were experiencing homelessness, some were struggling to get into education or employment or had an insufficient or unsteady income that meant having to choose between paying bills or eating. There were also a small number who were experiencing digital exclusion through a lack of access to a smartphone or the internet and struggling with daily life.

Living arrangements

Being happy where you live is important for everyone's wellbeing as it can provide a safe base and secure foundation from which to experience and develop other aspects of life. It is therefore important to understand not only where young people and adults are living, but also whether they are happy with their living arrangements.

The Scottish Government developed '*Staying Put Scotland guidance'* in 2013 as a response to concerns about consistently poor outcomes for children and young people who have been in care (Scottish Government, 2013a). Its key principles are that children and young people who leave care will be encouraged and empowered to remain in positive care settings until they are ready to live more independently; that children and young people will not leave care without the skills and support necessary for success; and local authorities and corporate parenting partners will be explicit in their commitment to the 'Staying Put Scotland' approach. This was reinforced in the publication of the Housing Options Protocol for Care Leavers, in which the Ministerial Foreword emphasises:

> *'The importance of providing appropriate accommodation to care leavers cannot be underestimated. Finding these young people the right accommodation option, at the right time, is critical to helping them build sustainable and successful futures in our communities.' (Scottish Government, 2013b, p.1).*

Additionally, the Scottish Government's '*Continuing Care guidance'* advises that young people and adults who are 'looked after away from home', for instance, living with foster carers, kinship carers or in residential child care – on or after their sixteenth birthday - have legal rights and entitlements to stay in the same place, ('stay put'), with their same carers up until their twenty first birthday (Scottish Government, 2024a).

Bright Spots asked care leavers who had been in care in Scotland where they lived. They could choose one answer from multiple options and local authorities could customise options to reflect what is provided and available locally (Figure 10).

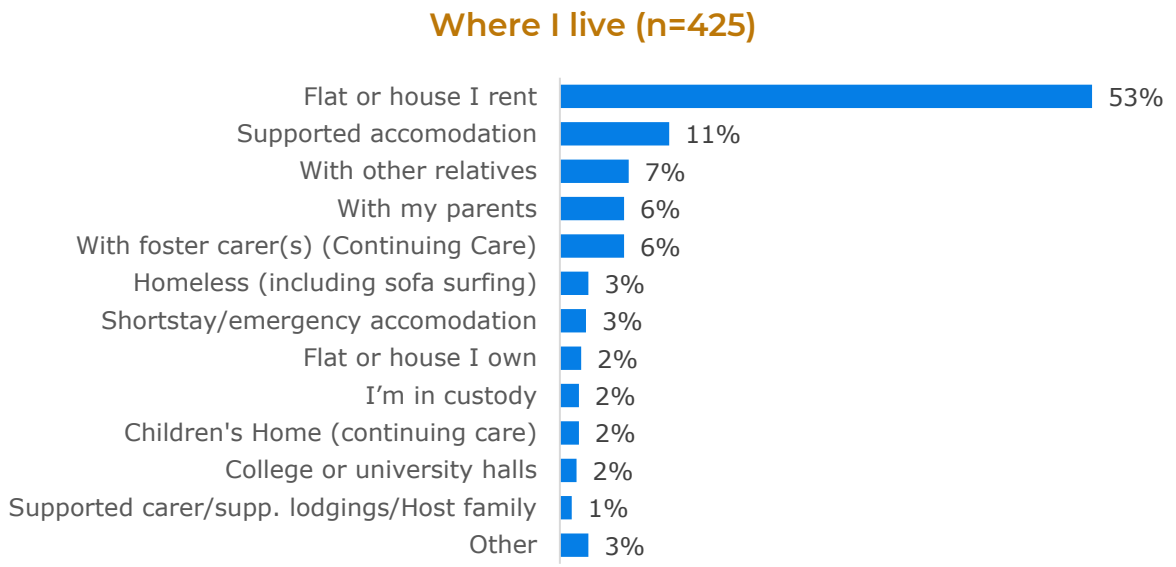


Figure 10. Where care leavers were living at the time they took the survey

Over half of the care leavers taking the Bright Spots survey in Scotland lived in a flat or house they rented (53%). In contrast to the general UK population where half of twenty-three-year-olds still lived at home (Hagell et al., 2021), only 13% of care leavers who had been in care in Scotland lived with their parents or other relatives. 11% were living in supported accommodation. In relation to 'staying put', 8% of children and young people who had been in care in Scotland were in Continuing Care, either living with foster carers or in residential child care. Twelve care leavers were homeless (3%) and eight were in custody (2%). Care leavers in Scotland who chose the 'other' category told us they either lived with friends, their partner, were in the armed forces, or in a refuge.

6% of care leavers who responded to the survey in Scotland, were either homeless or living in short stay or emergency accommodation.

All but one of the eight young people and adults who were in custody when they completed the survey were male, with the other person describing themselves as non-binary. Eleven percent of males were living in supported

accommodation compared to just 4% of females. No other gender differences reached the level of statistical significance.

Overall, some statistically significant differences were seen when looking at the age of respondents and where they were living. The proportion living in their own rented flat or house increased with age, with 76% of care leavers aged 22 or over renting compared to 32% of 16 to 18-year-olds. Sixteen to eighteen-year-olds were more likely to be living in short stay, supported or emergency accommodation, and care leavers aged under 22 were more likely to be living in Continuing Care with foster carers.

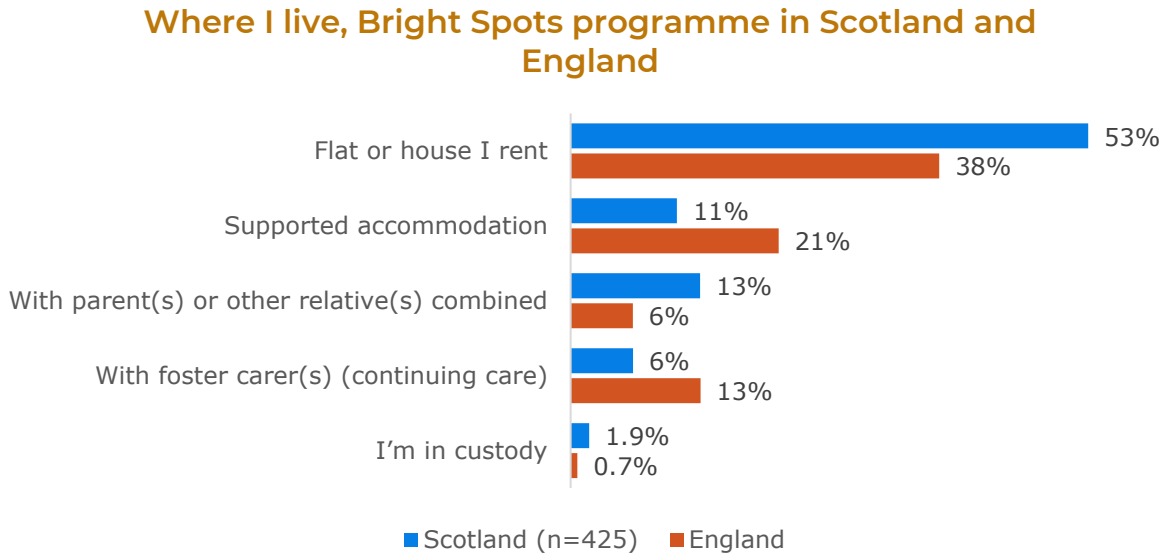


Figure 11. Where care leavers were living, Bright Spots programme in Scotland and England

Although the categories used in the surveys in England are not entirely consistent with those used in the survey for Scotland, Figure 11 compares percentages in certain living arrangements from the responses given. The percentage of care leavers living in rented accommodation was much higher in Scotland (53% compared to 38%), as was the percentage of care leavers living with their parents or other relatives (13% compared to 6%). In contrast, the percentages of care leavers in England who were living in supported accommodation or in Continuing Care with foster carers (the 'Staying Put' scheme in England) were around double those for Scotland (21% to 11% and 13% to 6%). The percentage of care leavers in custody in Scotland was over twice that for England (1.9% to 0.7%). Despite the comparatively small numbers, this difference was statistically significant, as were all the other differences noted above.

Feeling safe and settled

Young people and adults in care who are ready to move into independent living, are more likely to feel settled and safe in the accommodation they move to compared to young people who move when they are not ready. Readiness and feeling settled and safe is connected to improved wellbeing and greater participation in education, employment or training (CELCIS, 2015). Therefore, to better understand the wellbeing of young people and adults leaving care, it is important to understand their feelings about home, their neighbourhood, and what makes them feel settled, safe or unsafe.

In 2013, the Scottish Government published guidance for corporate parents entitled, '*Housing Options Protocols for Care Leavers*' (Scottish Government, 2013b), with a view to improve housing and accommodation outcomes for Scotland's children and young people who leave care. The guidance advises that young people leaving care aged 16 to 25 who are eligible for aftercare should have a pathway plan developed with a pathway co-ordinator in their local authority as they transition into adulthood. This should include planning around the accommodation that best meets their needs and wishes, with recognition that, for some young people, this may be to remain in their current living arrangements until they are ready to move into more independent living.

> *'Care Experienced people deserve to have access to safe, affordable, high-quality homes so that they can have the best chance at life.' (Who Cares? Scotland, 2024, p.1).*

The Scottish Government, by way of the new Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026, has strengthened the accommodation provisions outlined in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. The 2026 Act makes clearer the requirement for local authorities to provide accommodation to any young person, aged at least 18 years old but who has not reached their 21st birthday and to whom they have a duty to provide Continuing Care, if they determine that doing so would safeguard or promote their welfare and the young person agrees with this, and alternative options are not available, such as staying with family or foster carers. This allows young people who have left care to return to being accommodated by their local authority if this is in their best interests, though they are no longer in care.

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they felt safe in their home, settled in their home, and safe in their neighbourhood. They could choose to answer 'Always', 'Sometimes' or 'Hardly ever / never' for each of these.

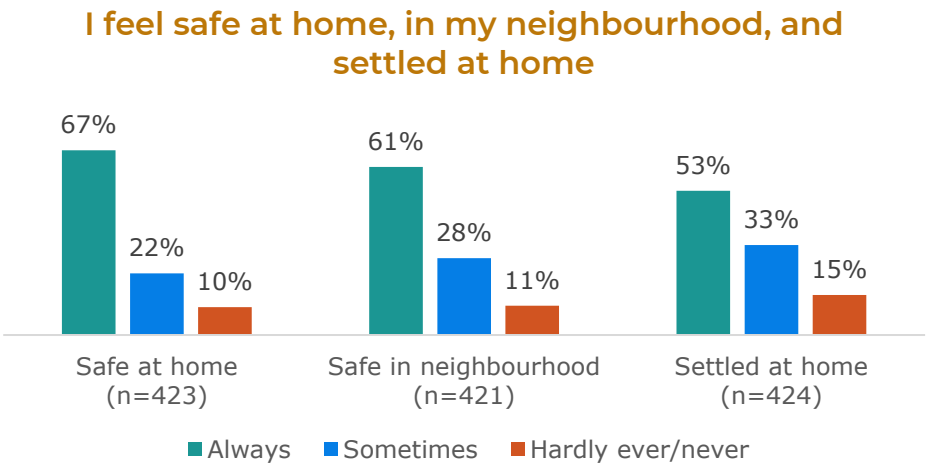


Figure 12. Feeling safe at home, in neighbourhood, and feeling settled at home

Two-thirds of the care leavers who responded always felt safe in their home (67%), 61% always felt safe in their neighbourhood, and just over half (53%) always felt settled in their home.

177 of the care leavers (41%) provided comments about where they lived, and many of these comments were very positive. Young people and adults who felt positive about their homes attributed this to living in an area where they felt safe, feeling supported by who they were living with, or their close proximity to their support networks such as carers, friends, family, and to where they worked or studied:

> *"It feels really good to have a stable and secure home. It makes me feel accomplished in a way." (Female, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"I'm in [residential housing] it's a safe environment & I have friends & I've got staff members who look after me." (Other gender, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"Safe place [living with my foster carers] with everything I need, I have everyone I want around me and never have any major concerns." (Female, 19-21yrs)*
>
> *"I feel perfectly safe and looked after in my supported accommodation, there is staff working at all times through the day. So your never alone or without support." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

The type of accommodation care leavers were living in influenced how safe and settled they felt. Those living with foster carers in Continuing Care were much more likely to always feel settled in their home (93%) than those living in supported (42%), short stay, or emergency accommodation (10%) and the respondents who were homeless (17%). Young people and adults in

custody or who were homeless were much less likely to always feel safe (25% and 42%) than those living with foster carers (93%).

One in ten respondents hardly ever or never felt safe at home, and a similar proportion hardly ever or never felt safe in their neighbourhood. A further 22% only felt safe at home sometimes, and 28% only felt safe in their neighbourhood sometimes. One in seven care leavers (15%) hardly ever or never felt settled in their home, and just over twice as many (33%) only felt settled sometimes.

Although many more care leavers felt safe and settled where they lived, a concerning number of the comments were about not feeling safe or settled. Reasons for this included the behaviour of neighbours and issues in their wider neighbourhood, such as being exposed to anti-social behaviour, too much noise late at night, drugs, violence or threats of violence, and safety issues in communal areas:

> *"I don't like where I live due to antisocial behaviour that goes on between neighbours." (Female, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"It's a nice flat but a bad location in terms of the streets and having issues with drug users letting themselves into my flat block to do drugs." (Male, 19-21yrs)*
>
> *"No, I have to stay with my grandparents as I don't like where my house is set and it makes me feel unsafe." (Gender not disclosed, 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)*
>
> *"...I like my house, but the location isn't ideal and doesn't make me feel safe." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

Young people and adults who had been in care in Scotland also raised issues about the condition of their homes, which included dampness and condensation, heating issues and energy costs:

> *"I like the area and want to stay near where I am. My flat has a mould and damp problem which has been ongoing for two years and it is very frustrating and not good for my health or wellbeing." (Female, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"Windows smashed a lot and condensation in the building that keeps coming." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

"Kitchen and bathroom need fixing. And, the windows, it is very cold as the flat is old. We need more money for heating and electric." (Male, 16-18yrs)

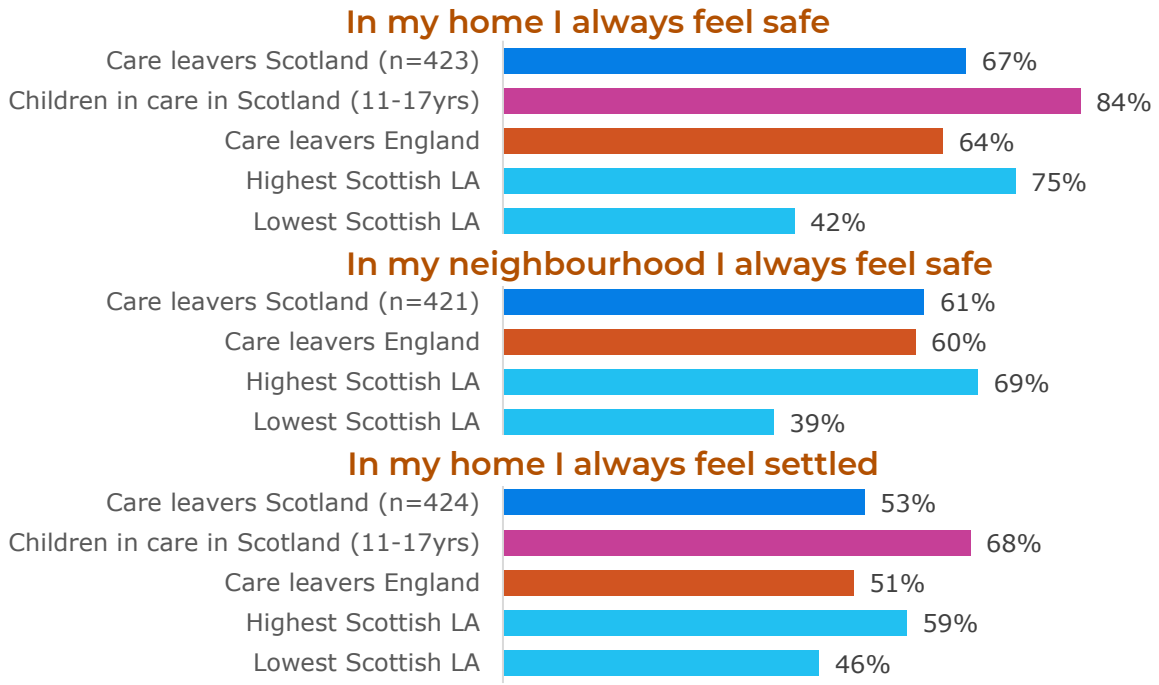


Figure 13. Always feeling safe and settled, comparisons

The percentages of respondents in Scotland who always felt safe at home and in their neighbourhood and always felt settled at home were remarkably similar to their counterparts in England. Variation across local authority areas in Scotland was particularly apparent for the two questions about feeling safe, with percentages ranging from just 42% up to 75% for always feeling safe at home, and from 39% to 69% for always feeling safe in their neighbourhood. In both instances, the authority area with the lowest percentage was an outlier, with a percentage well below the other areas. This area had a comparatively low response rate, and the experiences of young people and adults who did respond may not be representative of other young people and adults who had been in care in this local authority area.

The difference between care leavers and children and young people in care in Scotland who took the Bright Spots Your Life, Your Care surveys is pronounced. The percentage of young people and adults who had been in care and did not always feel safe at home (33%) was double that of children and young people aged 11 to 17 in care (16%). 68% of children and young people who were in care always felt settled at home, and this reduced sharply to 53% for care leavers. Leaving care often entails a move to live

somewhere else, and the much higher number of care leavers who did not always feel safe and settled raises questions about the suitability of the accommodation that they were living in.

Care leavers' feelings about where they live

In 2024, Who Cares? Scotland published a 'housing issues paper' outlining the main housing issues raised by care experienced young people aged over 16 who called their national advocacy helpline or participated in an online survey about housing (Who Cares? Scotland, 2024). The issues related to Continuing Care, homelessness, living conditions/maintenance, and moving to a new area. Additionally, Who Cares? Scotland reported that the recurring themes from their survey painted a negative picture of housing and living conditions with a lack of support, inadequate housing, lack of choice and financial issues being among the challenges faced by care experienced young people.

Bright Spots asked care leavers whether they feel where they live now is right for them. They could answer 'Mainly yes' or 'Mainly no'.

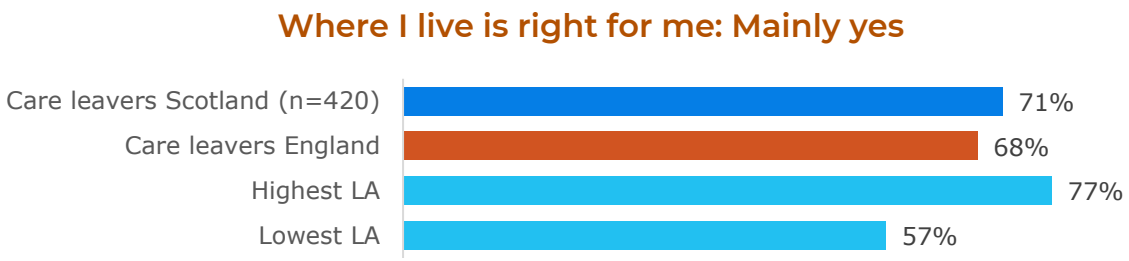


Figure 14. Care leavers feeling where they live is mainly right for them

The majority (71%) of young people and adults who had been in care in Scotland felt that where they lived was mainly right for them. This is encouraging but also a little surprising given the issues raised and concerns expressed by many young people and adults, such as dampness within their home or the anti-social behaviour of neighbours. This also still means that over a quarter (29%) did not feel that their home was mainly right for them.

Almost all the respondents who lived in Continuing Care with foster carers or in residential child care, and those living in college or university accommodation, felt that where they lived was mainly right for them (98%). Unsurprisingly, the respondents living in short stay or emergency accommodation and those who were in custody or were homeless were

significantly less likely to feel that where they were living was mainly right for them (18%, 38% and 33% respectively).

The percentage of respondents in Scotland who felt that where they lived was mainly right for them (71%) was just above that for the respondents who answered this question in the England surveys (68%). Variation across the six local authority areas in the Scotland pilot was substantial: ranging from one area where just 57% felt that where they lived was mainly right for them, to 77% in the area with the highest percentage.

The care leavers who left comments told us why where they lived was right for them, and they associated this with their feelings of wellbeing:

> *"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)*

> *"…I am happy here. It is close to my uncle and it's a nice area." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I am really lucky to have gained a house especially in such a nice area with nice neighbours as well as to have my own parking space and garage. I could not have gotten a better house for someone my age." (Male, 22+yrs)*

> *"It's a special home for me. I am happy here. It's still noisy because they are still building so that's why I don't feel settled." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

Others explained why where they lived was not right for them. In addition to their concerns about the condition of the property and the area they were living in, they noted issues with the size of the property, particularly for those with children, and not being near their friends or family, leaving them feeling isolated:

> *"Need a bigger house as have a newborn baby." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I want more space and to be closer to work." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"If it was possible, I would like somewhere bigger to stay as I'm expecting my third child." (Female, 22+yrs)*

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

Some respondents also shared that they had felt pressured to accept accommodation they didn't feel was suitable for them:

"I wouldn't have picked the place but felt I had to." (Male, 22+yrs)

While local authorities in Scotland face significant challenges in a difficult housing market when seeking to provide appropriate accommodation which meets the needs of care leavers, the variation we saw across local authority areas through the responses to the survey suggests that more could be done in some areas to ensure that children and young people leaving care do not live in unsuitable accommodation. Unsuitable accommodation contributes to poor wellbeing and potentially sets up young people to struggle to adapt to independent living as they grow into adulthood. Our analysis found that the young people and adults who felt they were involved in pathway planning, as the guidance for aftercare and Continuing Care advocates, were significantly more likely to feel safe at home, settled at home, safe in their neighbourhood, and feel that where they lived was right for them. Involving children and young people in this decision-making process is an important starting point that is showing clear benefits. The 'Pathway Planning' section of this report has more on the pathway planning process.

Education, employment and training

For the wellbeing of all of Scotland's children and young people it is ideal to have a positive destination in education, employment or training. This provides the opportunity to develop and increase skills, personal growth, and confidence, which can provide stability we all rely on for our futures. Again, this is recognised by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). It is therefore important to understand more about the education, employment and training experiences of all care experienced children, young people and adults.

Since 2021, the Scottish Government has been funding the delivery of the 'Discovering your potential' employability programme aimed at supporting care experienced young people aged 16-29yrs to help improve access to education, employment and training (Employability Scotland, n.d.).

The Scottish Government has been clear that in its work to keep The Promise of the Independent Care Review, support for employment and training remains key:

> *'In creating a Scotland that is a fair and equal society, we must continue to create greater equity and opportunity for our young people and adults with care experience. We must continue to increase access to employment, training and support, all of which will, in turn, contribute to our ambitions on productivity growth and wellbeing.' (Scottish Government, 2024c, p.51).*

Having a question on employment, education, or training status in the Bright Spots survey provides the opportunity for comparison against UK statistics for young people in employment, education or training. This not only helps to build a picture of how young people and adults in Scotland who have left care are doing but also puts this in the context of how their peers in the general population are doing.

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they were in education, employment or training. They could answer 'Yes, I am studying', 'Yes I am working', 'Yes, I am training for work', or 'No'.

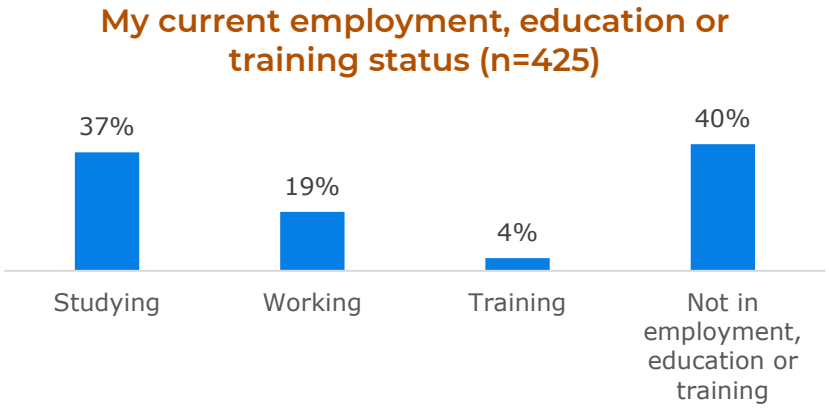


Figure 15. Employment, education and training status of the survey respondents

Almost twice as many of the respondents were studying (37%) as were working (19%), with a further 4% in training. A reason for the higher proportion of young people and adults being in education or training than working may be due to the age the care leavers who responded to the survey, as the majority (57%) were aged between 16 and 20 years old.

