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Comparing Leaving-Care Policy and Practice Across the Four Nations of the United Kingdom: Exploring Similarities, Differences, and Implementation Gaps

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ABSTRACT *From an international comparative perspective, the four nations of the United Kingdom have robust legal and policy frameworks governing care leaving. Measures taken include access to aftercare workers; pathway planning; introduction of extended care arrangements (permitting young people to remain in placement beyond 18 years); and specific types of financial support. The paper explores commonalities and differences in approaches across the United Kingdom and illuminates how resource constraints, placement availability, workforce challenges and cultural norms may result in implementation gaps and a postcode lottery of provision. Findings lend weight to calls for attentiveness to and systematic evaluation of the implementation process to understand the challenges encountered in embedding effective support for care leavers. Findings also highlight the value of further comparative studies that explore the systems and subsystems of law, policy, and practice in the four nations to contribute to more-informed leaving care policy and practice.*

Keywords: care leavers; out-of-home care; leaving care; extended care; youth transitions; comparative policy

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Transitions to adulthood start at different points and with differential access to available resources and support. For care-experienced young people, these transitions require the management of multiple changes simultaneously, such as leaving education, leaving care, starting new education or employment, and living independently (Stein and Munro 2008). Moreover, the advent of the coronavirus pandemic made the lives of those leaving care more precarious, with young people reporting their experiences as “a massive struggle” (Roberts et al. 2021a, p. 81).

In Western Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States care-experienced young people negotiate multiple changes in their lives at a younger age (usually by the age of 18) and with less support than young people in the general population, resulting in “accelerated and compressed” transitions (Stein and Munro 2008). In a study of practice across 11 European countries, the majority of young people left care by 18 years of age and their transitions were accelerated, compressed, and linear with no opportunity to return to their care settings if initial decisions proved problematic (Stein 2019).

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (General Assembly of the United Nations 2010, p. 19) acknowledge the importance of preparation and planning; support during the process of transition; and the provision of aftercare support, including but not limited to financial support. However, there remain wide variations, within and between countries, in the extent to which this is reflected in legislation and policy and effectively implemented in practice. For example, Strahl et al.’s (2021) multilevel comparison of care-leaving policy and legislation in 36 countries reported that few countries have well-developed care-leaving legislation and that limited aftercare support is provided beyond legal adulthood, even when existing legislation permitted this. Furthermore, despite considerable interest in the implementation of extended care arrangements, “there are wide variations in how this is conceptualised, legislated, funded, and implemented” (van Breda et al. 2020, p. 1).

This paper contributes to the existing literature comparing and contrasting leaving-care legislation, policy, and practices in different countries and exploring implications for young people (Munro et al. 2016; Storø et al. 2019; Mendes and Rogers 2020). The paper focuses on leaving-care policy provision across the four nations of the United Kingdom: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Each jurisdiction has robust legal frameworks governing care leaving, however, there are implementation gaps and challenges in embedding and sustaining interventions (McGhee 2017; Dennell et al. 2022; Kelly et al. 2022). The critical reflection on barriers and enablers to support considered in this paper are particularly important given ongoing global concerns regarding poor outcomes for this group, and the risk of the care gap between care leavers and their peers in the general population widening (Refaeli et al. 2023). The findings and lessons from this UK analysis also have wider international applicability, as countries seek to both implement reforms and ensure their effectiveness.

The United Kingdom’s Devolved Political Structure

The United Kingdom has been characterised by an unsettled political geography, in which Welsh, Scottish, and Irish nationalists have challenged their enrolment into political union (Clarke 2009). Discourses of national identity and many years of political differences, contributed to the drive towards forms of devolution. By the late 1990s

devolution saw some powers that had previously been held centrally by the UK parliament and government transferred to Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. These nations were then accorded the powers to make laws and deliver public services, meaning that decisions are taken closer to the communities they affect. Accordingly, the last three decades have seen policy shifts and differences in practice across these temporal and geographical spaces and changes in the political landscape of postdevolution and the areas that constitute the United Kingdom.