In total, 60% or three in five were in employment, education or training. This means two in five (40%) not in employment education or training, a figure that is over three times higher than for all young people aged 16-24 years across the UK (13% in 2024) (ONS, 2025).

We were unable to make a comparison with the Bright Spots comparator group due to a change in question wording.



Figure 16. Range in education, employment or training rates across the Scotland pilot local authority areas

There was notable variability across the six Scottish local authority areas, ranging from one area with 86% of care leavers in education, employment or training, to just under half of young people and adults responding in another area (48%, Figure 16).

Bright Spots asked care leavers who were not in education, employment or training if they could tell us why this was. They could answer 'I am caring for my child(ren)', 'Illness or disability stops me from working, training or further study', 'I am looking for work, training or further study', or 'Other'. Those answering 'Other' were prompted to tell us more if they wanted to by writing a free-text response.

Of the 157 respondents who said they were not in education, employment or training and told us why, 13% were looking for work, training or education, 14% were parents and caring for their child(ren), 23% had an illness or disability that prevented them from working, and 50% chose the 'other' category for another reason (Figure 17).

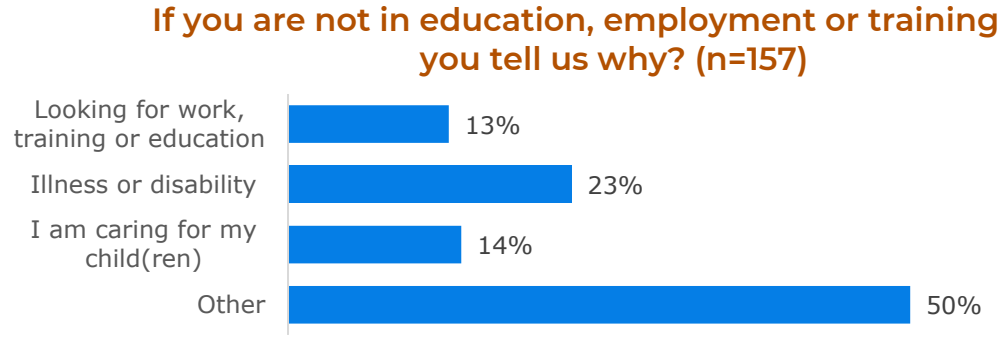


Figure 17. Reasons for not being in education, employment or training

Of the 79 respondents who chose the 'other' option, fifty-six explained their reasons: for some care leavers, the barrier to education, employment or

training was due to having a learning disability, neurodiversity or poor mental or physical health; some were either in prison or had criminal convictions which impeded their access to employment or education opportunities; and some explained that they had difficulty finding a job or apprenticeship, were currently between jobs (for example, a temporary job had ended), or they needed support to find a job.

> *"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)*

Other reasons for not being in education, employment or training included not feeling ready or not having the mindset to find employment, having difficulty maintaining work or further education, being in the process of seeking asylum (so not permitted by the UK Government to undertake paid employment), or because they would earn less than the minimum wage, were on Universal Credit or were receiving other government welfare support.

> *"Autistic Spectrum Diagnosis, on Universal Credit." (Male, 22+yrs)*

> *"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)*

Access to a smartphone and the internet

Living in a digital world means there is an increasing reliance on the use of technology across many aspects of our lives, including accessing education, employment, healthcare, social care services, activities, and supportive social networks. However, children and young people who have experienced care are among many people within the population across the UK who experience digital exclusion (Roesch-Marsh, McGhee & Gillon, 2021).

Research has previously highlighted the 'digital divide' between children and young people who have been in care and their peers in the general population, and the focus on digital inclusion to address this divide in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Scottish Government, 2023).

Having and using a mobile phone and having internet access was very important to care experienced children and young people who participated in

the development of the Bright Spots surveys. Additionally, the first Bright Spots pilot in Scotland was held early in 2022 during COVID-19 pandemic's public health restrictions when digital access was crucial for inclusion.

Bright Spots asked care leavers were asked whether they could connect to the internet from their home. They could answer 'Yes' or 'No'. (Figure 18).

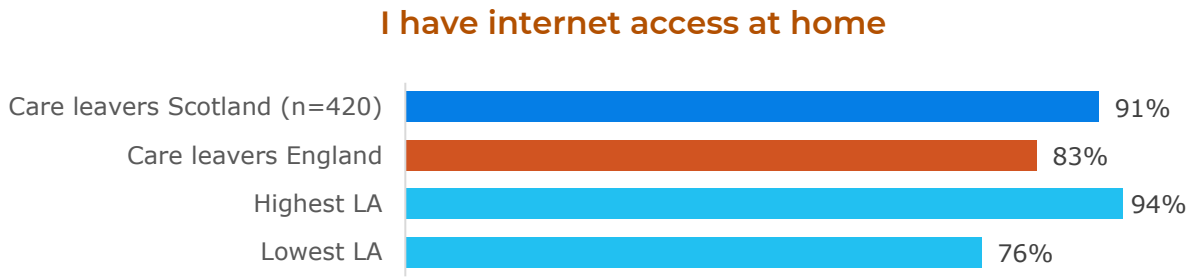


Figure 18. Access to the internet at home

Most respondents had access to the internet at home (91%). This was higher than the percentage of their counterparts in England (83%) and, although this difference was statistically significant, the different timeframes when the surveys were carried out may have been a factor. It is possible that care leavers who did not have internet access at home are under-represented because Bright Spots is an online survey, though care leavers could complete the survey on devices made available by support practitioners, and paper copies were also used with some care leavers.

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they had a smartphone. They could answer 'Yes' or 'No'.

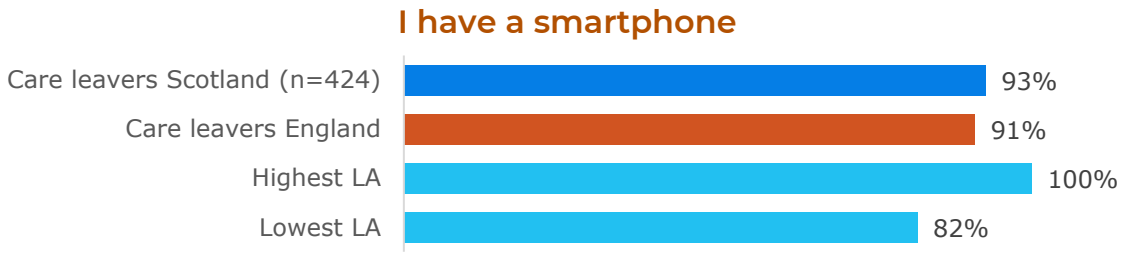


Figure 19. Respondents have access to a smart phone

Of the 424 respondents who answered this question, a higher proportion (93%) had access to a smartphone when compared to care leavers in

England who answered the surveys a few years earlier (91%). The range across local authority areas varied between 82% and all care leavers in one area.

Care leavers' spare time

Leisure activities are important for everyone's overall wellbeing as these provide the opportunity to unwind and have fun, which can lead to improved physical and mental health, increased confidence as new skills are learned, and the opportunity to meet new people and build relationships (Sirgy, 2021). This is recognised as a right under both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child (1989) under Article 31 and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948), under Article 24.

Bright Spots asked care leavers what they liked doing in their spare time. They could choose multiple options from a list of 12 suggested activities.

The 428 respondents to this question said they enjoyed the same top five activities as their counterparts in England: 1) listening to or playing music, 2) watching TV or films, 3) hanging out with people they like, 4) using social media, and 5) shopping.

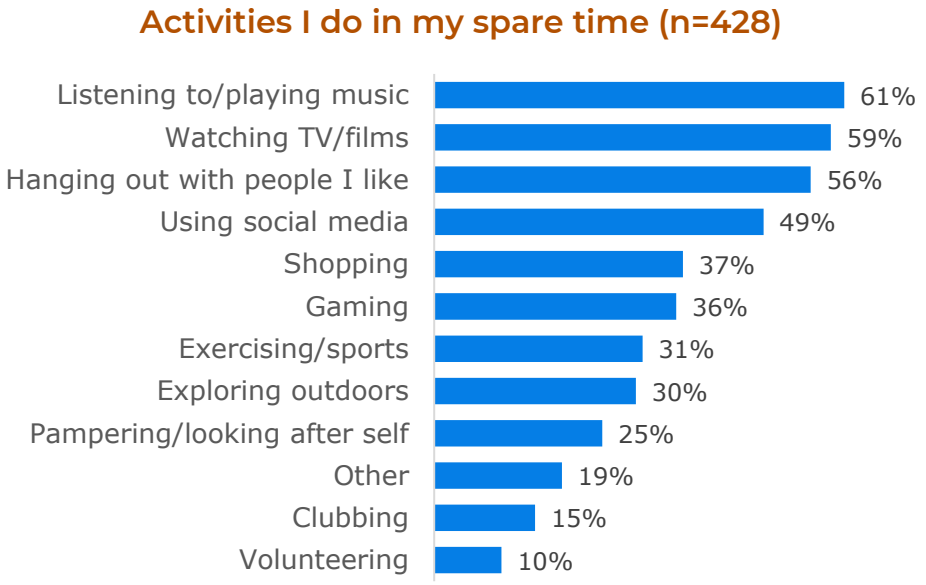


Figure 20. Activities the care leavers like doing in their spare time

"I go to the gym 4 times a week & I play a lot of snooker." (Other gender, 22+yrs)

"Spending time with my son." (Female, 22+yrs)

> *"Sinking pints at the [pub] with friends". (Male, 22+yrs)*

In addition to the available options, 19% chose 'Other' and most commonly mentioned reading, writing or learning new things, spending time with their pets or being creative (art, drawing, painting, photography), in their spare time.

> *"Reading, art, spending time with my pets, learning." (Female, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"…I enjoy looking after my many pets." (Female, 16-18yrs)*
>
> *"[I] like to draw or anything arty." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

Additional activities that care leavers enjoyed included going to the theatre, socialising or eating out, taking drugs or alcohol, spending time with their family or child(ren), undertaking work experience, driving or working on their vehicle, spending time alone, walking, sleeping, cleaning, going to church, fashion (collecting designer trainers and clothes) or going to cadets.

> *"Musical theatre." (Male, 16-18yrs)*
>
> *"Writing, colouring in, cleaning." (Male, 16-18yrs)*
>
> *"Going driving with my friends." (Female, 19-21yrs)*
>
> *"I also enjoy manual labour jobs, mechanics, building fences and other outdoor jobs, and also general maintenance and painting homes. I'm also an artist and enjoy taking pictures and drawing." (Female, 22+yrs)*

While these comments related to activities that the care leavers enjoyed or loved doing that appeared to positively impact their wellbeing, some shared that were struggling in their spare time, for example, due to loneliness or their 'living situations'. These factors not only influenced how they spent their spare time but also appeared to have a negative impact on their overall wellbeing:

> *"I grew up outside [Scottish city] and since coming back I've left to rot basically... No friends... Don't talk to family... Just me." (Male, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"I've got way too much spare time and I have to find stuff to do. I was going into woods to escape some living situations." (Male, 22+yrs)*

To find out about other activities care leavers considered enjoyable and what might prevent them from taking part in activities they would enjoy, the

survey included an open-ended question to allow respondents to provide further information.

Bright Spots also asked care leavers whether there was any other 'fun stuff' they wished they could do more of and whether there is anything that stops them from having fun.

In response, the five most mentioned activities that care leavers said they wished they could do more of were:

1. Sports (gym, horse-riding, basketball, table tennis, cricket, sky-diving, bungee-jumping, snowboarding, cycling, swimming, going to football games, biking, boxing, rock climbing, kayaking)
2. Travelling (for example, going to new cities, holidays, space travel, road trips, exploring, going walks)
3. Socialising and having fun with friends
4. Day activities/days out (for example, to the cinema or an escape room) or dating
5. Spending more time outdoors in nature or camping.

"I would like to swim more, shop more, visit other places, not enough money to shop or explore. I would also like to study more, not enough opportunities for this." (Male, 16-18yrs).

"Spend time with friends." (Female, 19-21yrs)

Other activities mentioned included cultural activities (history, theatre), reading or learning new things, social media or anime, spending time with their family, relaxing and having more 'me' time, keeping busy, cooking, sleeping, taking drugs, shopping, having more pets.

The difference between the activities the respondents do and the activities they'd most like to do begs questions about opportunity, access and cost. For example, sports came seventh in the list of the most mentioned activities the respondents enjoy but first in what they would like to do.

"I like cycling just don't have a bike." (Male, 19-21yrs)

The respondents told us what the barriers were to them having fun:

1. not having enough money
2. health or disability
3. being too busy working or studying
4. a lack of opportunities to undertake activities

5. not having transport, access to a vehicle, or a driving license or passport
6. being a parent or issues with childcare.

A lack of money, sometimes combined with other factors, came across as the main barrier preventing participation in activities that the care leavers would have liked to do:

> *"I want to experience more history and culture, I want to educate myself more. I want to be able to go on a shopping trip or buy myself some nice clothes, I want to do more outdoor sports. Lack of money is what stops all this."(Female, 22+yrs)*

> *"I would like to travel I don't have a passport or money." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"Being Disabled and low-income [stops me from having fun]." (Other gender, 19-21yrs)*

> *"Where I live there's limited stuff I can't do as there's no access to things close by me. As I don't drive. I am used to [Scottish city] where it has everything but here where I live I have nothing." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I would like to play football. I would like to do more with my friend, but he lives in [city in England]." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

Other barriers to having fun mentioned were lack of support, time, and the location of activities as well as not have the necessary equipment.

> *"Play cricket - no cricket team where I live." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I don't have enough support to help my caring responsibilities and I need support learning how to drive." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

> *"Cycling and football and Yes, don't have a bike and football at flat and no one to play with." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

Care leavers' finances

Care experienced young people and adults can encounter significant financial challenges, largely due to not having the same informal support networks as their non care experienced peers and the challenges associated with transitioning into independent living (Scottish Government, 2026b). Many care leavers can face barriers in securing stable housing, accessing education, and covering their everyday living costs which often includes most of the costs of running a home. All of this can deepen experiences and

impact of poverty. Concern has also been raised that the current cost-of-living crisis being experienced across the UK could tip many more care experienced young people and adults into poverty (Catch 22, 2022).

Over the last decade, the Scottish Government has introduced a number of initiatives to help provide financial support to care experienced young people as they transition into adulthood. The Care-Experienced Bursary is available for those entering full-time further and higher education, which consists of a grant of £9,000 per year instead of the student loan; and a Council Tax exemption is in place for all care leavers under the age of 25. More recently, The Care Leaver Payment (Scotland) Regulations were introduced in 2026 which entitles care experienced young people, who are 'looked after' on or after their 16th birthday on or after 1 April 2026, to a one-off £2,000 payment as they leave care or Continuing Care (Scottish Government, 2026c).

The Welsh Government recently piloted a new financial support initiative for care leavers. A 'basic income' pilot supported 644 care leavers in Wales who turned 18 between July 2022 and June 2023 (Bezeczky et al., 2026) with £1,600 per month (before tax) for two years to help their transition to independent living to improve their health and wellbeing, support engagement in employment and training. The evaluation of the pilot began in November 2022 and is due to end in 2027. Some care leavers described the basic income as a "safety net" that provided the financial security to plan and feel more in control of their lives. The transition after the ending of the pilot in May 2025 was challenging for some. Nonetheless, the basic income approach has been reported to have had a "positive effects on their mental health and wellbeing during the pilot. Reduced financial stress allowed them to live in the present without worrying about meeting their basic needs" (Bezeczky et al., 2026, p.4).

It is important to understand how care experienced young people and adults in Scotland are managing their finances as poverty can impact mental health and wellbeing, and how someone manages their money can, in turn, be influenced by their mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2025). Limited finances constrain choices, including participation in social activities, and the pressure of debt can affect wellbeing. Additionally, feeling low or depressed can reduce the motivation to manage finances (opening and paying bills or monitoring your bank account for example), spending can provide a temporary high that can lead to overspending, and poor mental health can influence the ability to study or work and therefore potential income.

Financial worry for care leavers was a theme in both the research review and the focus groups with young people that were carried out when the Brights Spots Programme's Your Life Beyond Care survey was being developed.

In the Scotland pilot, Bright Spots asked care leavers how they were coping financially. They could choose to answer 'Living comfortably', 'Doing alright', 'Just about getting by', 'Finding it quite difficult', or 'Finding it very difficult'.

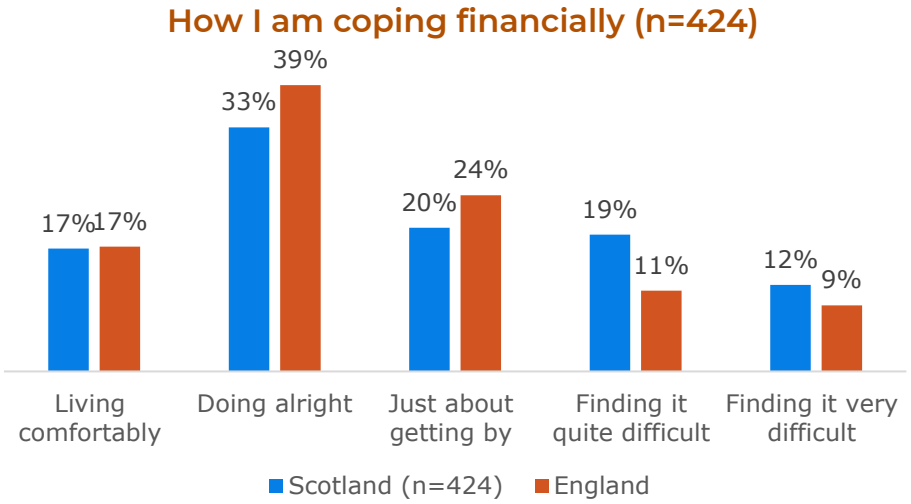


Figure 21. How care leavers are coping financially

Of the 424 the care leavers in Scotland who answered this question, most (70%) were 'just about getting by', 'doing alright' or 'living comfortably (Figure 21).

A higher proportion of the respondents (30%) were finding it 'quite' or 'very' difficult to get by financially compared to those in who took the survey in England (20%), a statistically significant difference, though it is important to acknowledge the different timeframes when surveys were completed in England (2017-19) and Scotland (2022-24), and the impact of the 'cost-of-living crisis' in recent years. Both groups were getting on less well than the general UK population aged 16–24 (8%) as a whole, although this ONS population data is comparatively dated, referring to 2021 (ONS, 2023b; table 6.6). The majority of 16–24-year-olds in the general UK population were also more likely to still be living in their parental home, which could explain why there was a smaller proportion who found it difficult to get by financially.

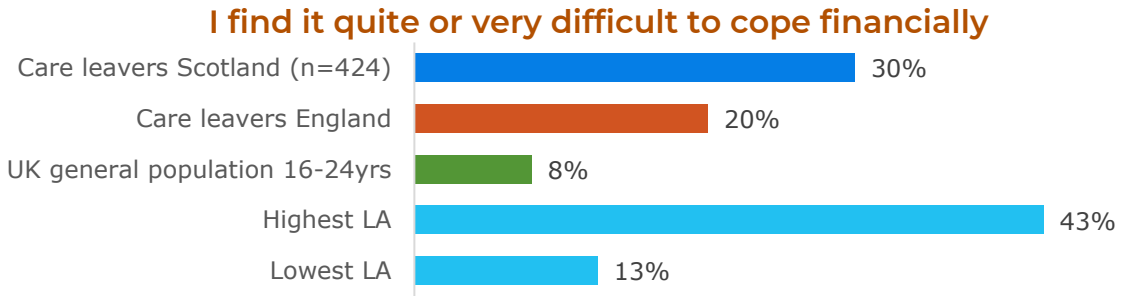


Figure 22. Finding it quite or very difficult to cope financially

There was a substantial difference between local authority areas, with the proportion of care leavers who felt they were finding it 'quite' or 'very difficult' to cope financially, ranging between 13% and 43%. It should be noted that the local authority area with just 13% of care leavers finding it difficult to cope financially had a comparatively high proportion of care leavers in employment, education or training.

Bright Spots asked an open-ended question which invited care leavers to tell us their thoughts about managing their money.

The majority of the care leavers (154) in Scotland responding to the Bright Spots survey told us about the challenges they faced when managing their money. Some did not feel they had enough money to get by; they experienced difficulty with paying their bills and/or sometimes had to choose between paying bills and buying food. A few said that they were either in debt, had difficulty paying their rent, or they were in rent arrears. They also shared their concerns about the rising cost of living:

> *"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)*
>
> *"Debts will be the death of me, seem to just be going in a cycle." (Female, 19-21yrs)*
>
> *"I only get £220 per month because I am paying off my rent arrears. I really struggle." (Female, 19-21yrs)*
>
> *"Yes I'm quite good at managing my money but the cost of living is difficult." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

Some care leavers described having no spare money for other essentials, emergency repairs, or treats or entertainment and leisure, after their bills were paid.

> *"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)*

> *"Food is expensive and living on £87 a week after paying bills makes it so there is nothing left for me when everything is paid." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I mostly manage my money okay but what I get isn't enough to live on especially with rising costs with everything." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

A few said that their health and wellbeing limited the extent to which they could seek support with budgeting or employment to improve their finances:

> *"Finding it really hard, I'm behind on my rent, sitting weeks without food at times but I can't reach out and ask for help due to anxiety." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

Some commented that they felt their income was quite good, while others said they had no income or were looking for a job, and a few mentioned that they had to take on more than one job in order to get by. A small number of respondents said that they received financial support from the UK Government and/or the Scottish Government. The types of financial support mentioned included disability payments or Universal Credit, and/or the Care-Experience Bursary:

> *"I try to budget well but [it] doesn't always go to plan, looking for employment to achieve a steady income." (Male 16-18yrs)*

> *"I have 2 jobs and at college. I get paid and get care experience bursary." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

> *"Grateful for bursary at college." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

Some care leavers explained that they had difficulty managing or budgeting their money and a few felt they were impulsive with their spending and shopping. However, there were also a few respondents who said they were able to budget and manage their money, with some also being able to keep some money aside for savings:

> *"I'm 100% not the best at managing my money. I like to spend the money I have when I have it. I am slowly getting better at it but still need lots more practice. My income is quite good and I'm definitely quite well off." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I feel the staff attempt to support me with managing my money better but I impulsively buy things anyway." [Female, 18-20yrs]*

> *"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)*

There were mixed experiences of receiving support with personal budgeting. Some care leavers said that they had previously received or were currently receiving support with their budgeting, while others mentioned that they would like to receive support with this:

> *"I can't manage money on my own and I'm supported by my foster carer." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I could [do] with some help budgeting my money. My friend has been helping me plan meals rather than buying takeaways." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

Overall, most of the care leavers in Scotland were coping with living independently, but some were struggling with different aspects of their daily life. Although most care leavers (seven in 10) noted that they were at least getting by with managing their money, almost one in three were finding it very difficult to cope financially. Care leavers described financial challenges such as not being able to afford to live in their homes, being in debt and unable to pay their rent on time or lacking sufficient money for food. Some care leavers also expressed a need for support with budgeting. This highlights that care leavers often have to face some of these financial challenges at an earlier age and stage in life than their non care experienced peers in the general population. Early budgeting support and financial management education should be provided to ensure that when children and young people do choose to make the move into their own accommodation, they are prepared and ready and that ongoing budgeting support is made available as they make their transition.

Summary - Daily Life and Living Independently

Living arrangements

- Just over half of care leavers who responded were living in their own rented flat or house. 6% were homeless or living in short stay or emergency accommodation
- The proportion of Scottish care leavers living with foster carers in Continuing Care, who completed the survey, was lower than the proportion of English care leavers Staying Put with foster carers.
- Most respondents felt safe and settled at home and safe in their neighbourhood and that where they were living was right for them. The young people and adults who felt positive about their homes and neighbourhood attributed this to living in an area where they felt safe, feeling supported by the people they were living with, and/or the close proximity they had to their support networks and to where they worked or studied.
- However, not all care leavers felt safe or settled in their homes or neighbourhood. Asked three separate questions, one in three did not always feel safe in their homes, almost half did not always feel settled at home, over a third did not always feel safe in their neighbourhood. A quarter felt that where they were living was not right for them. Reasons for feeling unsafe and/or unsettled included the behaviour of neighbours and issues in their wider neighbourhood, such as being exposed to anti-social behaviour, too much noise late at night, the presence of drugs, violence or threats of violence, and safety issues in communal areas.

Education, employment, training

- The majority of respondents were in education, employment or training. Twice as many of the young people and adults were studying as were working.
- There was notable variability across the six Scottish local authority areas, ranging from one area where almost 86% of the young people and adults were in education, employment or training, to just under half of young people and adults who responded to the survey in another area.

- Two in five care leavers in Scotland were not in education, employment or training, which was a rate over three times higher than their peers in the general population. Some of the reasons that the respondents gave for not being in education, employment or training were having a long-term illness or disability, caring for their children or relatives, being in prison or their criminal record impeding access, needing support to find and apply for jobs, or not feeling ready for employment.

Access to smartphone and internet

- Almost all care leavers responding could connect to the internet from their homes and had a smartphone. This meant that there were a few young people who were experiencing digital exclusion, as they could not connect to the internet from where they were living and/or did not have a smartphone.

Personal Finances

- Although the majority of care leavers responding to the survey in Scotland said that they felt they were coping financially, most were either 'just about getting by' (one in five) or were 'doing alright' (one in three). A small number of respondents felt they were 'living comfortably'.
- Almost a third of care leavers were finding it difficult to get by financially. This was a much higher ratio than care leavers in England (1 in 5), though the latter group took part in Bright Spots in 2017-19, before the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent 'cost-of-living crisis'.

Spare time

- In relation to hobbies and having fun, the top five activities that care leavers enjoyed doing were listening to or playing music, watching TV or films, hanging out with people they like, using social media and shopping.
- However, not all care leavers could participate in activities that they would like to. They cited different barriers to being able to enjoy leisure activities including a lack of money, ill-health or disability, a lack of opportunities, a lack of transport, or being too busy working or studying.

Relationships



Relationships

The importance of supportive relationships for care leavers is well established, as is the link between friendship and wellbeing (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021). The significance of relationships was highlighted in The Promise, the report of the Independent Care Review (2020) in Scotland. The Promise identifies 'people' as one of the five foundations on which change must be built, emphasising the importance of relationships and the need to improve how care experienced people in Scotland can be supported to build and maintain supportive relationships:

> *"Friendships and relationships with people in the workforce and wider community are important. These relationships may be where children find the love and care they need. Children in care must be actively supported to develop connections and relationships." (Independent Care Review, 2020, p23).*

The Promise reported that many children and young people who shared their stories with the review had experienced too many moves to allow them to be able to make friends and build long-lasting relationships. For care leavers then, there may be life experiences which effect their opportunities to develop and maintain supportive relationships. Relationships are an important part of everyone's wellbeing and understanding the barriers and circumstances that restrict the possibility of having positive, supportive, sustained relationships is integral to understanding the wellbeing of children and adults with experience of care.

Whilst care leavers will have had relationships with different people during their young lives, the Your Life Beyond Care survey specifically asked about friends, partners and pets, and explored the connections between these relationships and emotional support and wellbeing.

Friendships, partners and pets

Friendships

The relationship between friendships and wellbeing is widely recognised, but the care system can be a difficult environment in which children and young people make and maintain friendships (Gilder et al, 2025). Stability and continuity of friendships can be particularly challenging for young people who leave care, which often involves a physical move to live somewhere else.

Young people involved in development of the Your Life Beyond Care survey described how important having good friends was to them, so the same question that was asked in the Your Life, Your Care surveys of children in care was included in the Your Life Beyond Care survey.

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they had a really good friend. They could choose to answer 'Yes' or 'No'.

The majority of the care leavers leaving taking the survey (84%) told us that they did have a really good friend, but one in six (16%) said they didn't have a really good friend (Figure 23). This was double the percentage for children and young people aged 11-17 years old in care responding to the Your Life, Your Care Bright Spots surveys in Scotland (8%), where one in 12 did not have a really good friend.

Across local authority areas, the percentage of respondents who said they didn't have a really a good friend ranged from 9% to 21%.

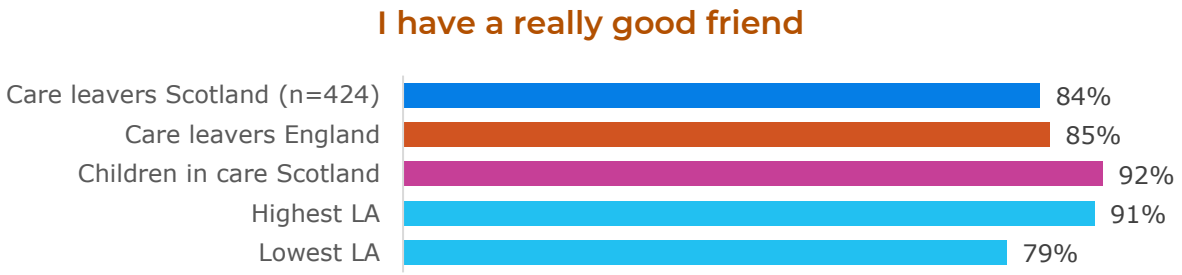


Figure 23. Having a really good friend

Friends were the most frequently selected source of emotional support by care leavers in Scotland, and the importance of friendships for many care leavers came across in their comments to the survey. Care leavers described their friendships positively, saying that they enjoyed spending time with their friends:

> *"I feel positive, My life is still as it was, I still see my friends. All's good." (Female, 16-18yrs)*
>
> *"I have two best friends." (Male, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"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)*

One young person who was in prison also talked about the benefit of friendship:

> *"I'm in [prison] it's a safe environment & I have friends & I've got staff members who look after me." (Non binary, 22+yrs)*

For the minority of care leavers who did not have a really good friend, this was clearly painful for some of them, and could also be part of a more general dissatisfaction with life:

> *"I've fallen into debt, self harmed, failed multiple years of college courses, have no friends, no social life and my flats in disrepair." (Male, 22+yrs)*

Some respondents addressed the particular challenges they faced in making and maintaining friendships while in care and since they left care:

> *"Making friends and relationships was difficult when being in foster care. 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 while I was in care and since being out of it over the years." (Female, 22+yrs)*

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

> *"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)*

> *"I wish I had more friends and I wish I wasn't so restricted. I moved here only 6 months ago." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

Some felt that it was their self-confidence, self-esteem and feelings of anxiety about talking to new people that made it challenging to make and keep friendships:

> *"I would like to get back into basketball and socialising with friends. Nothing really stopping me, but am not that great at starting conversations. Got out of routine with covid but will try to get back to it. Text conversations are difficult." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

> *"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)*

Care leavers who did not have a really good friend were more likely to feel lonely, and care leavers who had a long-term illness or disability, and those

who were not studying, employed or in training, were less likely to have a really good friend.

Partners

For everyone, forming intimate relationships and developing an ongoing relationship with a partner can be important elements of the transition from adolescence into adulthood, and partners can be a key relationship support, though not all relationships with partners are positive. As with any partner relationship, research has highlighted both the benefits and challenges that many young people encounter whilst navigating partner relationships (Gómez-López et al., 2019). For some care leavers, the precarity they experience when leaving care can lead them to seek out stability, as well as relational and emotional support through a partner. These relationships have been described as fulfilling a desire to begin building a family of their own, rooted in unconditional love, which care leavers may not have experienced through their own biological or care family relationships (Roberts et al., 2018). For some care leavers this can be a positive experience, particularly where a partner has positive relationships within their own biological or care family that then become a source of care and support to them. However, the experiences of care leavers that led to them needing care and protection and during their time in care may mean that some care leavers find it more challenging to form healthy attachments, including intimate partner relationships (Taylor-Gee, 2022).

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they had a partner (are you in a relationship)? They could choose to answer 'Yes' or 'No'.



Figure 24. Having a partner, by gender

Whilst one in three (37%) respondents had a partner and were in a relationship, the majority did not have a partner (63%). Young women (45%) were more likely to be in a relationship than young men (31%), and

43% of the small number of care leavers who described themselves as neither male or female had a partner. Respondents were not asked about the gender of their partner.

One young person described their reliance on their partner:

> *"Don't have friends to have fun with just my partner." (Genderfluid, 19-21yrs)*

Some young people looked forward to getting a home with their partner:

> *"I live with my partner at her house. It would be good if we could afford our own house." (Male, 22+yrs)*

> *"I want to get a home with my boyfriend." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

Another care leaver described how, despite the challenges they faced, they had managed to build a life they were proud of with their partner:

> *"The life I've built for myself I've done it on my own. Me and my partner." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

Several young people talked about the financial aspects of being in a relationship, and the difficulties this could bring:

> *"I've got no money like £112 a week isn't a lot yk [you know] but would love to just do more like dates and that wi [with] ma partner." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

> *"Paying for me and my partner right now because she is in the middle of looking for a job." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I'm doing better with my money now that my husband works." (Female, 22+yrs)*

One young person commented on the impact that separating from her partner had caused, and another felt that reconnecting with a former partner would make their life better:

> *"What happened was, me and my partner split up and so the benefits changed and stuff like that." (Female, 22+yrs)*

> *"I'm feeling quite down every day as I feel that things don't always go my [way]. Getting a hold of money situation will help. And getting back with my ex-girlfriend would help too." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

One young person commented that life would be more fun if they could find a partner.

Pets

A research study looking at the significance of pets for children and young people with care experience found that transitions meant that some children and young people lost connection with their pets and that this represented the loss of a relationship for children and young people that was important to them (Muldoon & Williams, 2022). Further to this, the researchers emphasised the lack of focus given to the importance of children and young people's relationships with pets in the planning for their transitions into care, between care placements, and when they transition into adulthood.

Pets were very important to the children in care who helped develop the original Your Life, Your Care survey, and young people involved in focus groups who informed the development of the Your Life Beyond Care survey also stressed how their pets made their lives better and gave them opportunities to take responsibility.

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they had a pet (when they completed the survey). They could choose to answer 'Yes' or 'No'.

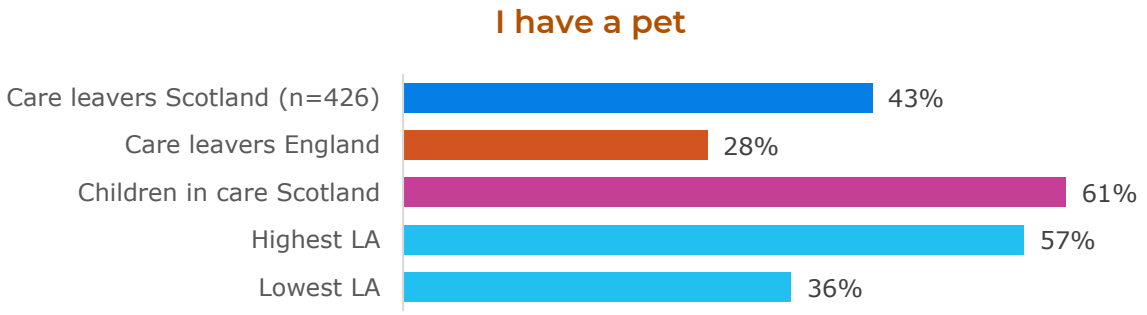


Figure 25. Having a pet

Care leavers in Scotland taking the survey were less likely to have a pet (43%) than children and young people (11-17yrs) who were in care (61%, Figure 25). Care leavers in Scotland were significantly more likely to have a pet than care leavers in England (28%). It is also the case that Bright Spots surveys in England found that care leavers were less likely to have a pet than children in care.

Looking across the six pilot local authority areas in Scotland, there was similarity in the proportion of care leavers with pets across five of the six local authorities, and one local authority in which well over half of their care leavers had a pet (57%).

Pets offer an important relationship and some young people reported that when they came into care, having to leave their pets represented another relationship that was disrupted. Equally for care leavers, moving to more independent living might also mean moving away from pets who they have a relationship with, either because the pet they lived with did not belong to them, or their new home did not allow pets. Some care leavers told us about how important their relationships with their pets were to them.

> *"I wish I could have more dogs. I'm only allowed 3 dogs by the Council." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

> *"It kills me inside. I just want a home of my own where I can have all my pets with me and don't have to stress about the cost of emergency homeless accommodation, and I don't want to stop working so it will be cheaper." (Female, 22+)*

Another recognised the commitment and constraints that having a pet entails:

> *"Money, time, and dogs stop me from having fun. Cannot leave the dogs for long and cannot afford any activities/buying things." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

The responses from the Scottish Bright Spots pilot indicate that when young people leave care, they are less likely to have a pet than young people who are in care. There could be several explanations as to why young people leaving care would not have a pet, including the cost of caring for a pet, the time and responsibility that caring for a pet requires and/or the housing circumstances of young people leaving care.

Relationships with family members

Whilst care leavers were not asked directly about their family relationships, some chose to comment on these in response to the open text questions. Family held a range of meanings for care leavers, with some choosing to tell us about their relationships with their parents, their siblings, or their wider family, and others about their foster carers.

Several care leavers told us that they would have liked to have had more opportunity to maintain their relationship with their family whilst they were in care. For some, they recognised that this was not possible but regardless, it was something that they still longed for:

> *"Being able to see my family more would have been better bc [because] I didn't know them when I was older." (Didn't say, 16-18yrs)*

> *"Don't have family that can be there for me. they've their own issues. doesn't mean I don't wish it better." (Male, 22+yrs)*

Some care leavers commented on their relationships with their birth families, and the impact that this had on their ability to develop other relationships.

> *"I don't have a good connection with really anyone from my family although I do visit and get along with them I don't usually confide in them." (Female, 22+yrs)*

> *"My relationship with my biological family is very strained and I feel like because of my problems with them I can't form connections with others very well." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

> *"To be honest I don't have much contact still with family and massively struggle to commit to people. My social worker is very supportive and taught me how to love and support myself too." (Female, 22+yrs)*

One care leaver told us about how they had been supported to maintain their relationship with their birth family by their carers and this had strengthened their network of family:

> *"The two people who changed my life was two carers (mum and dad) […]. I was also fortunate enough to have members from my biological family who loved and cared for me. I am super grateful to the support network that I have had over the past 7 years or so." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

One care leaver explained just how much he felt part of the family with his foster carers:

> *"This was always going to a difficult questionnaire for me because I'm not "leaving care"… my now mum and dad are just that - my mum and dad. They are not my 'foster parents' and to be quite frank, I have never viewed them as that… I know they feel the same towards me! So I am lucky in that sense." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

Relationships providing emotional support

Whilst care leavers report having relationships with a range of people in their lives, this does not necessarily mean that these relationships are

experienced as a source of support. Therefore, understanding who young people seek out support from, and the extent to which young people experience their relationships as supportive, is important for understanding how care leavers' relationships may have an impact on their overall wellbeing.

In addition to being asked about who they had relationships with, care leavers were also asked about the types of support they received from their relationships, including if they felt they had a person who they trusted, who helped them out, and who stuck by them no matter what, who listened to them, who told them when they had done well, and a person who believed they would be a success. Care leavers' responses to these questions help us to understand the support received, or not received, through their relationships.

Bright Spots asked care leavers who they received emotional support from. There were twelve categories of people to choose from as well as an 'other' option, where participants could tell us who they got emotional support from. Care leavers were encouraged to select as many of the options available that were relevant to them.

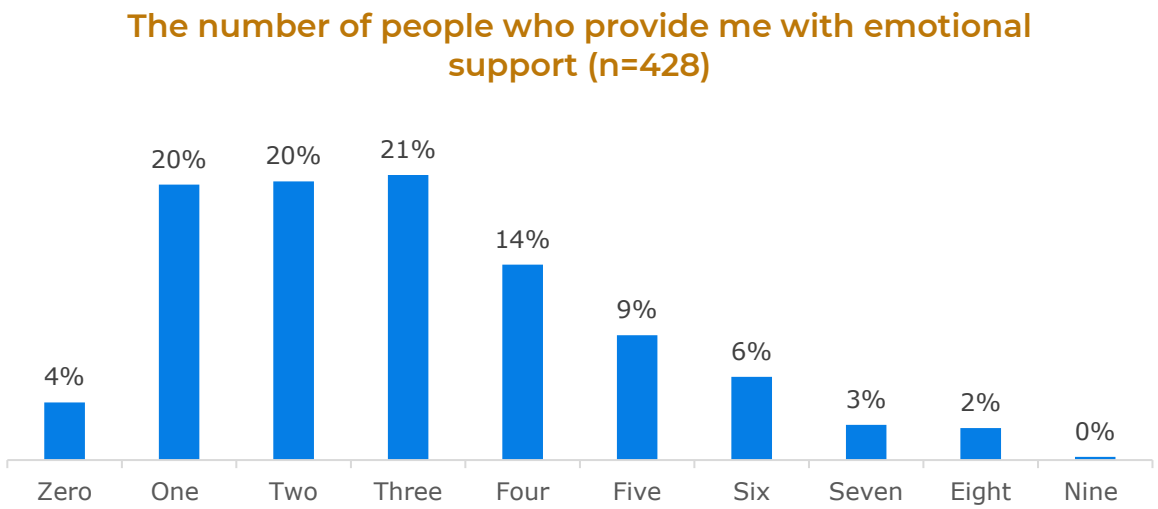


Figure 26. Number of people providing emotional support in care leavers' lives

Overall, most respondents identified at least one person who gave them emotional support (96%, Figure 26), and more than half identified at least three sources of emotional support (55%). Whilst most care leavers had at least one person who gave them emotional support, eighteen (4%) told us that they had nobody who gave them emotional support.

Many care leavers valued and were grateful for the support they received, and some care leavers described their support networks:

> *"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'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)*

For some care leavers, the questions about people in their lives and sources of emotional support were particularly poignant, and something that they had not reflected on before:

> *"It's a bit awkward thinking about this." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I haven't thought about this before, and it's actual quite sad." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

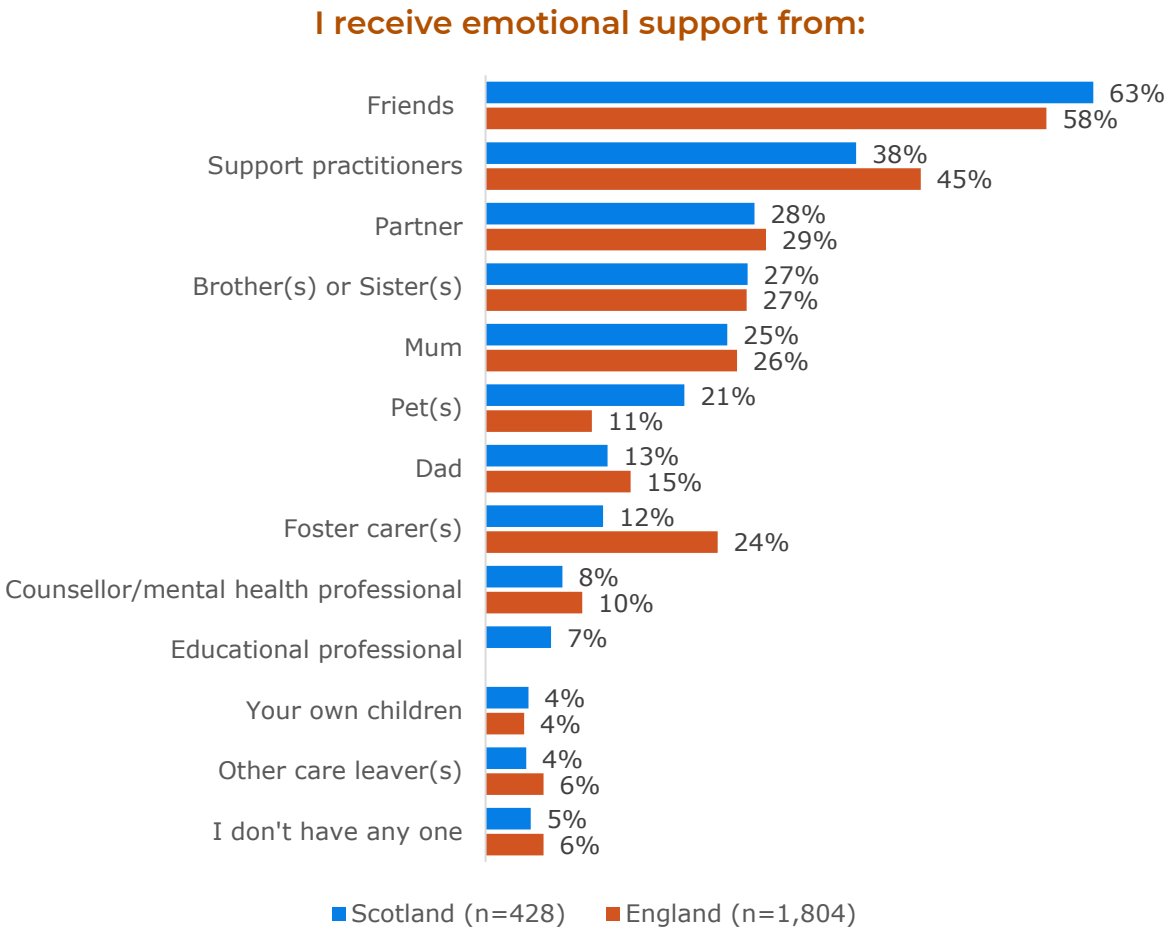


Figure 27. Providers of emotional support

Looking at who care leavers were receiving support from, Figure 27 compares responses from care leavers in Scotland with care leavers who took the survey in England. Friends, support practitioners, partners, siblings and mothers were most frequently identified by both groups. More care leavers in England received support from practitioners and from foster carers, and more care leavers in Scotland identified pets as a source of support.

Friends

The most frequently selected source of support by care leavers in Scotland were their friends (63%), which was also the most prevalent source of support for care leavers in England too. In Scotland, young women were more likely to have received emotional support from a friend than young men (68% vs 59%).

Many care leavers told us about the importance of their relationships with their friends:

> *"I have a supportive network of friends." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I stay with friends a lot." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

Support practitioners

Care leavers said they received support from a range of practitioners, such as social workers, Youth Team workers and Aftercare workers. Support practitioners were the second highest recorded source of emotional support for care leavers in Scotland who took the survey, and for their counterparts in England, although a higher percentage in England felt that they received support from practitioners (45% vs 38%). Care leavers in Scotland with a long-term health problem or disability were more likely than care leavers without a long-term health problem or disability to record that they received emotional support from their support practitioner (43% vs 37%).

This important source of support is explored in the Relationships with support practitioners section, and many of the comments about support received from these practitioners were extremely positive:

> *"I have received amazing support from my throughcare and aftercare worker. She is really helpful, was always supportive, and I can tell she wants to help other people unlike some of the workers. I feel as if I got all the help I needed from her and I am happy to have her." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

Partners

Female care leavers were more likely to report that they got emotional support from their partner than male respondents did (32% vs 24%). Partners and their wider family also offered a source of emotional support to care leavers where they were not able to have emotional support from their own birth family.

> *"My partner and his mum are both such a great help and have took me into the family and I appreciate everything they do for me." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I do have close friends and a partner I do confide in." (Female, 22+yrs)*

Family

The survey did not distinguish between birth or other parents such as foster parents, when asking about mum or dad, or between birth siblings and sibling-like relationships. Whilst 27% of care leavers from the Scottish pilot reported that they got emotional support from their siblings, and similarly 25% reported that they received emotional support from their mum, comparatively few said they received emotional support from their dads (13%).

> *"I want to thank my brother whom I found out about when I came here for allowing me to visit him and his support." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

Aspects of supportive relationships

In addition to asking care leavers who they received emotional support from, the Your Life Beyond Care survey also asked four questions to further explore specific aspects of supportive relationships. Having this support is associated with resilience and providing protection when navigating stressful life events that can have a negative impact on mental health (Lereya et al., 2016).

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they had a person who they trusted, who helped them out, and who stuck by them no matter what; if they had a person who listened to them; a person who told them when they had done well; and a person who believed they would be a success. They could choose to answer 'Yes' or 'No'.



Figure 28. Having a person they trust and who sticks by them no matter what

Whilst most respondents said that they did have a person they could trust, 12% said they did not, which was just below the comparator group in England (14%) but above the percentage for older children in care aged 11-17 years who took the Your Life, Your Care Bright Spots survey in Scotland (8%).