However, the UK parliament and government retain some powers across the United Kingdom including, for example, defence, immigration, and foreign affairs (“reserved powers”); whereas, others are “devolved”. Legislation has been enacted to establish the devolved administrations and outline, amend, and extend the specific powers held by each nation (Scotland Act 1998, Northern Ireland Act 1998, Government of Wales Act 1998; Government of Wales Act 2006; Scotland Act 2012). The devolution settlements and administrative arrangements in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland do differ, but each has its own legislature and government and each can deliver primary and secondary legislation in specific policy areas that are relevant to child welfare, allowing for greater policy divergence.¹ In England, the largest nation in the United Kingdom, legislative power is retained by the UK parliament and devolution of some executive powers to regional clusters of local authorities has occurred at a much slower pace (see House of Commons 2023). These developments present rich opportunities for natural experiments comparing policies and practice across the four nations, but the variations in political and administrative structures and the availability and comparability of data also make this a complex task.

Legal and Policy Frameworks

Across the four nations of the United Kingdom, specialist and mandatory leaving-care legislation was enacted between 2000 and 2002 (Children [Leaving Care] Act 2000, Children [Leaving Care] Act (Northern Ireland) 2002, Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001). The acts and regulations marked a departure from permissive or discretionary support for young people leaving care. They placed new duties with local authorities and trusts to assess and meet needs, provide personal advisers (through and after-care support workers in Scotland), and develop pathway plans that should outline the services and support to be offered to meet individual assessed needs across domains including education, employment, health, finances, social needs, relationships, and accommodation. The role of the personal adviser is to provide advice and support that a young person needs to make a successful transition to adulthood. They are also responsible for monitoring and reviewing pathway plans.

Over time, each jurisdiction has introduced further legislation and policy guidelines that have served to strengthen the duties placed on local authorities and trusts to protect and promote the welfare of care leavers (Children and Families Act 2014, Children and Social Work Act 2017, Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014, Children [Leaving Care] Regulations (NI) 2005, Standards for Leaving Care Services in NI (DHSSPSNI 2012), Adoption and Children Act (NI) 2022, Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014). Factors giving rise to these developments include research and administrative data demonstrating the persistence of poor outcomes amongst care

leavers; lobbying by children’s charities and advocacy organisations for reform; growing cross-party recognition of the issues and the longer-term costs to the public purse of failing to provide additional support to improve outcomes (van Breda et al. 2020).

Across the United Kingdom, local authorities, trusts, and a range of public agencies have a *duty* to act as corporate parents to care leavers—that is, they should provide the kind of support that any good parent would provide for their own children (Grauberg 2019). In England this is articulated as “supporting, encouraging and guiding [them] to lead healthy, rounded and fulfilled lives” (Department for Education 2018, p. 8) and in Scotland, as taking the action necessary “to uphold the rights and safeguard the well-being ... through which physical, emotional, spiritual and educational development is promoted” (Scottish Government 2015, p. 7).

There are also a number of wider developments that are common to all four nations, including increasing the upper age limit for access to services; relaxing conditions surrounding education, training, and employment as a precondition for access to support; and extending the upper age limit for remaining within foster placements to 21 years (formal extended care placements). However, there are variations in how these are enacted across the United Kingdom and the extent to which they are serving their intended purposes in practice.

The remainder of this paper examines similarities and differences in policy and illuminates gaps between policy and practice realities. It focuses upon (a) pathway planning and the personal adviser role, which are intended to strengthen preparation and planning; (b) extended care placements as a measure that is intended to smooth the process of transition; and (c) financial support, as one aspect of after-care provision.

Personal Advisers and Pathway Plans

The Children (Leaving Care Act) 2000 (in England and Wales) strengthened duties placed with local authorities to improve preparation, planning, and consistency of support for young people leaving care. Central to the act were duties to assess and meet young people’s individual needs, to provide personal advisers, and to develop pathway planning for young people. In the Welsh context, under the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014, local authorities are also required to develop pathway plans for young people leaving care to consider the holistic practical and emotional needs of care leavers, including health, accommodation, education, training and employment, relationships, finance, and independent living skills.

In Northern Ireland, the Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) (2002), the amended Children (NI) Order 1995, the Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (NI) 2005 and the Standards for Leaving Care Services in NI (DHSSPSNI 2012) outline core duties to assess need, keep in contact with care leavers, and provide support from a personal adviser and a pathway plan. In Scotland, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, as amended, set out that local authorities have a legal duty to prepare young people for leaving care, rather than using the personal adviser model, young people work with designated and dedicated “throughcare” and “aftercare” teams based on an eligible needs assessment.