There was notable variation across the local authority areas in Scotland, with the proportion of care leavers reporting that they did have a person they could trust ranging from 67% to 92%.

Several care leavers mentioned the support they received from their carers.

> *"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)*

Some care leavers had relationships with people around them but didn't always find them as supportive as they would have liked:

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

> *"I have lovely people who support me but no one who truly understands me and gives me the right support." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

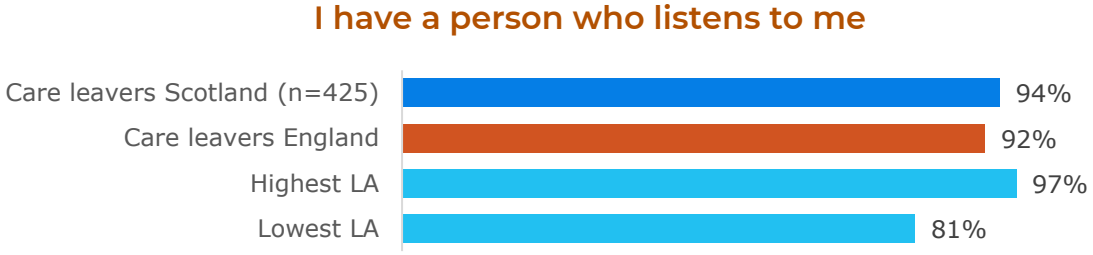


Figure 29. Has a person who listens to them

It was very positive that 94% the respondents in Scotland said that they had a person who listened to them. Across the local authority areas there was some variation however, with almost 20% of care leavers reporting in one area that they didn't have someone who listened to them.

For some care leavers, their support practitioner was a person who they felt listened to them:

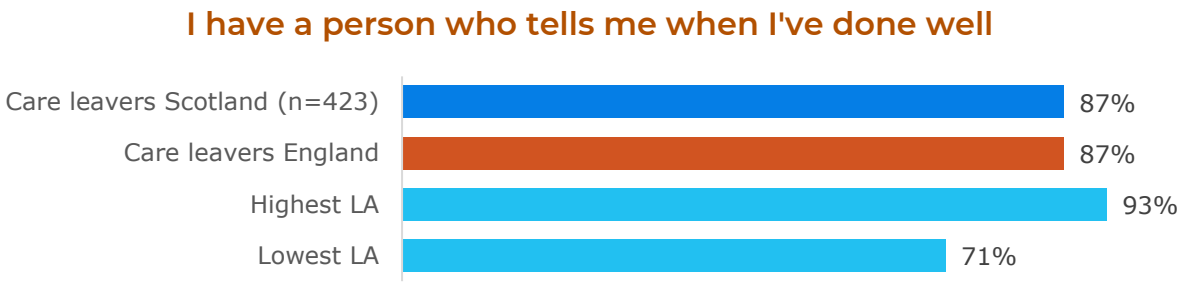


Figure 30. Care leavers who say that they have a person who tells them when they've done well

Again, a large majority of care leavers in Scotland felt that they had a person who told them they had done well, with seven in eight feeling this way (87%), the same figure as reported in the England Bright Spots responses. In the local authority area in the Scottish pilot which had the lowest percentage, three in 10 care leavers did not feel they had this support (29%). One young person described how having someone that was proud of them would have made a difference:

> *"Having someone who was proud of me, or someone who said they were proud of me. It felt like no one cared to be honest [would have made being in care better]." (Non-binary, 22+yrs)*

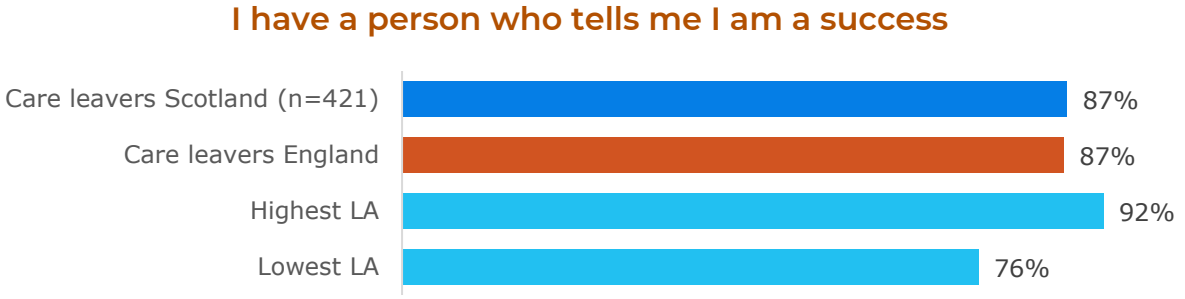


Figure 31. Care leavers who have a person who tells them they are a success

The percentage of respondents who had a person that told them they were a success was the same as that for having a person who said they had done well (87%). Again, this is the same for care leavers who took the surveys in

England. The answers to the four questions about supportive relationships all highly correlated with each other, and for some care leavers it will have been the same person who provided support in each of these ways.

It was very positive that a large majority of care leavers enjoyed these supportive relationships, and the similarity with England is apparent. Although the number of care leavers who didn't feel they had these kinds of support were comparatively small, the impact of the absence of these supportive relationships on their lives was substantial, and was associated with other factors covered by the Bright Spots survey such as feeling lonely or anxious, happiness with how they looked, and feeling safe at home and in the neighbourhood where they lived.

The extent of variation across the local authority areas in Scotland is important to recognise, though small numbers of respondents in some local authority areas mean that the percentages should be treated with caution and may not necessarily be representative. That said, the percentage of respondents who said that they did not have a person who believed they were a success was three times higher in one area compared to the area with the lowest number of young people who felt this (24% to 8%).

Summary - Relationships

- 84% of care leavers who responded to the survey said they had a really good friend. One in six did not have a really good friend (16%), twice the figure (8%) for children and young people (11-17yrs) who were in care and took the Your Life, Your Care in Bright Spots survey in Scotland.
- One in three care leavers (37%) had a partner. A higher percentage of young women had a partner than young men (45% to 31%).
- A much higher percentage of care leavers in Scotland had a pet than their counterparts in England (43% to 28%), though the percentage was well below that of children and young people in care in Scotland (11-17yrs) who told the Your Life, Your Care surveys that they had a pet (61%).
- All but 4% of care leavers in Scotland said they received emotional support from at least one person, with more than half (53%) receiving support from three or more sources of emotional support.
- Friends were the most common source of emotional support (63%), then support practitioners (38%), partners (28%), brothers or sisters (27%) and mums (25%).
- Most of the care leavers said they had people around them who supported them. 88% had a person they could trust, 94% had a person who listened to them, 87% had a person who told them they'd done well, and 87% had a person who told them they were a success.
- For most of the responses to the questions about supportive relationships, there was considerable variation across the local authority areas taking part in the Scotland pilot.

Supporting the transition to independence



Supporting the transition to independence

It is important for children and young people leaving care to know and understand the role of the practitioners who provide ongoing support and guidance during their transition from care to independent living, a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

The practitioner role is vital in helping care leavers navigate the challenges and opportunities of leaving care and ensuring they have access to the support they need (Scottish Government, 2024d.). Policy frameworks in Scotland reinforce this emphasis on sustained, relationship-based practice, recognising that young people leaving care often don't have the informal safety nets available to many of their peers, such as when setting up a new home or navigating the world of work, where friends and family can often help, and therefore rely more heavily on practitioners for guidance, advocacy, and emotional support.

Commitments to The Promise of the Independent Care Review (2020) means there is a national effort in Scotland to ensuring that every care experienced child and young person has "a supportive, nurturing, and loving relationship" with the adults in their lives, including through transitions from care (Independent Care Review, 2020, p.6). The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced Continuing Care and Aftercare duties, requiring local authorities to provide ongoing support up to the age of 26 (Scottish Government, 2024a).

However, the policies and discretionary support packages vary significantly between local authorities. Research has shown that for care leavers, the key characteristics of positive professional relationships include being available when they are needed, being reliable, actively listening in an engaged and non-judgemental way, continuity, and shared decision-making appropriate to developmental age (Winter, 2015). These findings align with the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach in Scotland, which emphasises child-centred practice, partnership working, and supporting young people to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them.

Young people involved in development of the Your Life Beyond Care survey felt that being able to trust workers was one of the most important things for them.

The Bright Spots surveys examine the personal reflections and experiences of the quality and consistency of relationships children in care and care leavers have with support practitioners, their involvement in pathway

planning, whether they feel they understand the reasons for being in care and the transition when leaving care. Across the Scotland pilot, the findings provide an understanding of what is working well and where improvements are needed.

Relationships with support practitioners

In each of the local authority areas in Scotland participating in the Bright Spots pilot, there were differing local structures in place which provide support to care leavers, including through dedicated aftercare or youth team services, and the continuation of support from social workers who had already been supporting care leavers when they were in care. Different roles in each of the local authority had different titles such as Youth Team Worker, Throughcare and/or Aftercare Worker, Leaving-care Worker, Social Worker, and may have undertaken distinctive or similar tasks to support young people depending on their needs. For the purpose of the survey, we use the term 'support practitioners' in this report to cover all of these roles.

Bright Spots asked care leavers how many support practitioners they had had in the last 12 months. The care leavers could say 'One', 'Two', or 'Three or more', or 'I've not had a support practitioner'.

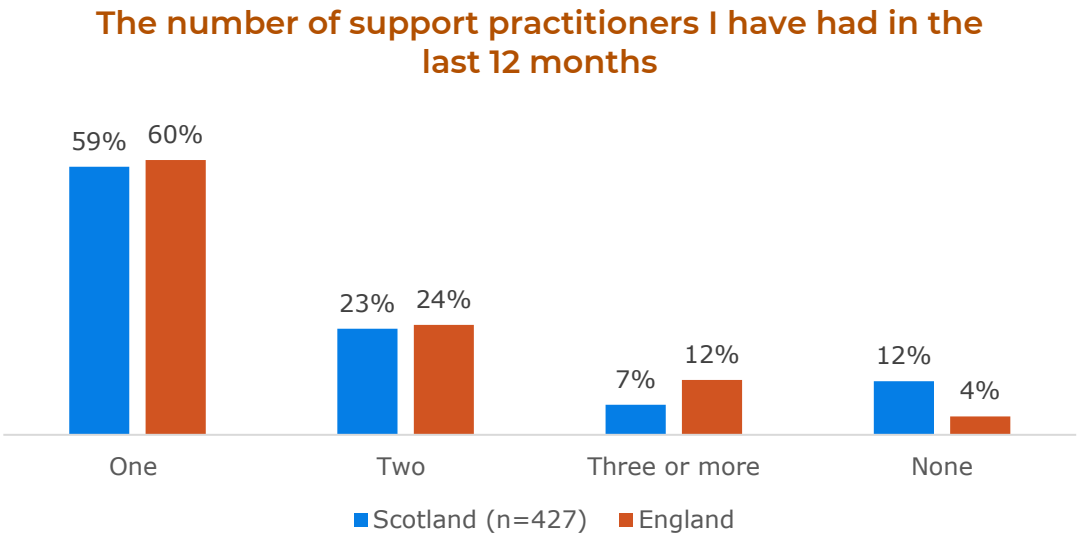


Figure 32. Number of support practitioners in the last 12 months

More than half (59%) of the care leavers who responded had one support practitioner in the previous twelve months, a similar percentage to their counterparts in England (60%) who took the survey there from 2017-19.

However, 7% of care leavers in Scotland had three or more support practitioners in the previous twelve months, and 12% had not had a support practitioner during this period. More care leavers in England had three or more workers (12% compared to 7%), but substantially less had no support practitioner (4% compared to 12%).

Care leavers highlighted the importance of having long-term, trusting relationships with their support practitioner. Many had known their support practitioners from when they were young, whether through their school, social work, or earlier support services:

> *"Me and my leaving crew worker [sic] knew each other when I was younger, she was acting as social work when I was about 7. Because of this we have built a connection… and now have the trust that everyone else would hope for." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

This continuity allowed them to build deep connections over the years, creating a sense of stability and understanding that they felt could not easily be replaced:

> *"I've known my leaving care worker for years as I've had him while he was working elsewhere so it helps a lot since we know each other so well." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

Several care leavers expressed that they would struggle to trust new practitioners, emphasising how valuable it was to have someone who already knew their history and their needs. They also spoke with appreciation about the guidance and strength their support practitioners provided as they moved into adulthood, recognising the positive impact these relationships have had on their lives and on the lives of many others:

> *"My leaving care worker is one of the most closest people to me and has helped me so much throughout the years and still carries on to do so and always puts her clients first!" (Female, 19-21yrs)*

Bright Spots asked care leavers asked if they knew who their support practitioner was at the time they completed the survey. Answer options were 'Yes' and 'No'

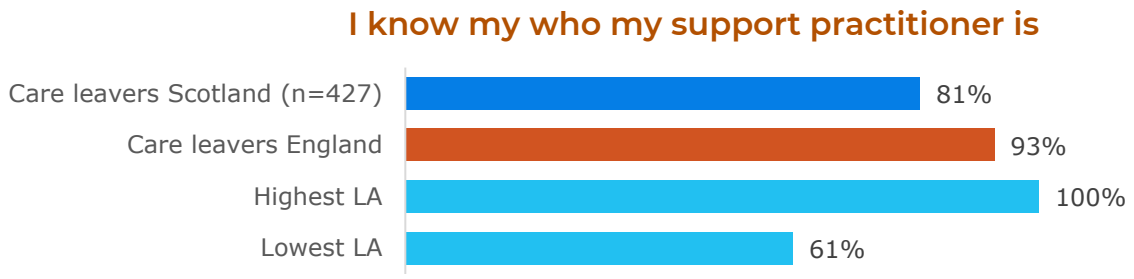


Figure 33. Knowing their support practitioner

Four in five respondents (80%, Figure 33) said that they knew who their support practitioner was. This figure is notably lower than the 93% recorded through the Bright Spots surveys across England. In Scotland, many of those who did know their practitioner described strong, long-standing relationships built on trust, consistency, and emotional support. Several care leavers spoke warmly about support practitioners who had supported them for years, highlighting the difference this stability made in their lives and expressing deep appreciation for practitioners who provided support and help with anything they struggled with:

> *"My throughcare and aftercare worker is called [name], [name] has worked with me for around 6-7 years and I can honestly say I don't know where I would be sometimes without her. She helps me with anything I need or am struggling with. She is very supportive and steps up to help me and has my back when I feel like no one else does. I just wanted to show my appreciation to her for everything she has and continues to do for me." (Female, 22+yrs)*

However, a substantial minority of respondents did not share this experience. Some care leavers said they did not know who their current support practitioner was, had only just met them, or were experiencing yet another change in practitioner:

> *"TBH I don't know who he is." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I only met her 20 mins ago." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I am currently moving from one social worker to another." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I don't really have a worker right now." (Female, 22+yrs)*

Frequent staff turnover, minimal contact, and periods without an allocated support practitioner were the most common reasons given for care leavers not knowing who to turn to as their support practitioner. These contrasting

experiences paint a mixed picture: while many care leavers reflected that they benefit from meaningful, enduring support, instability and low contact is leaving others without a clear or consistent point of help.

Bright Spots asked the care leavers who said they had a support practitioner whether it was easy to get in touch with them. Answer options were 'All or most of the time', 'Sometimes', or 'Hardly ever/never'.

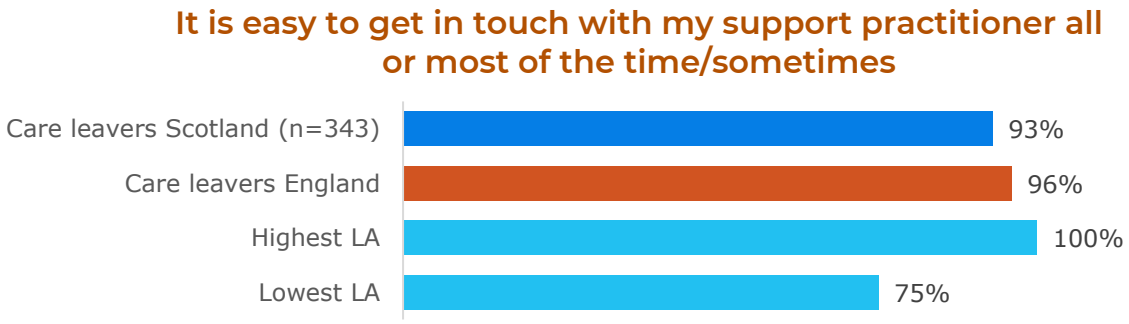


Figure 34. Ease of getting in touch with support practitioner

A large majority (93%) said that they thought it was easy to contact their support practitioner 'all or most of the time' or 'sometimes', just below the 96% reported by the care leavers who took the surveys in England. Many respondents in Scotland highlighted strong relationships and praised their support practitioners' responsiveness, approachability, and consistent availability, noting that support was readily accessible when they needed it:

> *"Excellent service always there for me when I need it ([name])." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

> *"My worker is so friendly and approachable… she is always contactable when I need to get in touch with her." (Female, 22+yrs)*

However, this was not universal. A minority of care leavers described difficulties such as infrequent communication, slow responses, or challenges in reaching their support practitioner, indicating that while contact is generally effective, there remains variability in practice that affects some care leavers' ability to have timely support:

> *"Hardly any contact with me from both of them." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

> *"Don't see him much." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

Bright Spots also asked care leavers if they trusted their support practitioner. Answer options were 'All or most of the time', 'Sometimes', or 'Hardly ever/never'.

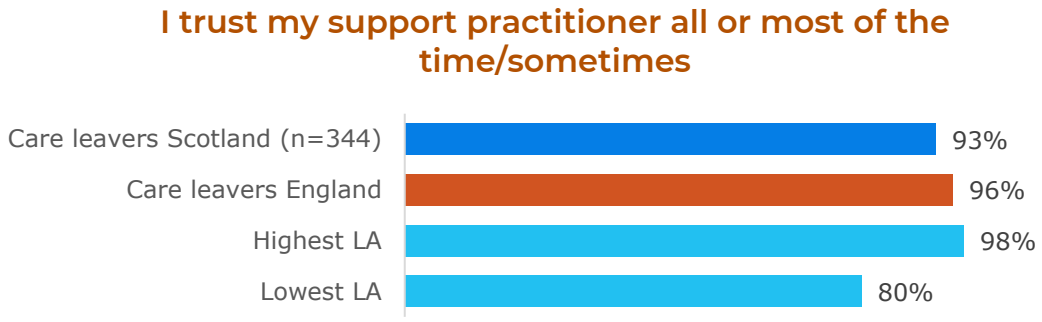


Figure 35. Trust in support practitioner all or most of the time or sometimes

Most respondents said they trusted their support practitioner 'all or most of the time' or 'sometimes' (Figure 35). Trust was strongest where relationships were longstanding, stable and characterised by empathy, reliability and consistent communication. Many described support practitioners who were genuinely caring, present and proactive:

> *"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 been an absolute angel and a real credit to through care [sic]. She has helped and supported me through so much and kept my head above waters, she has been there for me when not one other person ever bothered." (Female, 22+yrs)*

> *"My leaving care worker goes above and beyond to make sure that I'm well supported and that I have everything that I need in place to be happy and healthy whilst at university in [city]." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

Others highlighted that even newer relationships could feel safe and trustworthy when support practitioners made the effort to stay in touch and check in:

> *"[name] has been my social worker for the shortest time out of all of the ones I have had throughout my life, but who I trust the most and feel comfortable sharing anything with. She goes out her way to stay*

in touch and make sure I am okay which is very appreciated." (Female, 16-18yrs)

By contrast, frequent support practitioner turnover, limited contact or interactions that felt dismissive or patronising, significantly undermined trust:

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

"Tries too hard... She is too happy and praises me for things that seem too basic." (Male, 19-21yrs)

"Met her twice if your [sic] lucky, I have had more contact with my intensive support worker." (Male, 22+yrs)

Other care leavers answering this question felt that their support practitioner had less time for them than they wanted or had previously had:

"I feel like she has less time for me than my social worker did." (Female, 16-18yrs)

"Contact me more often. Try again if you don't get me." (Male, 22+yrs)

"Hardly any contact with me…" (Male, 16-18yrs)

"She is good just don't see or speak to her much." (Female, 16-18yrs)

Taken together, this range of experiences underlines how deeply trust depends on the quality, consistency and humanity of the relationship between care leavers and the practitioners that support then.

Bright Spots also asked care leavers if they wanted to say anything more about their support practitioner.

One hundred and fifty-eight care leavers (37%) told us more about their support practitioners. The feedback to this open question was carefully reviewed, and the responses grouped into themes. This helped to identify the main areas that matter most to care leavers. It revealed that care leavers need and want to depend on support practitioners to help secure and set up accommodation, access benefits, manage money, and navigate services such as health and education:

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

"My social worker has helped me secure a tenancy." (Male, 22+yrs)

"She has helped me get more money…" (Male, 22+yrs)

They also praised practitioners for being supportive during difficult times and in transitioning from care to independent living:

"My youth care worker has worked with me from a young age and kept me strong into my adult life…" (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)

Their experiences and feelings paint a very clear picture of what good support looks like, and where support can fall short. Even the care leavers who had had difficult past experiences with services said their current support practitioner had restored their trust:

"They have help me more than anyone else had in my entire experience in and out of care." (Male, 19-21yrs)

"My social worker has been absolutely amazing the entire year I've had her as my social worker, I had previous experiences that tainted my views on social work." (male, 16-18yrs)

"Probably one of the best I've ever had... She always checks up on me too which means a lot cuz [because] I don't always have that kind of support." (Female, 19-21yrs)

When their needs are met, care leavers feel secure and supported. However, as can be seen through the responses to the survey, when support is missing, care leavers can feel less confident, and experience more instability as they transition into adulthood and independence. Over time, these experiences can contribute to disengagement and uncertainty:

"If anyone has seen her alive please contact me." (Male, 19-21yrs)

"Wish he knew more about what's coming next as I'm turning 18 years and he doesn't really know who to ask or anything like that." (Not provided, 16-18yrs)

Pathway planning

In the context of the care and protection of children and young people, pathway planning involves a local authority and child setting goals for their future and outlining the support that the child will need to be able to reach

those goals. Local authorities in Scotland have a legal duty to assess the needs of every young person who stops being 'looked after', on or after their sixteenth birthday, and to carry out a pathway assessment (Scottish Executive, 2004). This helps the local authority understand what support, advice and practical help the child will need as they transition into adulthood. Regulations also state that local authorities must complete a pathway assessment for young people who are still 'looked after' but are already over sixteen – for example, those continuing to live with foster carers - to make sure the plan for aftercare to support a young person is clear and well-prepared. All care leavers who are entitled to aftercare support should have a pathway co-ordinator (Scottish Executive, 2004). The local authority is required to appoint one for every young person who is compulsorily (eligible for aftercare by law) or discretionarily (offered aftercare support at the authority's discretion) supported, and they may also appoint one for young people who are still 'looked after' but preparing to leave care. In practice, this means any care leaver receiving throughcare or aftercare support should have a named pathway co-ordinator to oversee their plan and ensure they receive the help they need.

The pathway co-ordinator's role includes ensuring the pathway assessment and plan are completed, that the child or young person's views are included, and that the actions in the plan happen. They engage with and support the young person directly, work with their advocate if they have one, liaise with other services identified in the plan, monitor how the young person is doing, and keep written records of all contact with the young person.

Scottish Government figures for 2024-25 showed that 57% of children in Scotland who were 16 years or over on the date they stopped being in care had a pathway co-ordinator (Scottish Government, 2026a).

Bright Spots asked care leavers if they felt involved in their pathway planning, and could choose to answer 'All or most of the time', 'Sometimes', 'Hardly ever/never', 'I don't have a pathway plan', 'I don't know what this is'.



Figure 36. Care leaver who felt involved in pathway planning

The percentage answering 'all or most of the time' or 'sometimes' varied across the six local authority areas participating in the Scotland pilot (Figure 36) (86% to 56%). The overall percentage (71%) was well below that for care leavers who took the surveys in England (87%), and this difference was statistically significant.

For the care leavers who took the survey in Scotland, their experiences show that involvement in pathway planning was strongly shaped by how well they were informed, listened to, and supported:

> *"The process was difficult but I had support to help me get through it." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I felt I wasn't listened to and that my say didn't apply I'd like to be supported." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

> *"I didn't fully understand the plan." (Female, 16-18yrs)*

Those who felt uninvolved in pathway planning described unclear or last-minute planning, limited understanding of their options, and a sense that their views were not heard, often leaving them feeling unprepared or abandoned:

> *"...more needs to be done for care leavers to ensure that they are fully ready and got the proper support plan behind them so that they don't feel abandoned all over all again!" (Female, 22+yrs)*

> *"More planning. I wasn't aware of all my options. Felt I was actively encouraged to make a specific decision, which was an interim arrangement."(Male, 22+yrs)*

> *"I didn't realise a lot of options were available to me… I didn't realise it existed and was able to get more support." (Female, 22+yrs)*

In contrast, care leavers who had felt included highlighted consistent communication, being kept up-to-date, and having access to support that helped them to understand their choices and take part in decisions about their future:

> *"I was really included and kept up to date." (Male, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"…worked out good and feel I am supported." (Female, 16-18yrs)*
>
> *"It was really easy, and it was managed really easy." (Male, 16-18yrs)*

Reasons for being in care explained

Some care leavers feel strongly that the care system does not sufficiently equip them with an understanding of their background and personal history (Kelly et al., 2016). Having a good sense of where you come from and your history can really help children who experience care to understand who they are and how they fit into the world (Staines & Selwyn, 2020).

Bright Spots asked care leavers if someone had explained to them why they were in care. They could answer 'Yes', 'Yes, but I'd like to know more' or 'No, I don't know'.

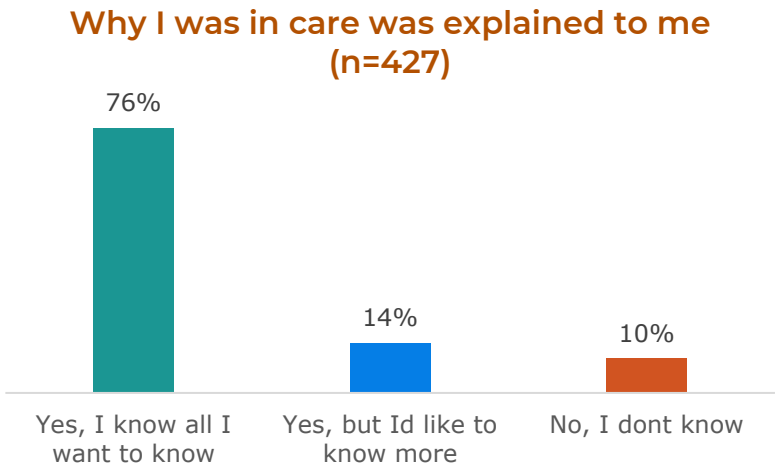


Figure 37. The care leaver had had the reason they had been in care explained to them

Just over three quarters (76%) of the respondents felt that they had received a full explanation about why they had been in care and knew all that they wanted to know. 14% had received an explanation but would have like to have known more, and 10% felt that they had not received an explanation and did not know why they had been in care (Figure 37).

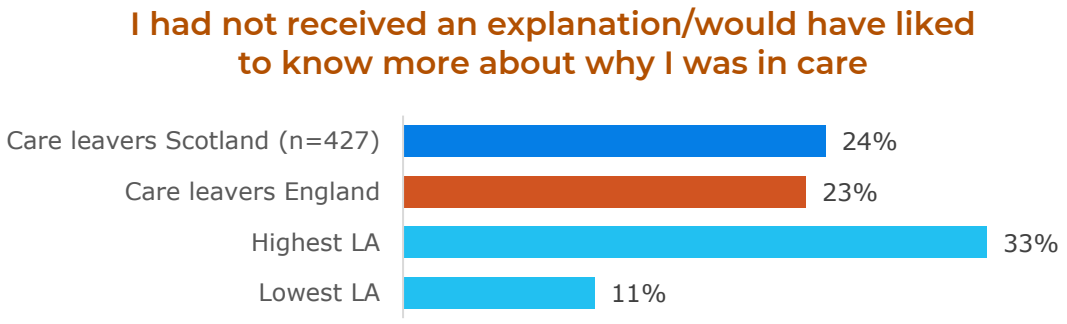


Figure 38: Care leaver had not received an explanation or would like to have known more about why they had been in care

The percentage who said that they had not received an explanation or who that wanted to know more about why they had been in care (24%, Figure 38), was similar to the percentage of respondents answering this question in the England survey (23%).

There was substantial variation across the six participating local authority areas in Scotland: from one in three in one area not receiving an explanation or wanting to know more (33%) to one in ten in another area (11%).

Transitions and the 'cliff edge of care'

Transitioning from childhood into adulthood is a significant milestone for all young people. However, for children and young people with experience of care this transition frequently occurs abruptly, at an accelerated pace and at a much younger age than for their non care experienced peers (CELCIS, 2023). In addition, research across the UK and further afield has brought attention to the changing nature of care and support available to care experienced young people making this transition, highlighting that many experience a 'cliff edge' with an significant decrease in the support available to them while needing to also navigate increased independence and personal responsibility for their housing, finances, education and employment, and meeting their day-to-day needs, which has a direct effect on their wellbeing (Coram Voice, 2020).

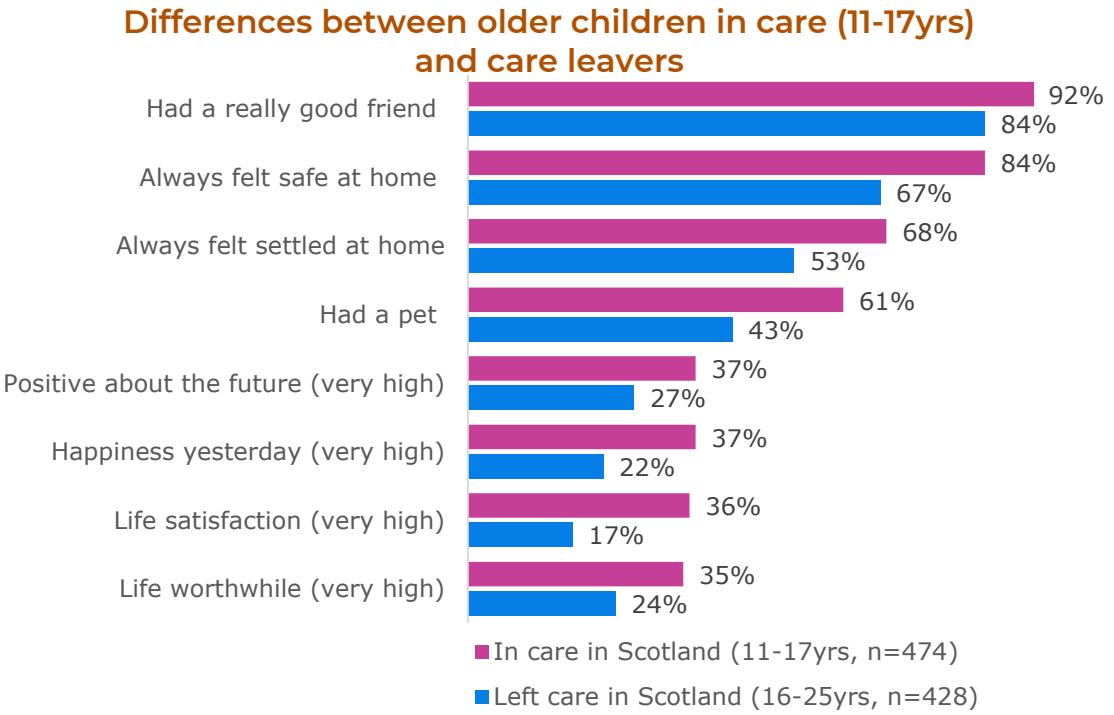


Figure 39. Differences between Your Life, Your Care in care survey responses and Your Life Beyond Care care leaver survey responses in the Scotland pilot

The Your Life, Your Care survey taken by older children in care (11-17yrs) in Scotland asked questions that were also put to care leavers in the Your Life Beyond Care survey. This allows comparison between these two groups and illustrates the substantial difference between them on many indicators of wellbeing.

The proportion of care leavers who did not have a really good friend was double that of the children in care (11-17yrs) (16% to 8%), and twice as many did not always feel safe at home (33% to 16%). The percentage of children in care giving very high scores on the life satisfaction scale was double that for care leavers (36% to 17%), with the children in care also having substantially higher percentages for very high positivity (37% to 27%), happiness yesterday (37% to 22%), and feeling that life was worthwhile (35% to 24%). The persistent differences across these indicators further emphasises the need for support which allows care leavers to make a more gradual and extended transition out of the care system.

The care leavers gave many examples of difficult experiences when they left care. They described leaving care too early and too abruptly, with insufficient planning and preparation in advance:

> *"I was thrown out of care far too early when I had far too many emotional and care needs, especially where my disabilities were*

concerned. My experience would have been better had they kept me under care until at least the age of 18." (Female, 22+yrs)

Some felt that they were not aware of the options they had and that improved communication would have helped, and some felt pressured to accept arrangements that they felt weren't in their best interests:

"More time to transition as I was basically chucked out my care home at Christmas - difficult time for me. I felt I wasn't listened to and that my say didn't apply. I'd like to be supported more and given more notice of moving." (Male, 16-18yrs)

There were respondents who also shared that, with hindsight, they hadn't been ready to leave care even though they had wanted to at the time:

"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)

"I don't want people to make the same mistake as me by making an impulsive decision to leave care when I wasn't ready to." (Female, 16-18yrs)

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

The care leavers also said that they wished there had been better communication about their transition from care, what this would look like and who would be there to support them:

"A bit clearer level of communication from the social work would've helped prevented [sic] me and others like family members from feeling over encumbered by the amount of changes that happen quite suddenly." (Male, 19-21yrs)

"Social work actually supporting me, I left care due to my carer passing away suddenly and felt like I had do it all alone, my social worker visited me once." (Female, 22+yrs)

Some of the care leavers felt that they could have been given more practical support to prepare them for independent life, and they were expected to cope on their own:

"More information from my TCAC Worker about how much my rent will be, if my gas and electric is a monthly bill or pay as you go, more information about the solar panels on my house roof." (Female, 16-18yrs)

> *"If I had learned more independence skills such as budgeting, cooking, cleaning and taught the importance and discipline of going to work as I struggle with basic things such as that." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

> *"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)*

However, not all care leavers had challenging experiences when leaving care and it was clear that feeling supported was critical to having more positive experiences of leaving care:

> *"I'm not sure I can suggest anything as I believe I was supported when I left care. Support is so important and having somewhere to call home is vital." (Female, 22+yrs)*

> *"I had a good experience leaving care fully supported." (Female, 22+yrs)*

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

Life as a care leaver is marked by significant challenges which test resilience (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021). Care leavers can face a variety of hurdles as they transition to independence, often much earlier than their non-care-experienced peers. The survey found that despite this, many of the care leavers who took the Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland had a positive experience in preparing to leave care. However whilst great attention has been given in Scotland to the legislation and policy relating to young people leaving care, care leavers continue to have varied, and often negative, experiences of leaving care. This echoes the experiences of care leavers in England, as well as in international research (Chikwava et al., 2025).

Summary – Experiences of Leaving Care

Support from practitioners

- Two-thirds of the care leavers who took the survey said that they had one support practitioner in the past year. Four in five care leavers who had been in care in Scotland knew who their support practitioner was.
- Most said it had usually been easy to contact their support practitioner, but experiences differed widely: some care leavers praised support practitioners' responsiveness and approachability, while others struggled with slow replies, limited contact, or difficulty reaching a support practitioner.
- Most of the care leavers trusted their support practitioner, describing them as caring, present and proactive.
- More than half of the care leavers comments about support practitioners were positive, often highlighting the support they received, their reliability and an emotional connection they have. However, some care leavers also described more negative experiences, including feeling judged, unheard, rushed, or being unfamiliar with their support practitioner.

Pathway Planning

- Almost three quarters of the care leavers responding to the survey said they had felt involved in their pathway planning all or most of the time (71%), leaving a quarter of care leavers who felt that they had not been involved in this way.
- The care leavers reported mixed experiences: some found pathway planning helpful, while others described it as stressful or irrelevant.

Reasons for being in care

- Around a quarter of care leavers said they had not been fully told why they were in care or had wanted more information.

Transitioning into independence

- The Scottish pilot of Bright Spots allowed for a comparison of experiences between children in care and young people who had recently left care. Across a wide range of indicators, the wellbeing of care leavers was lower than that of children in care. Substantially more care leavers did not have a really good friend or a pet, did not feel safe or settled at home, felt less positive about the future, less happy the previous day, and were less happy with their lives.
- Some care leavers felt well supported as they left care, but too many described experiencing abrupt change, with insufficient planning in advance, being poorly prepared for having increased responsibilities after leaving care and feeling that support for them was inadequate.

Wellbeing



Wellbeing

The Bright Spots programme looks at how care leavers feel about their lives and the experiences that they have, which includes their emotions and feelings, their happiness with how they look, how positive they are about the future and their perceptions of stress. The analysis of the survey responses considers subjective wellbeing, and aspects of care leavers' lives that are associated with high and low wellbeing. Core wellbeing scales are used which follows the approach taken for the responses to the Your Life, Your Care surveys for children in care, and care leavers were asked additional questions related to emotions and feelings and stress.

Emotions and feelings

Young people who participated in development of the Your Life Beyond Care survey with Coram Voice described how the process of leaving care could trigger both positive and negative emotions. Emotions and feelings can influence decision making, and this is referred to as 'affect'. The survey includes a question based on the widely used Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson et al., 1988). Three positive emotions and three negative emotions that were felt to be most relevant to their experiences were selected by care leavers involved in development of the survey.

Bright Spots Your Life Beyond Care survey asked 'In the last few weeks how often have you felt: Full of energy, Optimistic, Proud, Angry, Lonely and Afraid. Answers could be chosen from a five-point scale of 'Often/always', 'Some of the time', 'Occasionally', 'Hardly ever', and 'Never'.

Answering 'Often/always' for Full of energy, Optimistic and Proud is considered positive, whereas answering 'Often/always' for Angry, Afraid and Lonely is negative. Conversely, answering 'Hardly ever' or 'Never' is considered negative for Full of energy, Optimistic and Proud, and positive for Angry, Afraid and Lonely.

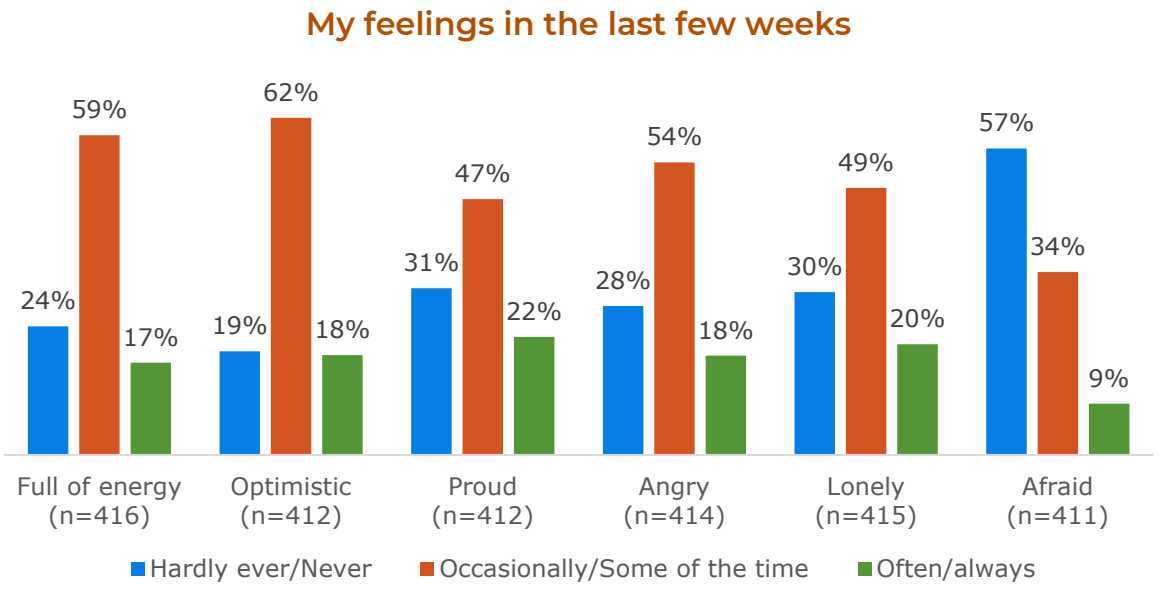


Figure 40. Feelings in the last few weeks

A similar pattern emerges when looking at the spread of responses for most of the emotions: Most care leavers answered 'occasionally' or 'some of the time' for Full of energy, Optimistic, Proud, Angry and Lonely in the last few weeks. The remaining respondents were split between the positive and negative extremes for each emotion, with more negative than positive responses for each, though numbers were almost equal for Optimistic. For each emotion, some care leavers were doing very well, but a larger group were doing much less well.

> *"Sometimes feel low but have supportive people around me." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

> *"It can be hard for me to understand my feelings and how to express them." (Male, 22+yrs)*

> *"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)*

22% of the care leavers 'hardly ever' or 'never' felt angry, but a concerning 18% 'often/always' felt angry. One young person related their anger directly to their experience of care:

> *"I've never stopped being angry about going into care and I think it has ruined my life." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

The pattern of responses to the emotion Afraid were markedly different to those for the other emotions, with almost six in 10 care leavers 'hardly ever' or 'never' feeling afraid (57%), and 1 in 10 'often/always' feeling afraid (9%), the smallest percentage of negative responses across the six emotions.

Loneliness

There has been growing global recognition of the impact of loneliness on people's overall wellbeing, with longer periods of loneliness being found to have a negative effect on a person's physical and mental health (Qualter et al., 2022). Recent research has found that six in 10 adults living in the UK are lonely some of the time, with this rising to seven in 10 for young people aged 18-24, of whom one in three reported that they felt lonely most of the time or often (The Centre for Social Justice, 2024). The scale of loneliness across the UK, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in both the UK Government and Scottish Government developing strategies to tackle the growing number of people experiencing loneliness and isolation (Scottish Government, 2018; HM Government 2018). Loneliness and isolation are recognised as a key concern when children and young people are leaving care and facing the challenges of living more independently and developing new relationships (Ofsted 2022; Rylance & Sharry, 2023; Who Cares? Scotland, 2024).

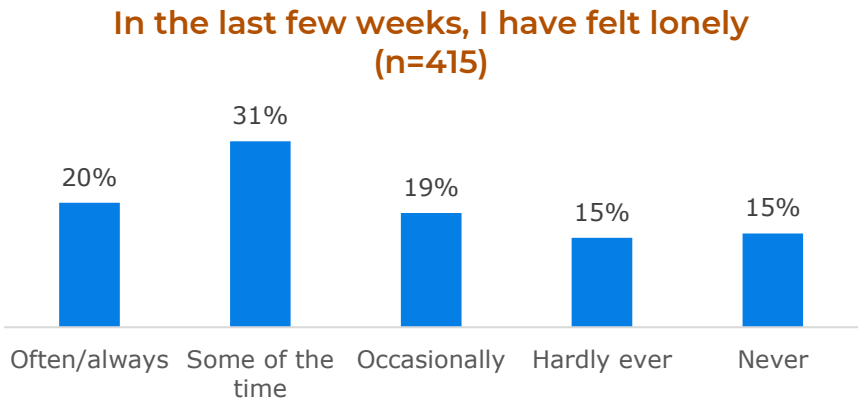


Figure 41. Feeling lonely in last few weeks

Care leavers taking the Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland were asked how often they had felt lonely in the last few weeks, and 20% answered that they often/always felt lonely with a further 50% reporting feeling lonely some of the time or occasionally (Figure 41). The remaining 30% hardly ever or never felt lonely.

"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)

"I'd like to build my social life as it gets lonely and rely on staff to spend time with me."(Female, 16-18yrs)

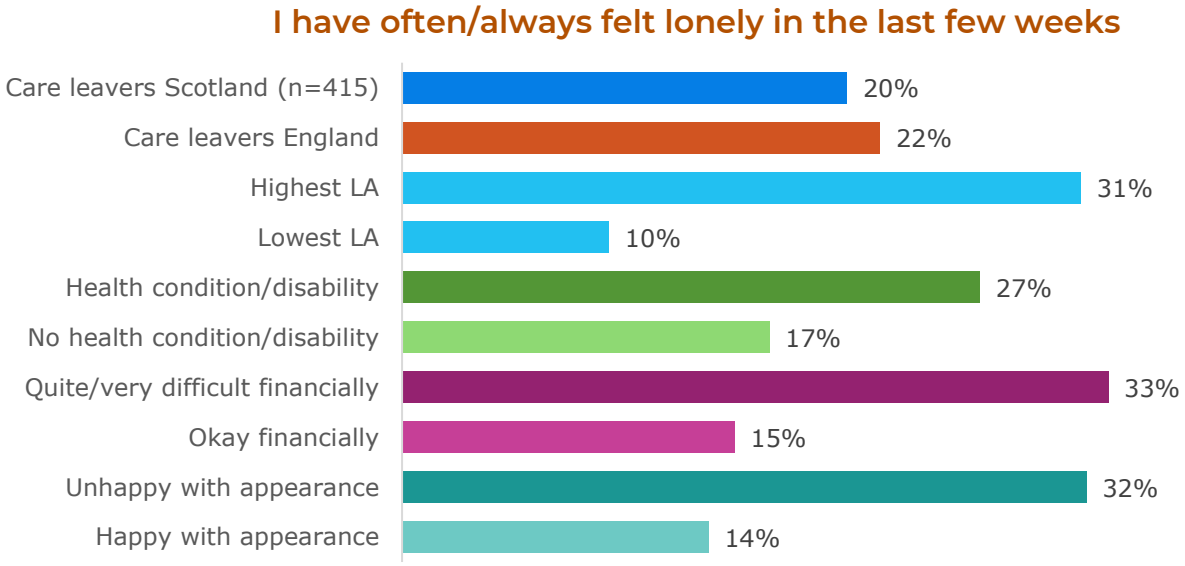


Figure 42. Feeling lonely often/always comparison

The care leavers who had shared that they had a disability or long-term health condition were more likely to say that they always or often felt lonely compared to their care experienced peers in Scotland who did not have a disability or long-term health condition (27% vs 17%). Similarly, the care leavers who were struggling financially were over twice as likely to have felt lonely as those who were doing better financially (33% to 15%). Many care leavers in Scotland pointed out that their financial situation restricted social interaction with their friends:

"Money stops me from having fun with my friends." (Female, 16-18yrs)

"Wish I had more books. Or money to spare going out with friends." (Female, 19-21yrs)

Those who were less happy with their appearance were over twice as likely as care leavers who were happier with their appearance to have felt lonely often/always recently (32% to 14%). All these differences were statistically significant.

Variability in experiences and feelings shared by care leavers across the local authority areas taking part in the Bright Spots survey in Scotland stood out, with the proportion of care leavers reporting that they had often/always felt lonely ranging from one in 10 to three in 10 (10% to 31%, Figure 42). Some care leavers described the effects of feeling isolated and lonely in their comments:

> *"I'm often really unhappy and frustrated with life, I feel lonely and kinda like my childhood and teen years where [sic] taken from me. I often deal with thoughts of suicide and self-harm." (Non-binary, 19-21yrs)*

Happiness with appearance

A person's level of happiness with their appearance goes far beyond a superficial assessment of looks. It is an aspect of wellbeing that is very important to adolescents and young adults, relating to confidence, self-esteem and self-worth, and how young people think others perceive them. Children and young people who experience trauma can internalise their response and blame themselves, which affects their feelings of self-worth and their image of themselves (Downey & Crummy, 2022). External factors and pressures influence how children and young people feel about their looks, and unhappiness with appearance is a predictor of unhappiness with life as a whole (The Children's Society, 2023). Children and young people involved in development of the Your Life, Your Care survey were keen to include a question about how children feel about how they look, and this was important for care leavers too.

Bright Spots asked care leavers to select on a scale of 0 to 10 how happy they were with the way they looked. Scores of zero to four were rated as low, five and six as medium, 7 and 8 as high and 9 and 10, as very high.

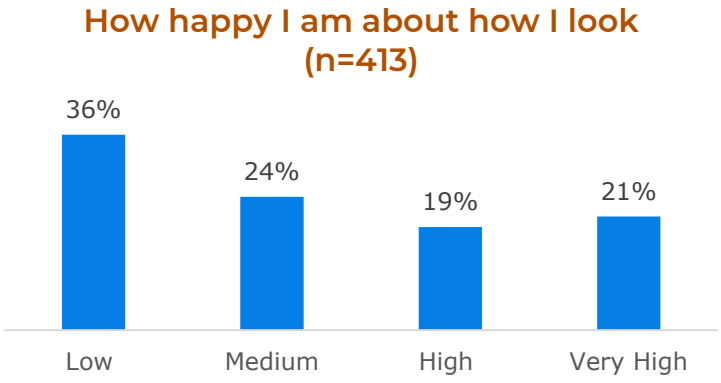


Figure 43. Happiness with appearance

When the care leavers were asked to rate how happy with were with how they looked, two in five gave high or very high scores indicating that they were happy with their appearance (40%, Figure 43). A further 24% gave medium scores, and the remaining 36% gave low scores.

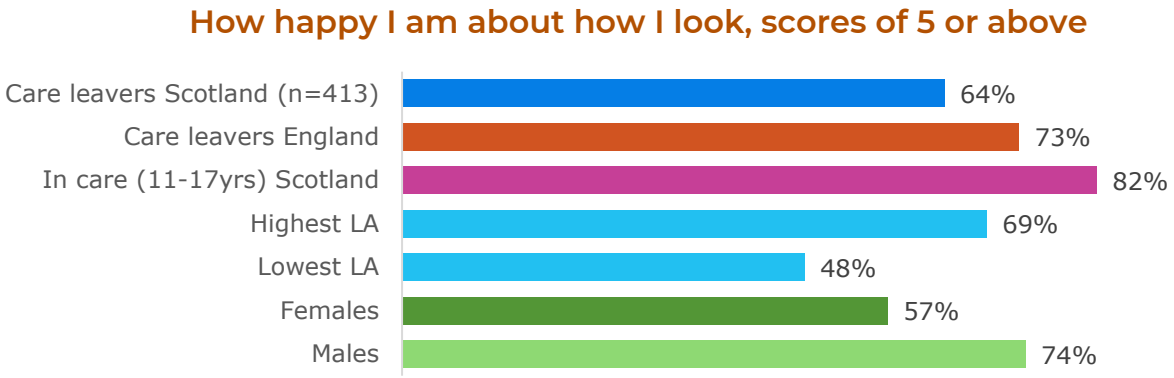


Figure 44. Happy with the way you look (medium/high/very high scores)

Putting together the very high, high and medium scores to understand the percentage of respondents who were not unhappy with how they looked, this was 64%. This percentage is significantly below that of care leavers who had taken the survey in England where it was 73%. Children (11-17yrs) in care who took part in the Your Life, Your Care surveys in Scotland were much more likely say that they were happy with how they looked (82%). Wellbeing tends to decrease for all children as they get older, but this is another example of a dramatic change to wellbeing that is evident when young people leave care.

Young women who had been in care in Scotland were more likely to report having low happiness with how they looked than the young men who responded (43% vs 26%), but over a quarter of young men gave low scores too:

> *"Self esteem still floors me daily. It's the only anxieties I struggle with is my appearance."(Female, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"I find it hard to feel good as I don't get told I'm pretty or they are proud of me much." (Female, 16-18yrs)*
>
> *"I care about what I look like. I am so anxious I forget to take care of myself." (Male, 19-21yrs)*
>
> *"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)*

"Getting a haircut helped my self image. Stressed about insomnia and starting a new job." (Female, 22+yrs)

A variation in scores was particularly substantial across the Scottish local authority areas taking part in the pilot, ranging from 69% in one area to 48% in another, where less than half of care leavers were happy with their appearance. The local authority area with the highest percentage in Scotland was below the overall rate for England (69% to 73%).

Positivity about the future

Bright Spots also asked care leavers to indicate how positive they were about the future on a scale of 0-10 with 0 indicating 'not positive at all' and 10 indicating 'completely positive'. Scores 0 to 4 were rated as low, 5 and 6 as medium, 7 and 8 as high and 9 and 10 as very high.

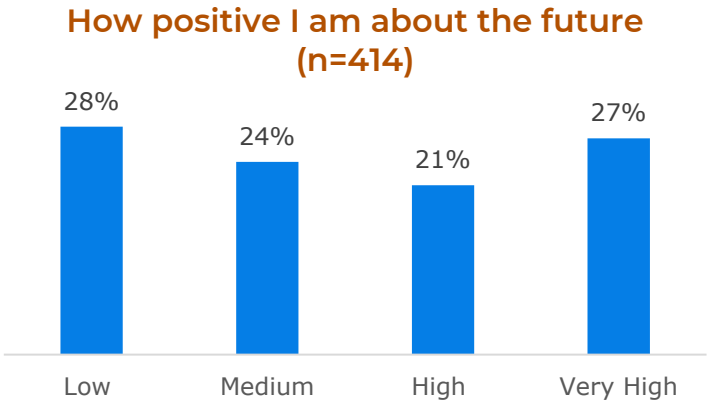


Figure 45. Positivity about the future

Less than half of the care leavers who responded to this question gave high or very high scores for how positive they felt about the future (48%). This compares to 54% of their counterparts who took the survey in England between 2017 and 2019 (Figure 45). Concerningly, 28% of the respondents in Scotland reported that they had low positivity about the future.

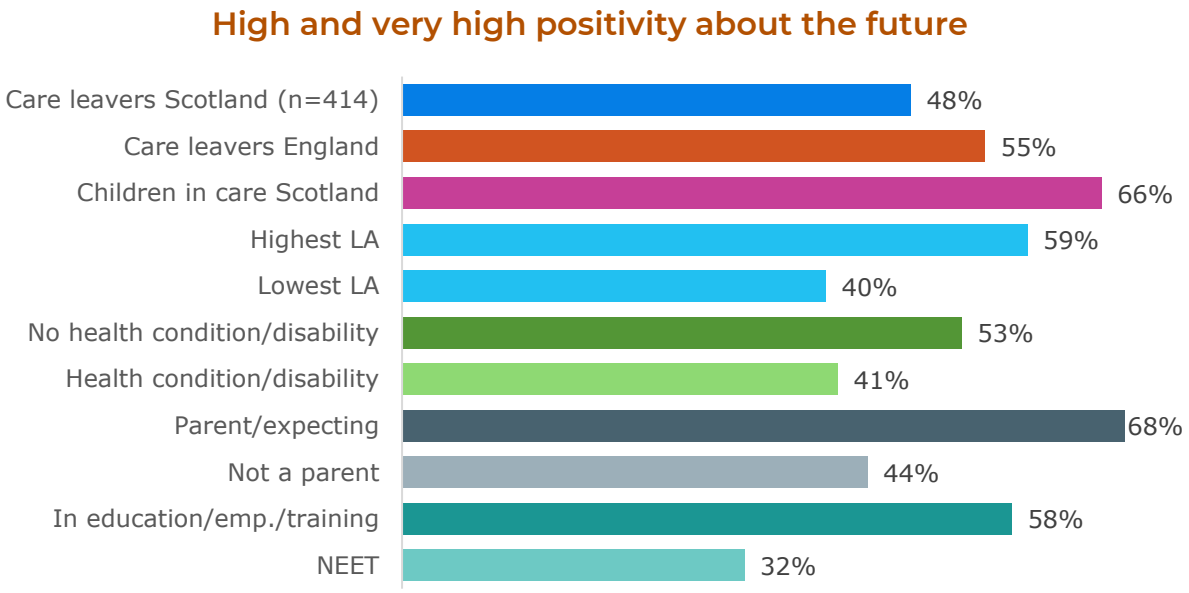


Figure 46. Comparing positivity about the future

The proportion of the care leavers who felt positive about the future ranged from 59% in one local authority area to 40% in another (Figure 46), and the difference between what children and young people in care in Scotland aged 11-17 years said in response to this question in the Your Life, Your Care survey and those who had left care was pronounced: 66% to 48%.

Respondents to the Your Life Beyond Care survey who were pregnant and/or parenting were more likely to report being positive about the future than those who weren't parents (Figure 46, 68% vs 44%). Conversely, the care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition were less likely to be positive about the future (41% vs 53%), as were care leavers who were not in education, training or employment (32% vs 58%). These differences were statistically significant.

Perceptions of stress

Leaving care can be a positive experience for young people who are ready to move onto living more independently and are well supported to begin their transition to independence. It can also be a stressful and sometimes traumatic experience, particularly when young people and adults do not feel in control of decisions which can have a profound impact on their lives, and do not receive the emotional and financial support that could support them as they take on more responsibility.

The Bright Spots Programme wanted to know how well care leavers are coping in day-to-day life. The four-item Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al. 1983) was used, and this asks respondent to rate how they often they felt

stressed in particular ways in the last few months, using a five-point scale from 'Never' to Very often'. These questions look at individual perception of stress as opposed to an individual's experiences of stressful life events.

Bright Spots asked care leavers 'In the last few months how often have you felt:

- difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?
- unable to control the important things in your life?
- that things were going your way?
- confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?'

Respondents could choose to answer 'Never', 'Almost never', 'Sometimes', 'Fairly often', and 'Very often, for each of these feelings.

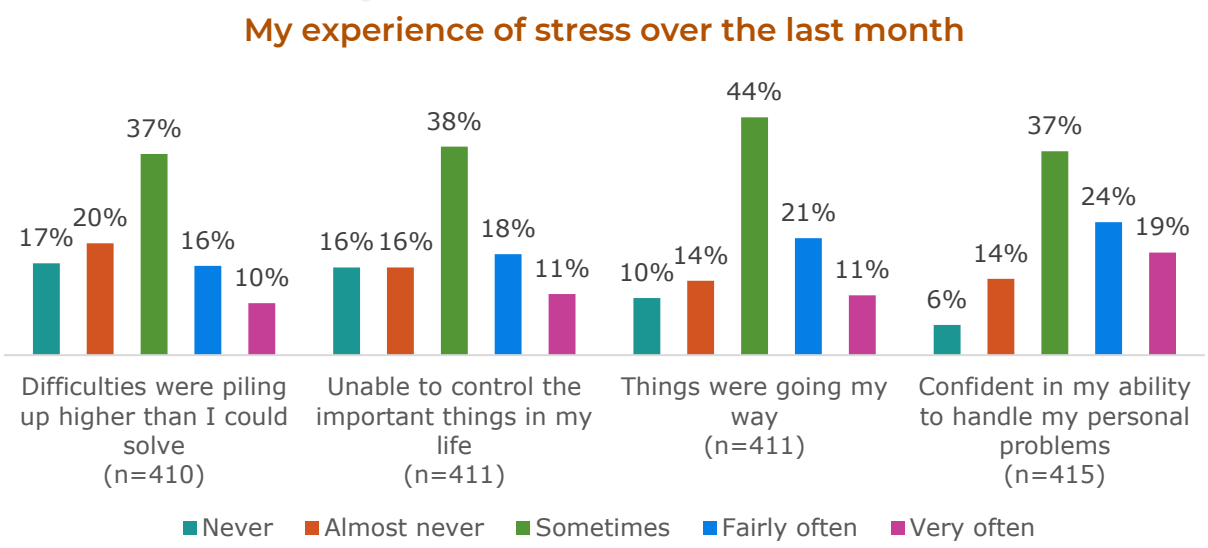


Figure 47. Experience of stress over the last month

The responses show that for many, the stresses in their lives were felt to be manageable and they were confident in their abilities to handle their personal problems at least some of the time (Figure 47).

However, a quarter felt that their difficulties were piling up higher than they could manage fairly or very often (26%), with a slightly higher percentage feeling unable to control the important things in their lives fairly or very often (30%). Nearly a quarter felt that things were almost never went, or had never gone, their way in the last month (24%) and one in five never or almost never felt confident in their abilities to handle their personal

problems (20%). For a substantial minority of these young people and adults then, it was clear that their experience of stress and/or their ability to manage their stress was challenging.

When the four types of stress were combined into a scale with a maximum score of 16 (Never=0, Very often=4 for each stress), the care leavers responding to the survey who had a disability or long-term health condition had a significantly higher stress score than those who did not, indicating that they were more affected by stress over the last month. The same was true for the care leavers who found it quite or very difficult to get by financially, and those who were not in employment, education or training.

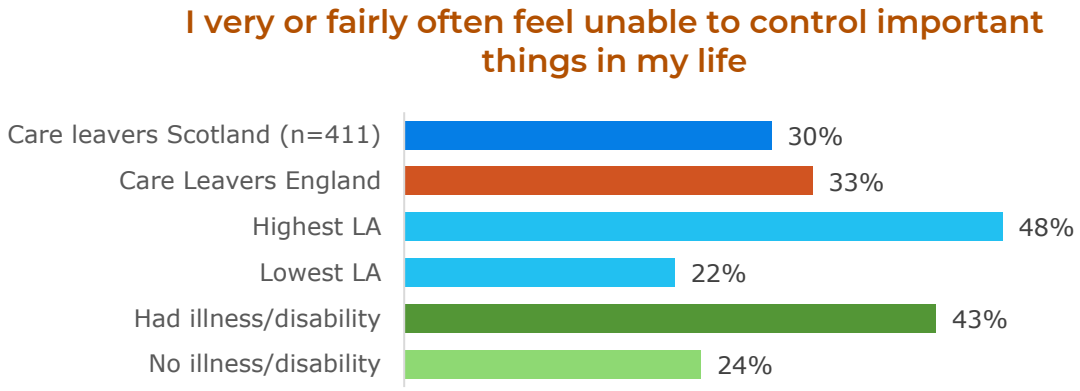


Figure 48. Unable to control important things in life

The 30% of respondents who often or very often felt unable to control the important things in their life was just below that for their counterparts who took the survey in England (33%). Variation across local authority areas in Scotland was particularly pronounced, ranging from 22% to 48%, a percentage over double that of the lowest area which means that almost half of care leavers in this local authority area often felt unable to control the important things in their lives.



Figure 49. Confident about ability to handle personal problem

The one in five who said that they never or almost never feel confident about their ability to handle their personal problems was above the percentage of their peers who answered this question in survey in England. The local authority area taking part in the Scotland pilot which had the highest percentage was more than double that of the lowest area (32% to 14%). A significantly lower number of care leavers who were either a parent or were expecting a baby said that they felt less confident (7%) than those who were not parents or expecting (21%), suggesting that they felt more able to handle their personal problems.

> *"I'm dealing with housing, social work and job centre and looking for work volunteering and caring responsibilities so although I have a lot going on I'm handling it just fine." (Female, 22+yrs)*

> *"Currently I am in a very busy period with uni and deadlines as well as moving house. So I have large stressors impacting my mood and stress levels at the moment. Overall, I am quite an anxious person with stress management issues and can get overwhelmed with day to day life. But I have had therapy in the past that has helped me ins coping methods." (Female, 22+yrs)*

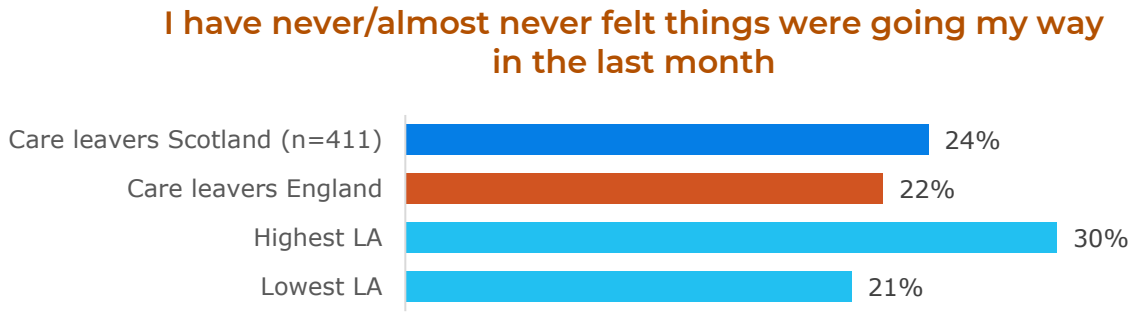


Figure 50. How often it was felt that things were going their way

There was little difference between the care leavers answering this survey question in Scotland who felt that things never or almost never were going their way and those in England who responded to this question (24% vs 22%, Figure 50). Variability across the local authority areas taking part in the Scottish pilot was evident though not pronounced, ranging from 21% to 30%.

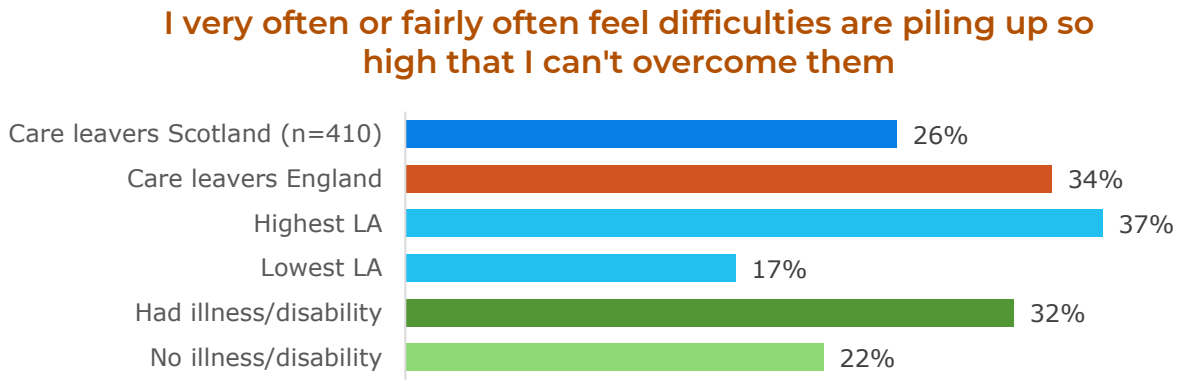


Figure 51. Feeling that difficulties piling up so high that the respondent feels they couldn't overcome them

Significantly fewer of care leavers in Scotland than in England felt that their difficulties were piling up so high that they couldn't overcome these very often or fairly often (26% vs 34%, Figure 51). Local authority area variation in Scotland ranged from one in six of the care leavers in the local authority area with the lowest proportion to one in three in the area with the highest proportion (17% to 37%).

> *"It's very hard for me to feel any better because of the circumstances at the moment." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

> *"I'm feeling quite down every day as I feel that things don't always go my [way]. Getting a hold of money situation will help. And getting back with my ex-girlfriend would help too." (Male, 19-21yrs)*

The difference between the care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition who answered this question in the Scotland pilot and those who did not was significant (32% to 22%).

The general wellbeing of care leavers

At the core of the Your Life Beyond Care survey are four wellbeing scales that tell us how care leavers were feeling about their lives. These scales provide standardised measures of different aspects of wellbeing and allow comparison with their peers aged 16-24yrs in the general UK population using data published by the ONS (2020) for the same questions.

The Your Life Beyond Care survey included four wellbeing questions where respondents were asked to rate how they felt on a scale of zero to ten, with zero labelled 'Not at all', five labelled 'OK' and ten labelled 'Completely'. These questions asked:

- 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?

ONS categorise scores from 0-4 as 'low', scores of 5 and 6 as 'medium', scores of 7 and 8 as 'high', and scores of 9 and 10 as 'very high', with the exception of scores for anxiety where the scale is reversed whereby a low score is more positive. For anxiety, scores of 0 and 1 are 'very low', scores of 2 and 3 are 'low', scores of 4 and 5 are 'moderate', and scores from 6-10 are 'very high'. This categorisation was applied to Bright Spots scores too to allow direct comparison.

We compared the ONS data for the general population of 16-24-year-olds alongside the responses from the children, young people and adults and young people who took the surveys in the Scotland Bright Spots Programme pilot (ONS, 2020). The ONS data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, which may contribute to the differences observed.

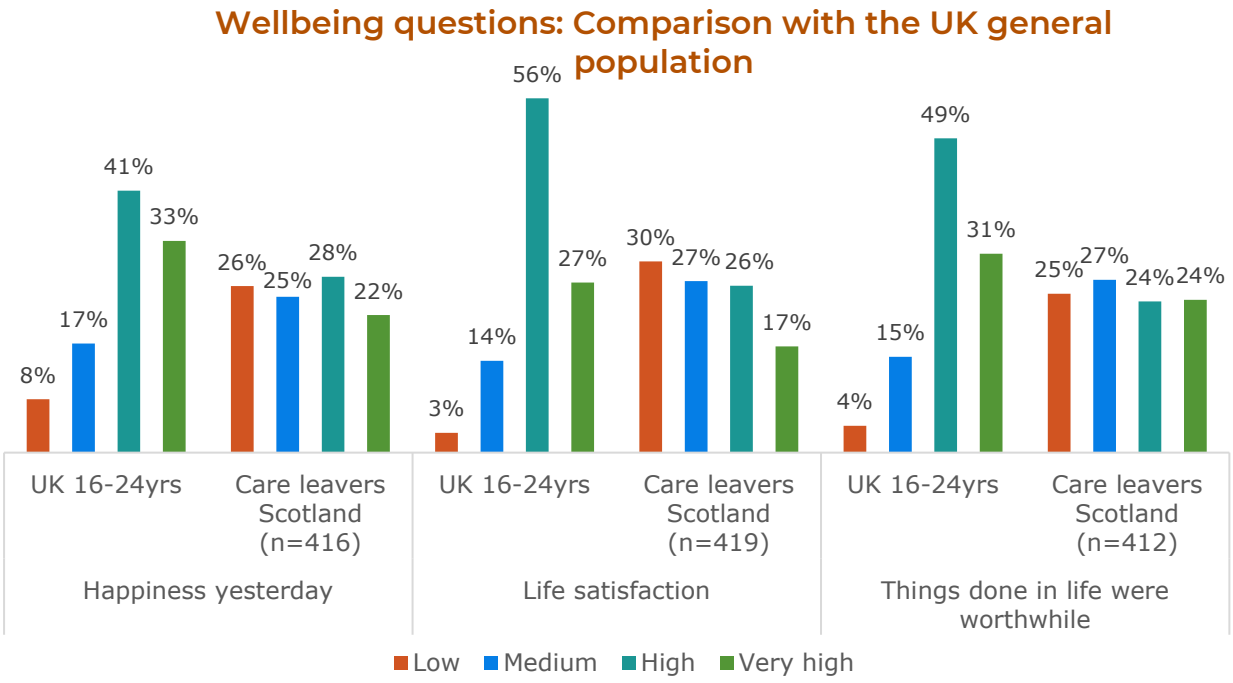


Figure 52. Wellbeing questions: UK general population comparison

Visually, the distribution of responses across the four categories is markedly different for care leavers in Scotland taking the Bright Spots survey and their peers in the general UK population (16-24yrs, Figure 53). Many more young people (16-24yrs) in the general population gave high and very high scores, and many more care leavers gave low and medium scores, though the different time periods when data for each group were collected could also contribute to differences. While we can see that a substantial minority of care leavers in Scotland who engaged in this pilot appear to be thriving, the extent to which the wellbeing of care leavers seems to be much lower than their peers in the general population on all of these wellbeing indicators is a real cause for concern.

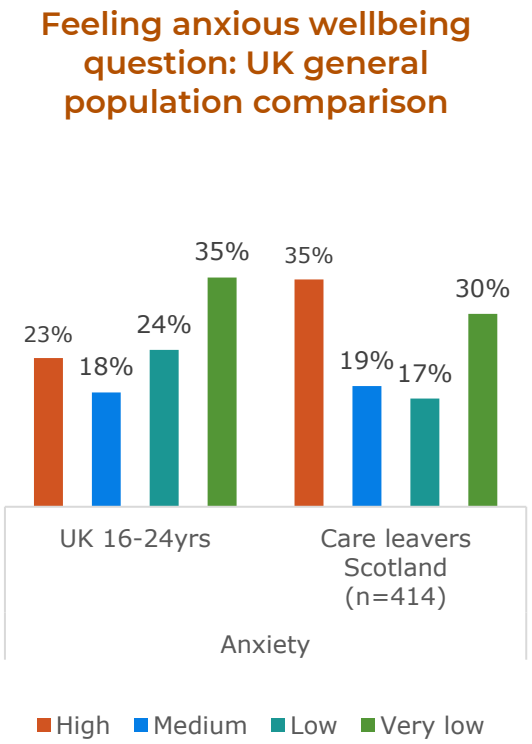


Figure 53. Anxiety scale: UK general population comparison

For the question about feeling anxious, where a low score is more positive, the responses are different to the other questions for both care leavers in Scotland who answered the Brights Spots survey and their peers in the general UK population (16-24yrs). The difference between the two groups on this question is less pronounced, though a higher proportion of the care leavers taking the survey in Scotland gave high scores (35% to 23%), and a lower proportion gave very low scores (30% to 35%).

> *"I struggle with ups and downs and what I call social burnout. I feel like I can be quite agitated and nervous, other times I feel calm and happy enough. It depends what I have been doing." (Female, 22+yrs)*

> *"I felt fine yesterday because I was inside all day, would have been more anxious if I had to go out." (Female, 19-21yrs)*

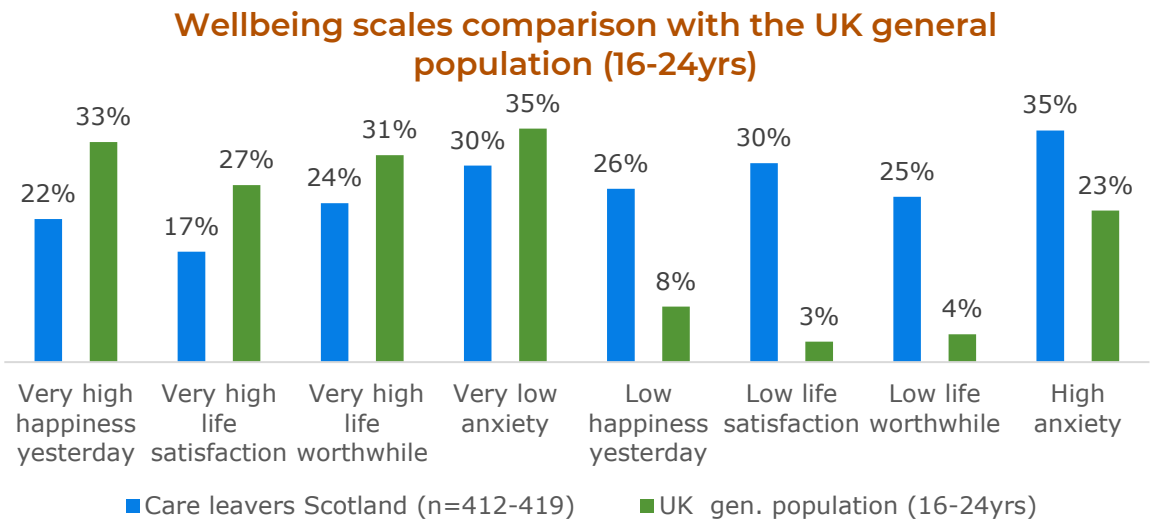


Figure 54. Very high and low scores general population comparison

A large and dramatic difference can be seen between the percentages of these care leavers in Scotland and their peers in the general population who have a low level of happiness, satisfaction with life and high anxiety (Figure 55). Over three times as many of the care leavers gave low scores for happiness yesterday (26% to 8%), over eight times as many gave low scores for feeling that things they did in life were worthwhile (25% to 4%), and ten times as many gave low scores for life satisfaction (30% to 3%). The proportion of care leavers responding to the Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland who gave high scores for anxiety was closer to, but still well above, that of their peers in the general population (35% to 23%).

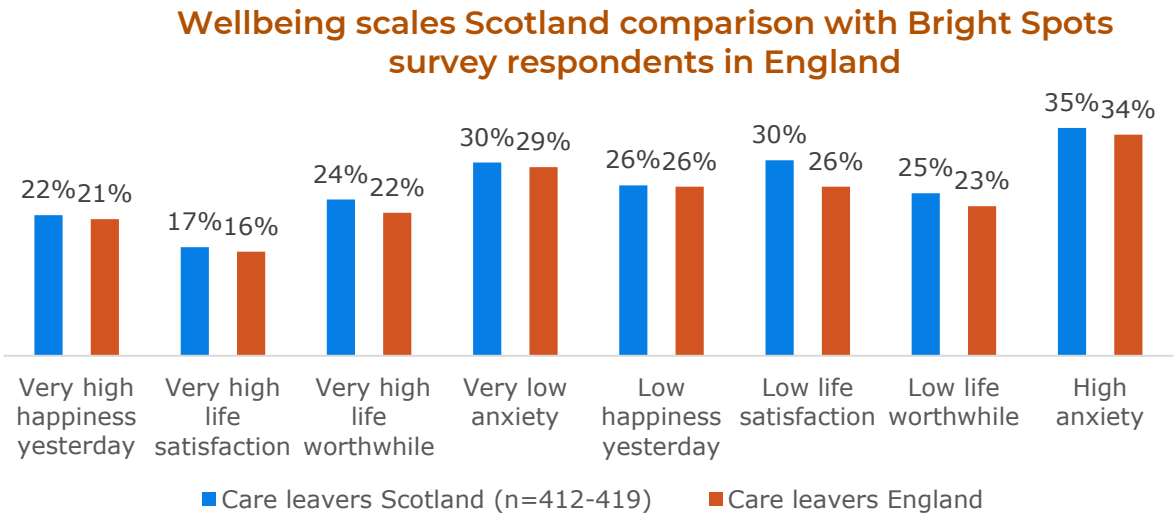


Figure 55. Comparison across Bright Spots Your Life Beyond Care survey responses in Scotland and England

The percentages in each category for the care leavers answering the survey in Scotland were generally very consistent with those for those answering the survey in England (Figure 56), despite the different time periods when the surveys were carried out in each country, with the COVID-19 pandemic occurring in the interim period. Percentages giving a very high score (very low for anxiety) were slightly above the comparator group, though percentages giving low scores were also generally higher. This demonstrates that the disparity between care leavers and their peers in the general population is not confined to Scotland, though this does not make it any less concerning, and that the COVID-19 pandemic is not necessarily a significant factor here.

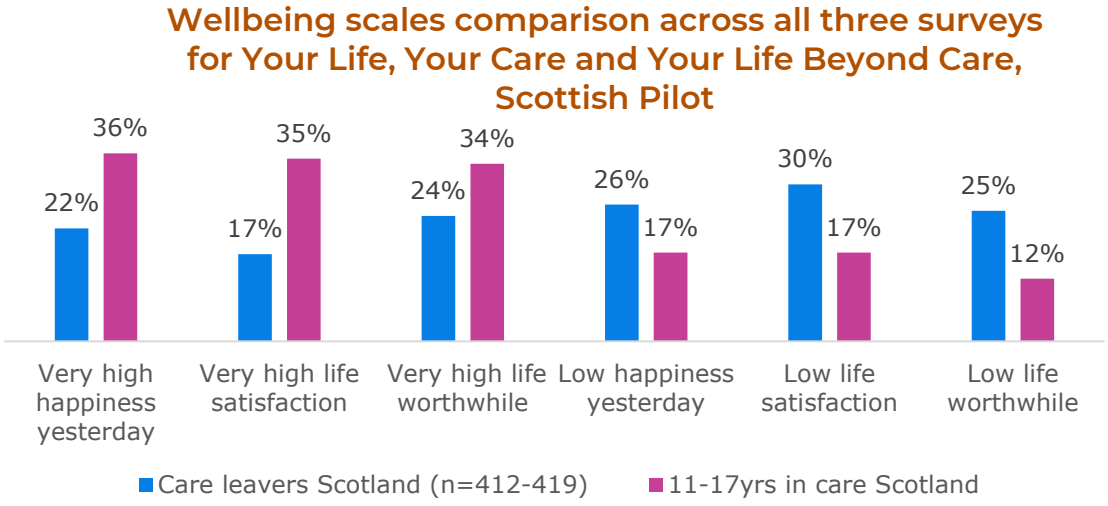


Figure 56. Comparing care leaver scores with the score from children and young people in care who took the Your Life, Your Care survey

The older children in care (11-17yrs) who took the Your Life, Your Care survey for the Scottish Bright Spots pilot generally appeared to be doing much better on each wellbeing measure than the care leavers who responded to the Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland (Figure 57). Percentages of care leavers giving low scores for all questions were well above those given by the older children in care who took part in Bright Spots in Scotland, and percentages giving very high scores were generally much lower. Twice as many of the care leavers gave low scores for feeling that things in life were worthwhile (25% to 12%), and twice as many older children (11-17yrs) in care gave very high scores for life satisfaction (35% to 17%). These differences draw attention to a sharp decline in wellbeing after children and young people leave care. This is similar to that seen for the transitions analysis part of this report. Taken together, alongside the experiences of a 'cliff edge of care', this adds significant evidence to what is

known about what young people need and how they feel when leaving care in Scotland.

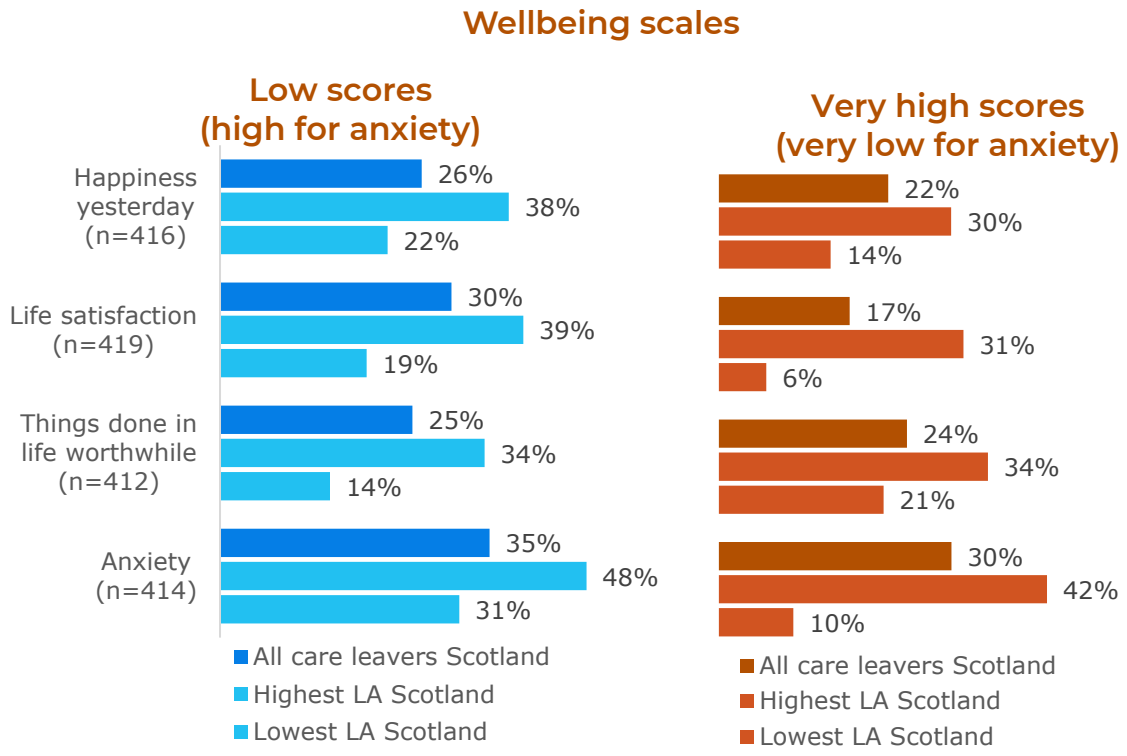


Figure 57. Wellbeing scales variation across local authority areas in Scotland

Across the responses to all the wellbeing questions from the six local authority areas participating in Bright Spots in Scotland there was substantial variation. For low scores this was most pronounced for feeling that things done in life were worthwhile (14% to 34%), and for life satisfaction (19% to 39%) (Figure 58).

Responses from one local authority area stood out as having a much higher percentage of very high scores for the life satisfaction question with 31%, compared to 18% in the next highest area. The lowest percentage for very high life satisfaction was just 6%. The spread in response to the happiness yesterday question was less pronounced, but over twice as many of the care leavers in one area gave very high scores compared to the area with the lowest percentage (30% to 14%).

Variation was particularly stark in relation to very low scores for the question about anxiety, ranging from one area where 42% of care leavers gave very low scores indicating they were not anxious the previous day, down to just 10% in another area where far fewer care leavers did not feel anxious the previous day. The latter area stood out as being well below all the other areas though.

Overall wellbeing

One of the strengths of the data the Bright Spots Programme is able to generate is that the relationship between other aspects of life and overall wellbeing can be explored. Coram Voice uses the four core wellbeing scales in the Your Life Beyond Care survey (life satisfaction, happiness yesterday, things done in life were worthwhile, and levels of anxiety) to identify and group care leavers who have low overall wellbeing and very high overall wellbeing.

For the data from the Scotland pilot, having identified the number and experiences of care leavers who had low and very high overall wellbeing, statistical tests were then used to determine other elements of their experience which had the strongest influence on both their low and very high overall wellbeing. For the data in England, Coram Voice used regression analysis to explore this because this approach allows for the interplay between factors that are related to low and very high overall wellbeing, as some factors are likely to be related to each other. Primarily because of the smaller number of survey respondents in Scotland, regression analysis was not applied, and this is explained further in Appendix 2.

Tests of association were applied to factors individually to determine the strength of the relationship to low and very high overall wellbeing. Although this method does not account for the interplay between factors, from the results, we can see that the factors with the strongest relationship to low and very high overall wellbeing are very similar to those identified by Coram Voice using regression analysis.

Overall low wellbeing

The respondents to the survey in Scotland who rated their feelings as less than five out of ten on two or more of the four core wellbeing scales were categorised as having low overall wellbeing. Using this categorisation, a third of the care leavers (33%) were identified as having low overall wellbeing.

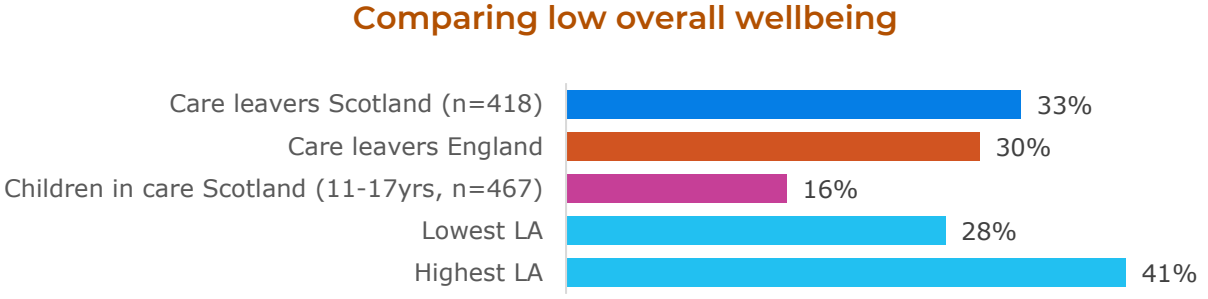


Figure 58. Low overall wellbeing

The variation across the local authority areas taking part in the Bright Spots pilot in Scotland ranged from 28% to 41% for low overall wellbeing (Figure 59). There was a stark difference between the proportions of care leavers and older children in care (11-17yrs) in Scotland who were identified as having overall low wellbeing (33% to 16%), though it should be noted one of the core wellbeing indicators used to determine low overall wellbeing was different for children in care. Where care leavers were asked how anxious they were yesterday, children in care were instead asked how positive they felt about the future. Children and young people involved in the development of the Your Life, Your Care survey were not keen to include a question about anxiety.

When tests of association were applied, answers to many of the other questions in the Your Life Beyond Care survey had a statistically significant association with overall low wellbeing. Not surprisingly, the four survey questions about stresses in life were very strongly associated with overall low wellbeing, as were the six emotions that care leavers were asked about. Other aspects of wellbeing that were most strongly associated with overall low wellbeing were where the care leavers:

- Were less happy with how they looked
- Felt less safe at home
- Were finding it difficult to cope financially
- Did not feel that had a person who believed they were a success
- Were not in education, employment or training
- Did not have a person who told them they'd done well
- Felt less settled at home
- Did not have a person they trusted
- Did not trust their support practitioner
- Did not feel they had a person who listened to them.

The care leavers described experiences that affected their feelings of wellbeing, such as not feeling safe and settled at home, having financial difficulties, and not feeling that they had people around them who provided them with support:

> *"It's a horrific place to live and no one within the council want to help, even though their [sic] well aware of the issues." (Female, 22+yrs)*
>
> *"I do budget as best I can but don't get enough to live on." (Male, 16-18yrs)*
>
> *"Experience of foster care can be traumatising. I find that care experience (along with other disadvantageous experiences) have*

negatively impacted my self esteem, emotional regulation, and feelings of security." (Female, 22+yrs)

"I wish I had more emotional support and reassurance." (Female, 22+yrs)

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

Very high overall wellbeing

To determine what other elements of life were associated with very high overall wellbeing, the scores of nine or ten on two or more of the four core wellbeing scales were identified. Just over a quarter (26%) of the care leavers responding to these questions gave responses indicating that they had very high overall wellbeing.

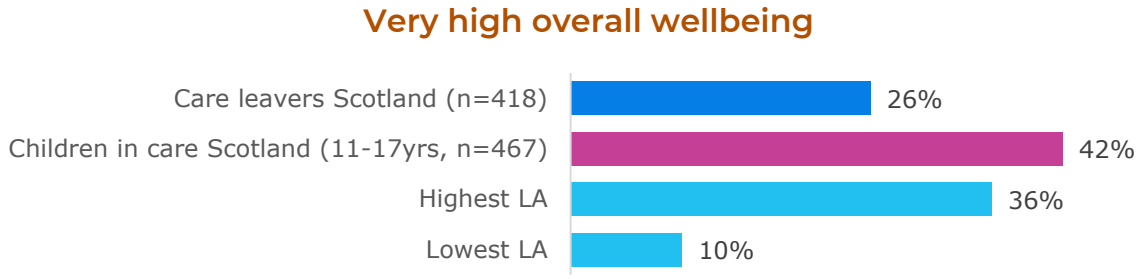


Figure 59. Very high overall wellbeing

Variation was particularly marked across the local authority areas in Scotland, ranging from just 10% in one area to 36% in the area where it was the highest (Figure 60). The area with 10% was an outlier, with all other areas having at least 24%, and the comparatively low response rate in the outlier area may have been a contributing factor. Noting that the anxiety question posed in the survey for care leavers differed to the one which asked 11-17 years in care about how positive they were about the future instead, a much higher percentage of older children (11-17yrs) in care responding to the Your Life, Your Care surveys in Scotland had very high overall wellbeing (26% to 42%).

When tests of association were applied, most other elements of experience covered by the survey were shown to have a statistically significant relationship with very high overall wellbeing. The strongest associations were where the care leavers:

- Felt more happy with how they looked
- Always felt settled at home

- Always felt safe at home
- Always felt safe in their neighbourhood
- Were coping financially
- Were in education, employment or training.

In their responses to the survey, the care leavers described how financial security and emotional support contributed to their wellbeing, as did living in a neighbourhood where they felt safe and happy:

> *"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)

> *"Where I live is a really good area and I really enjoy living here."* (Male, 16-18yrs)

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

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

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

All the factors most strongly associated with very high overall wellbeing were also associated with low overall wellbeing, with the addition of feeling safe in the neighbourhood where care leavers lived (Figure 61).

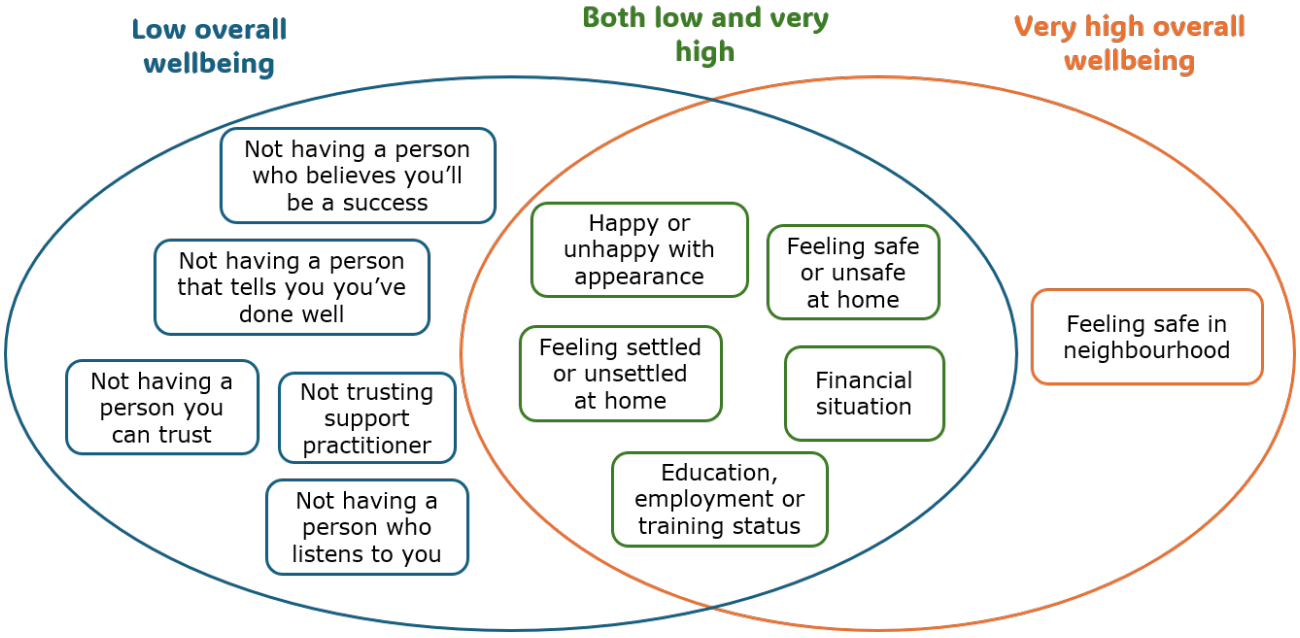


Figure 60. Factors associated with overall wellbeing

Over half (55%) of the care leavers who indicated they were not happy with how they looked had low overall wellbeing, compared to just 20% of the care leavers who were more happy with how they looked. Almost half (46%) of the young people who indicated that they were more happy with how they looked had very high overall wellbeing, compared to just 12% of those who were less happy with how they looked.

The extent to which care leavers felt safe and settled where they lived had a similar association with both low and very high overall wellbeing, as did their financial situation and if they were in education, had a job or were in of training.

The supportive relationships that were strongly associated with low overall wellbeing were not as strongly associated with very high overall wellbeing, indicating that the absence of supportive relationships had more of an impact on low overall wellbeing than their presence did on care leavers who had very high overall wellbeing.

Summary - Wellbeing

Emotions and feelings

- When care leavers were asked about positive feelings in the last few weeks, most felt full of energy, optimistic, and proud occasionally or some of the time, with the remainder split between the positive and negative extremes, with more negative than positive responses.
- For negative emotions, most care leavers only felt angry or lonely occasionally or some of the time, and fewer care leavers felt angry or lonely often or always than hardly ever or never felt angry or lonely.
- Fewer than one in ten care leavers often or always felt afraid in the last few weeks.
- For all four questions relating to stress over the last month, there were groups of care leavers in Scotland who were managing very well, and other who were coping much less well with stresses. 30% felt unable to control important things in their lives, 20% were not confident about their ability to handle personal problems, 24% rarely felt things were going their way, and 26% often felt that their difficulties were piling up so high that they couldn't overcome them.
- Care leavers who had a long-term illness or disability were much more likely to feel that they had not been coping with stresses in the last month.
- Over a third of care leavers (36%) in Scotland gave low scores for happiness with their appearance, well above the 27% of their equivalents in England, and double that of children (11-17yrs) in care who took part in Bright Spots in Scotland. Females were less likely to be happy with how they looked than males.
- The care leavers who were less happy with their appearance were much more likely to have felt lonely always/often, as were those who have a long-term health condition or disability and those who were not in education, didn't have a job or weren't in training.
- Almost the same amount of care leavers felt positive about the future, and those who didn't. Positivity about the future was lower for the care leavers who had a long-term health condition or disability and those not in education, employment or training, but was higher for those who are parents or were expecting a child.

- For most of the questions about feelings and aspirations, we saw large variations across the six local authority areas taking part in the Bright Spots Programme in Scotland, suggesting that local practice and support may have been making a difference.

General wellbeing

- The differences in wellbeing between care leavers taking part in the survey in Scotland and young people and adults aged 16-24yrs in the general UK population were particularly stark, with over three times as many care leavers giving low scores for happiness yesterday, ten times as many giving low scores for life satisfaction, and over eight times as many giving low scores for feeling that things that they did in their lives were worthwhile. The general population data pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Responses to the four wellbeing questions in the Your Life Beyond Care survey in Scotland and those in England were broadly similar, despite the different time periods when the surveys were carried out.
- On all wellbeing questions which allowed comparison, the wellbeing of care leavers was much lower than that of children in care (11-17yrs) in the participating local authority areas in Scotland.
- The overall percentages for care leavers in Scotland for each of the core wellbeing scales and for overall wellbeing mask substantial and concerning variation across the six local authority areas, and there is clearly not a universal experience of care and of leaving care across the areas who participated in Bright Spots.
- For the care leavers responding, happiness with their appearance was the factor most strongly associated with low and very high overall wellbeing. Feeling safe and settled at home, and having financial security and being in education, employment or training were also associated with them having low or very high overall wellbeing.
- The extent to which care leavers had or did not have supportive relationships had more of an influence on low overall wellbeing than high overall wellbeing, so care leavers who felt they did not have a person who believed they would be a success, a person who tells them they've done well, a person who they trust or a person who listens to them, were among the factors most strongly associated with low overall wellbeing.

- Care leavers who did not always feel they could trust their support practitioner was also more strongly associated with their low overall wellbeing.
- Feeling safe in their neighbourhood was more strongly associated with high overall wellbeing.
- There is again a degree of polarisation in the experiences of care leavers coming through the survey responses, with a third experiencing low overall wellbeing and a quarter experiencing very high overall wellbeing.
- How children, adults and young people completing the survey felt about where they live, the extent to which they felt they had supportive relationships, and their financial situation had critical impact on overall wellbeing.

Discussion and recommendations



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 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 in this analysis and report on the full Bright Spots pilot, 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 young people who had left care who felt supported and were thriving, and those 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 those with experience of care to thrive when leaving care included having supportive relationships with friends, family and carers, and with 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 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 children aged 11-17 years in care were 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 local authority area they happen to 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 the 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 a disability compared to the percentage of young people with a long-term health condition or disability in the general UK population. Many care leavers 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.

Limitations of the Bright Spots programme pilot in Scotland

There are a few limitations to the Bright Spots programme and the findings from the Scottish pilot that should be considered when drawing inferences from the results.

There was variation across the six local authority areas taking part in relation to their size of population, the number of children they care for, their geographical spread and the context in which they participated in the Bright Spots programme. The general population size for each local authority area ranged from approximately 93,000 to 265,000, and physical land area from approximately 70 to 2,450 square miles.

Although all local authority areas achieved response rates of 35% and above, the small number of care leavers in some areas mean that percentages should be treated with caution, and the findings may not represent the experiences of all care leavers in areas which had a lower response rate.

Terminology to describe support practitioners was changed to reflect provision of support in each local authority area, so the survey asked about support from a particular type of practitioner in each area. This approach of asking about support from a specific role aligns more with provision of support in England, where Personal Advisers provide throughcare, aftercare or leaving care support. In Scotland, care leavers may receive support from a range of support practitioners who have different roles, and they may work for different agencies. Some care leavers referred to multiple supports in the comments they provided, and some who did not have a specific support practitioner, commented on support they received from other practitioners, such as ongoing support from residential child care practitioners.

The local authorities taking part in Scotland included children and young people who had been in care because they were unaccompanied asylum seekers to whom they have a duty of care as a corporate parent to meet their need for care and protection as a 'looked after' child. The survey is not provided in other languages, as it is expected that local authorities have already found ways to communicate with their care leavers whose first language is not English. Some local authorities provided examples of other ways in which they supported their care leavers to complete the survey, which included providing interpreters, using someone the care leaver already

knew and trusted to take them through the survey, and using Google Translate.

To identify 'Bright Spots' of practice in a local authority area, Coram Voice establish where care leavers from this authority appear to be doing significantly better than care leavers from other local authority areas who have participated in Bright Spots. This is achieved by comparing the individual local authority data to aggregated data which combines results from other local authority areas. As Bright Spots was being piloted in Scotland, there was no aggregate data for Scotland, so comparison was made to aggregate data supplied by Coram Voice which combined data from 21 local authority areas that participated in Bright Spots in England between 2017 and 2019. This comparative data is quite dated, and – notably - comes from a period that pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic. It is too early to determine if the COVID-19 pandemic led to a substantial and sustained shift in financial pressures and wellbeing for all young people, but this context is important to consider when comparing findings in Scotland with those from England. Although the comparative data is relatively dated, there were remarkable similarities between experiences in Scotland and in England for many indicators of care leavers' wellbeing. That said, aggregate data from local authorities that have participated in Bright Spots more recently would provide a more robust comparison.

The first phase of the Scotland pilot ran towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic from January to March 2022. This had some impact on the extent to which the three participating local authorities were able to disseminate the surveys and run engagement events with their care leavers. For example, there were some increased staffing capacity issues due to illness, working with the logistics of lockdown restrictions, and the cancellation or rescheduling of awareness raising events.

The COVID-19 public health restrictions, including lockdowns, may also have impacted on how care leavers experienced their wellbeing during this particular time, compared with the three local authority areas who participated in the second phase of the pilot. As we are not drawing comparisons of the differences in responses between the two pilot groups at this time, we do not have a full picture of the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health restrictions between the two groups.

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Appendix 1. Statistically significant differences

Question	Difference between	Statistical test value	Degrees of freedom	Base number of care leavers	p-value
Living arrangements	Female, male	X^2=25.986	13	402	.017
Living arrangements	Age groups	X^2=104.041	26	420	<.001
Living arrangements	Scotland, England	X^2=94.720	8	1,733	<.001
Disability/health problem	Scotland, England	X^2=6.238	1	2,113	.013
Safe at home	Involved in pathway planning, less involved	X^2=8.959	1	422	.003
Settled at home	Involved in pathway planning, less involved	X^2=13.780	1	423	<.001
Safe in neighbourhood	Involved in pathway planning, less involved	X^2=8.144	1	420	.004
Home is right	Involved in pathway planning, less involved	X^2=6.298	1	419	.012
Internet at home	Scotland, England	X^2=17.623	1	2,161	<.001
Coping financially	Scotland, England	X^2=19.561	1	1,751	<.001
Knew support practitioner	Scotland, England	X^2=11.175	1	2,212	<.001
Have a pet	Scotland, England	X^2=34.983	1	2,194	<.001
Involved in pathway planning	Scotland, England	X^2=60.647	1	2,202	<.001
Lonely often/always	Disability/health problem, No disability/Health problem	X^2=5.050	1	391	.025
Lonely often/always	Less happy with appearance, more happy with appearance	X^2=17.650	1	409	<.001
Lonely often/always	Quite/very difficult to cope financially, getting by/doing alright/living comfortably	X^2=16.008	1	414	<.001
Happiness with appearance	Scotland, England	X^2=11.055	1	2,098	<.001
Stress scale	Disability/health problem, No disability/Health problem	U=12262.50, Z=-3.47	n/a	380	<.001
Stress scale	Not in education, training or employment, in education training of employment	U=14471.50, Z=-4.27	n/a	403	<.001
Stress scale	Quite/very difficult to cope financially, getting by/doing alright/living comfortably	U=10445.00, Z=-6.33	n/a	403	<.001
Positive about future	Parent/expecting, not a parent	X^2=13.064	1	412	<.001
Positive about future	No disability/Health problem, Disability/health problem,	X^2=4.622	1	391	.032

Positive about future	In education training of employment, not in education, training or employment	X^2=25.089	1	413	<.001
Confidence in ability to handle personal problems	Parent/expecting, not a parent	X^2=7.297	1	413	.007
Difficulties piling up	Disability/health problem, No disability/Health problem	X^2=4.075	1	386	.044

Table 2. Statistically significant differences

Table 2 shows test statistics for differences highlighted in the report where these reached the level of statistical significance. All of the results are for chi-square test of association apart from the Stress scale tests where the Mann-Whitney U test was used to evaluate difference.

Appendix 2. Factors associated with low overall wellbeing and very high overall wellbeing

Factors tested for association with low overall wellbeing

Indicator [Reference category]	Phi	p-value	p-value (exact)	Adjusted p-value	n	Reference category % with low wellbeing	Test category % with low wellbeing	Relative Risk	Relative Risk Lower	Relative Risk Upper
In the last few weeks how often have you felt full of energy? [Hardly ever/Never] Often/always/Some of the time/Occasionally	0.455	0.000	0.000	0.000	413	70.7%	20.7%	3.42	2.66	4.39
In the last few weeks how often have you felt proud? [Hardly ever/Never] Often/always/Some of the time/Occasionally	0.444	0.000	0.000	0.000	410	63.8%	18.7%	3.41	2.58	4.49
Everyone has ups and downs in their life. In the last month, how often have you felt things were going your way? [Never/Almost never] Very often/Fairly often/Sometimes	0.431	0.000	0.000	0.000	410	69.4%	21.8%	3.18	2.48	4.08
In the last few weeks how often have you felt optimistic? [Hardly ever/Never] Often/always/Some of the time/Occasionally	0.385	0.000	0.000	0.000	410	69.6%	23.9%	2.92	2.29	3.71
How happy are you with the way you look? [Not Happy] Happy	0.357	0.000	0.000	0.000	413	55.4%	20.4%	2.72	2.06	3.59
Do you feel safe at home? [Hardly ever/Never] Always/Sometimes	0.340	0.000	0.000	0.000	415	56.3%	22.1%	2.54	1.95	3.31
How are you coping financially? [Quite/Very difficult] Living comfortably/Doing alright/Getting by	0.332	0.000	0.000	0.000	417	56.7%	22.8%	2.49	1.92	3.23
Do you have a person who believes you are a success? [No] Yes	0.319	0.000	0.000	0.000	413	71.7%	26.9%	2.66	2.09	3.38

In the last few weeks how often have you felt lonely? [Often/always] Some of the time/Occasionally/Hardly ever/Never	0.306	0.000	0.000	0.000	413	61.2%	25.6%	2.39	1.86	3.07
In the last few weeks how often have you felt angry? [Often/always] Some of the time/Occasionally/Hardly ever/Never	0.304	0.000	0.000	0.000	412	62.7%	25.8%	2.43	1.89	3.12
Everyone has ups and downs in their life. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them? [Very often] Fairly often/Sometimes/Almost never/Never	0.303	0.000	0.000	0.000	409	76.9%	28.4%	2.71	2.14	3.43
Are you in education, employment or training? [Not working/in education/training] Working/Education/Training]	0.283	0.000	0.000	0.000	417	49.7%	22.4%	2.21	1.68	2.92
Do you have a person who tells you when you've done well? [No] Yes	0.272	0.000	0.000	0.000	415	65.5%	27.8%	2.36	1.83	3.04
Do you feel settled at home? [Hardly ever/Never] Always/Sometimes	0.271	0.000	0.000	0.000	416	63.9%	27.9%	2.29	1.78	2.95
Everyone has ups and downs in their life. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? [Never/Almost never] Very often/Fairly often/Sometimes	0.264	0.000	0.000	0.000	414	58.0%	26.7%	2.17	1.68	2.81
Do you have a person you can trust? [No] Yes	0.250	0.000	0.000	0.000	416	64.7%	28.8%	2.25	1.74	2.91
Everyone has ups and downs in their life. In the last month, how often have you felt unable to control the important things in your life? [Very often] Fairly often/Sometimes/Almost never/Never	0.242	0.000	0.000	0.000	410	65.2%	29.1%	2.24	1.72	2.92
Do you trust your worker? [Hardly ever/Never] Always/Sometimes	0.217	0.000	0.000	0.002	340	51.9%	27.8%	1.87	1.40	2.49
In the last few weeks how often have you felt afraid? [Often/always] Some of the time/Occasionally/Hardly ever/Never	0.217	0.000	0.000	0.001	409	64.1%	29.5%	2.18	1.64	2.89

Do you have a person who listens to you? [No] Yes	0.200	0.000	0.000	0.002	417	70.8%	30.5%	2.32	1.72	3.12
Do you feel safe in neighbourhood? [Hardly ever/Never] Always/Sometimes	0.178	0.000	0.001	0.008	413	56.8%	29.8%	1.91	1.41	2.58
Do you have a really good friend? [No] Yes	0.155	0.002	0.002	0.026	416	49.3%	29.7%	1.66	1.24	2.22
Is it easy to get in touch with your worker? [Hardly ever/Never] All or most of the time/Sometimes	0.146	0.007	0.012	0.132	338	58.3%	31.5%	1.85	1.27	2.69
Disability [Yes] No	0.136	0.007	0.008	0.097	394	42.4%	28.6%	1.48	1.12	1.96
Can you connect to the internet from your home? [No] Yes	0.125	0.011	0.016	0.159	414	51.4%	30.8%	1.67	1.18	2.36
Do you feel involved in your pathway planning? [All or most of the time] Hardly ever/never/sometimes, Don't have one, Don't know	0.112	0.022	0.029	0.262	417	41.3%	29.7%	1.39	1.06	1.83
Are you a parent? [No] Yes/Pregnant/Partner pregnant	0.100	0.041	0.047	0.377	416	35.2%	22.4%	1.57	0.99	2.51
Have you got a smart phone [No] Yes	0.092	0.060	0.074	0.517	417	48.4%	31.9%	1.52	1.03	2.25
Has someone explained to you why you were in care? [No/Would like to know more] Yes	0.067	0.172	0.179	0.894	417	38.8%	31.3%	1.24	0.92	1.66
Number of leaving care workers in the last 12 months [Two or more] One	0.048	0.352	0.354	1.418	369	36.8%	32.0%	1.15	0.86	1.54
Do you have a partner (are you in a relationship)? [No] Yes	0.029	0.552	0.590	1.770	416	34.2%	31.4%	1.09	0.82	1.45
Gender [Female] Male	0.006	0.904	0.914	0.914	395	31.9%	31.4%	1.02	0.76	1.36
Do you know who your worker is now? [No] Yes	-0.028	0.562	0.593	1.185	417	30.3%	33.7%	0.90	0.62	1.30
Do you have a pet? [No] Yes	-0.080	0.103	0.115	0.690	417	29.8%	37.4%	0.80	0.61	1.05

Table 3. Independent binary variables tested for association with low overall wellbeing.

Factors tested for association with very high overall wellbeing

Indicator [Reference category]	Phi	p-value	p-value (exact)	Adujsted p-value	n	Reference category % with very high wellbeing	Test category % with very high wellbeing	Relative Risk	Lower	Upper
In the last few weeks how often have you felt proud? [Often/always] Some of the time/Occasionally/Hardly ever/Never	0.49	0.000	0.000	0.000	410	66.3%	14.6%	4.53	3.34	6.13
In the last few weeks how often have you felt optimistic? [Often/always] Some of the time/Occasionally/Hardly ever/Never	0.47	0.000	0.000	0.000	410	69.3%	15.8%	4.38	3.28	5.85
Everyone has ups and downs in their life. In the last month, how often have you felt things were going your way? [Very often] Fairly often/Sometimes/Almost never/Never	0.43	0.000	0.000	0.000	410	80.0%	19.2%	4.17	3.23	5.39
In the last few weeks how often have you felt full of energy? [Often/always] Some of the time/Occasionally/Hardly ever/Never	0.40	0.000	0.000	0.000	413	64.3%	18.1%	3.56	2.67	4.73
Everyone has ups and downs in their life. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them? [Never/Almost never] Very often/Fairly often/Sometimes	0.39	0.000	0.000	0.000	409	48.0%	12.5%	3.86	2.68	5.55
How happy are you with the way you look? [Happy] Not happy	0.38	0.000	0.000	0.000	413	45.7%	12.0%	3.80	2.61	5.52

In the last few weeks how often have you felt angry? [Hardly ever/Never] Often/always/Some of the time/Occasionally	0.34	0.000	0.000	0.000	412	50.0%	16.4%	3.04	2.22	4.17
Everyone has ups and downs in their life. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? [Never/Almost never] Very often/Fairly often/Sometimes	0.34	0.000	0.000	0.000	414	56.4%	18.8%	3.01	2.24	4.04
Everyone has ups and downs in their life. In the last month, how often have you felt unable to control the important things in your life? [Very often] Fairly often/Sometimes/Almost never/Never	0.33	0.000	0.000	0.000	410	45.8%	15.4%	2.97	2.13	4.14
Do you feel settled at home? [Always] Sometimes/Hardly ever/Never	0.30	0.000	0.000	0.000	416	37.9%	11.7%	3.25	2.13	4.94
In the last few weeks how often have you felt afraid? [Hardly ever/Never] Often/always/Some of the time/Occasionally	0.30	0.000	0.000	0.000	409	37.1%	10.7%	3.45	2.19	5.45
Do you feel safe at home? [Always] Sometimes/Hardly ever/Never	0.28	0.000	0.000	0.000	415	33.9%	8.1%	4.16	2.31	7.51
In the last few weeks how often have you felt lonely? [Hardly ever/Never] Often/always/Some of the time/Occasionally	0.27	0.000	0.000	0.000	413	43.5%	17.6%	2.47	1.79	3.40
Do you feel safe in neighbourhood? [Always] Sometimes/Hardly ever/Never	0.26	0.000	0.000	0.000	413	34.3%	11.3%	3.03	1.90	4.83
How are you coping financially? [Living comfortably/Doing alright] Quite/Very difficult/Getting by	0.24	0.000	0.000	0.000	417	36.1%	15.3%	2.36	1.63	3.40
Are you in education, employment or training? [Working/Education/Training] Not working/in education/training	0.21	0.000	0.000	0.000	417	33.1%	14.1%	2.34	1.54	3.56

Do you trust your worker? [Always] Sometimes/Hardly ever/Never	0.19	0.001	0.000	0.011	340	30.5%	11.1%	2.75	1.44	5.22
Do you have a person you can trust? [Yes] No	0.17	0.001	0.000	0.007	416	28.2%	5.9%	4.80	1.58	14.56
Do you feel involved in your pathway planning? [All or most of the time] Hardly ever/never/sometimes, Don't have one, Don't know	0.16	0.001	0.001	0.026	417	33.0%	18.6%	1.77	1.26	2.49
Do you have a really good friend? [Yes] No	0.16	0.001	0.001	0.021	416	28.8%	10.1%	2.84	1.38	5.84
Do you have a person who believes you are a success? [Yes] No	0.14	0.004	0.004	0.088	413	28.1%	9.4%	2.97	1.27	6.96
Do you have a person who tells you when you've done well? [Yes] No	0.13	0.008	0.007	0.169	415	27.8%	10.9%	2.55	1.17	5.52
Is it easy to get in touch with your worker? [All or most of the time] Sometimes/Hardly ever/Never	0.12	0.024	0.030	0.659	338	29.8%	18.0%	1.66	1.04	2.63
Do you have a person who listens to you? [Yes] No	0.10	0.045	0.053	1.109	417	26.7%	8.3%	3.21	0.84	12.21
Disability [No] Yes	0.08	0.100	0.110	2.203	394	28.6%	20.8%	1.38	0.93	2.03
Do you have a partner (are you in a relationship)? [Yes] No	0.08	0.122	0.131	2.497	416	30.1%	23.2%	1.30	0.93	1.80
Can you connect to the internet from your home? [Yes] No	0.07	0.161	0.236	3.781	414	26.8%	16.2%	1.65	0.78	3.50
Has someone explained to you why you were in care? [Yes] No/Would like to know more	0.07	0.174	0.188	3.388	417	27.3%	20.4%	1.34	0.87	2.05
Are you a parent? [Yes/Pregnant/Partner pregnant] No	0.06	0.229	0.225	3.828	416	31.3%	24.4%	1.29	0.86	1.92
Number of leaving care workers in the last 12 months [One] Two or more	0.03	0.526	0.613	9.188	369	26.2%	23.2%	1.13	0.77	1.66
Have you got a smart phone [Yes] No	0.02	0.683	0.832	9.149	417	25.9%	22.6%	1.15	0.59	2.25

Do you know who your worker is now?										
[Yes] No	0.02	0.701	0.772	10.807	417	25.8%	23.7%	1.09	0.70	1.70
Gender										
[Male] Female	0.02	0.761	0.818	10.638	395	26.5%	25.1%	1.05	0.75	1.47
Do you have a pet?										
[Yes] No	0.01	0.809	0.822	9.859	417	26.3%	25.2%	1.04	0.75	1.45

Table 4. Independent binary variables tested for association with very high overall wellbeing

Table 2 and Table 3 display the results from a series of univariate analyses aimed at understanding the association of low and very high wellbeing with each of the other aspects explored within the survey. Binary variables were derived from existing variables, and tested individually for association with the derived low and very high wellbeing variables.

The tables includes the Phi value, which is a measure of the strength of an association between the two variables. The coefficient can range from -1 to 1, with a value of 0 indicating no association and values close to +1 or -1 respectively indicating a strong positive or negative association. The tables also display the relative risk value for each variable. This shows the percentage in the reference category with low wellbeing divided by the percentage in the test category with low wellbeing for each variable. A relative risk value of 2 would allow us to say for example that young people not in employment, education or training were twice as likely to have low overall wellbeing as those who were in employment, education or training.

The p-values for the Fisher's exact test have also been included within both tables. The fact that we are exploring the relationship between low and very high wellbeing and a wide range of other variables increases the likelihood that we will find an association between two of the variables by chance (rather than there being a true relationship present). This phenomenon is referred to as the multiple comparisons problem, and an overview of the problem and approaches to dealing with multiple comparisons is given by Chen et al. (2017).

As we increase the number of variables that we are assessing, it is therefore prudent to adjust for the fact that we are conducting multiple comparisons. The Bonferroni-Holm adjustment for multiple comparisons was applied to the p-values resulting from our univariate analyses in order to prevent an increase in the Type I error rate (that is, an increase in the chance of finding an effect when there is no effect present). These adjusted p-values are also presented in Table 2 and Table 3, and should be taken as a more reliable indication of a relationship than the unadjusted p-values.

General factors most strongly associated with low and very high overall wellbeing are shown in Table 5 and Table 6.

Factors most strongly associated with low overall wellbeing	Relative risk ratio	Phi value
Happiness with appearance	2.7	0.36
Feeling safe at home	2.5	0.34
Coping financially	2.5	0.33
Having a person who believes they are a success	2.7	0.32
In education, employment or training	2.2	0.28
Having a person who tells them they've done well	2.4	0.27
Feeling settled at home	2.3	0.27

Having a person they trust	2.2	0.25
Trusting their support practitioner	1.9	0.22
Having a person who listens	2.3	0.20
In education, employment or training	2.2	0.28

Table 5. Factors most strongly associated with low overall wellbeing

Care leavers' happiness with their appearance had the strongest association with low overall wellbeing, with over half (55%) of care leavers who indicated they were not happy with how they looked having low wellbeing, compared to just 20% of care leavers who were more happy with how they looked. Those who were not happy with how they looked were therefore 2.7 times more likely to have low wellbeing than those who were happier with how they looked. This ratio is referred to as relative risk, and this is shown for each factor in Table 4 above.

Factors most strongly associated with very high overall wellbeing	Relative risk ratio	Phi value
Happiness with appearance	3.8	0.38
Feeling settled at home	3.2	0.30
Feeling safe at home	4.2	0.28
Feeling safe in neighbourhood	3.0	0.26
Coping financially	2.4	0.24
In education, employment or training	2.3	0.21

Table 6. Factors most strongly associated with very high overall wellbeing

Table 5 shows factors most strongly associated with very high overall wellbeing. Again, happiness with appearance had the strongest association, with 46% of those that gave high scores having high overall wellbeing, compared to just 12% of those that were less happy with how they looked, a rate 3.8 times higher. Feeling safe and settled at home and in their neighbourhood, and having financial security and being in education, employment or training were the other critical factors influencing very high overall wellbeing.

Understanding the collective influence of multiple factors on young people's wellbeing

While Table 2 and Table 3 above provides us with an understanding of the individual factors that are associated with low wellbeing, it can often be more informative to determine how these factors may combine and interact to collectively contribute towards the wellbeing of a child or young person. One common approach to exploring this is through the use of binary logistic regression models, such as those applied by Coram Voice (2022) in their What Makes Life Good report. This report analysed Bright Spots findings across 21 local authorities in England between 2017 and 2019. By including multiple factors within one model, binary logistic regression can provide us with 'adjusted Odds Ratios', which offer a more measured estimate of the effect of

each parameter in the model after accounting for the influence of the other factors. As such, these can be a more accurate representation of the influence of any given factor on wellbeing.

It was hoped that this analysis could be repeated on the data from Scotland's Bright Spots surveys, however upon assessment this was not deemed to be appropriate, primarily because of the much smaller sample size (n=428 young people, as opposed to n=1,804), and the decision was taken to present associations based solely on the univariate analyses.

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.

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