In England, the Children and Social Work Act (2017) placed a duty with local authorities to offer personal adviser support to care leavers up to age 25, irrespective of whether they are engaged in education or training. In Northern Ireland, the new

Adoption and Children Act (NI) (2022) extended after-care provision for young people leaving care up to age 25, regardless of their engagement in education, training, or employment, and provided further clarity on corporate parenting responsibilities. In Scotland, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 amended the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to extend duties relating to corporate parenting and after-care services for care leavers up to age 25. The intention is that young people's care should be based on their developmental and individual needs rather than bureaucratic constructs.

It is important that these policy changes have been made to enable access to support for care leavers, but this is problematised by implementation gaps. Increasing the upper age limit for access to a personal adviser (from 21 to 25 years)² needs to be accompanied by effective communication to ensure that care leavers are aware of enhanced entitlements. Adequate staffing and resourcing also need to be available if authorities are to meet their increasing statutory duties, including provision of support beyond 21 years, but this is not always the case. For example, the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2018, p. 13) surveyed the 22 local authorities in Wales (16 responded) and although the majority were providing a personal adviser for young people up to age 25, four local authorities were not meeting this requirement due to difficulties with recruitment of personal advisers (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2018). This suggests that, where staffing levels are low, care-experienced young people over 21 may not have access to a personal adviser and the advice and support they are entitled to.

Briheim-Crookall et al.'s (2020, p. 50) analysis of survey data from 21 English local authorities on 1,804 care leavers found that in one local authority every single care leaver reported that they knew who their worker was; whereas, in another, 17 per cent did not know their worker. Similar issues have been noted in Northern Ireland where only 10 per cent of those eligible were receiving leaving care support services in March 2020 and the number of young people without a written pathway plan increased from 39 in March 2018 to 159 in March 2020 (HSCB 2020, p. 60). The number without a needs assessment increased from 14 in March 2018 to 79 in March 2020. In addition, 209 were awaiting allocation of a personal adviser (compared to 128 in March 2019) (HSCB 2020, p. 60). It was suggested that these gaps in support related to workforce challenges and insufficient numbers of social workers and personal advisers (HSCB 2020, p. 61).

Young people have noted the positive impacts of working with personal advisers (Briheim-Crookall et al. 2020), but the functionality of pathway planning has been questioned. The pathway plan is intended to be a vehicle to understand a "young person's continuing need for care, accommodation and support" (Department for Education 2015, p.19). However, analysis of a sample of pathway plans in England found that housing and engagement in education, employment, and training (EET) tend to be afforded greater attention than other dimensions of need (Munro et al. 2011). Moreover, although there is an expectation that young people are active participants in the process (Mannay et al. 2015), research suggests that this is not always realised in practice (Munro et al. 2011; Kelly et al. 2016). In the Staying Put pilot evaluation peer researchers coined the phrase "pathway planning syndrome" to capture practice that they perceived was focused on bureaucratic compliance with the statutory requirement to complete the paperwork rather than a meaningful process designed to assess and respond to their needs and any changes in circumstances (Munro et al. 2012).

Additionally, past experiences of trauma, multiple changes of worker and being let down can mean that young people may develop survivalist self-reliance and be reluctant to seek support (Barratt et al. 2020). This may be further reinforced by the persistent use of the language and discourse of independence (rather than interdependence) within leaving care services. Hung and Appleton (2016) found that past experiences of plans being disrupted by matters outside the young person's control meant that care-experienced young people often were reluctant to make pathway plans. Kelly et al. (2016) reported that young people found pathway planning documentation to be patronising and age inappropriate and considered pathway plans to be somewhat redundant as unforeseeable changes and resource constraints limited their relevance to postcare lives. There were also concerns that multi-agency involvement in the planning process was inadequate. These findings indicate that pathway planning processes need to diversify to promote young people's engagement and to mobilise after-care support across the sector. Pathway plans should also be timely and regularly reviewed to respond to changing needs and circumstances (Munro et al. 2012; Kelly et al. 2016).

Given these complexities it could be argued that social workers and leaving care workers require additional training to assist them in completing the process in a way that is meaningful for those involved. However, interviews with professionals also serve to highlight frustration that operating within the constraints of the care system means that social workers are not able to provide the level and types of support that they recognise would be desirable, and in some cases, they perceive that what is offered is actually contrary to young people's needs and interests (Kelly et al. 2016; Munro et al. 2022). Constraints workers identified include workload allocations that force professionals to ration care and try to distribute the limited time they have or to prioritise those in crisis; a lack of service availability outside business hours; the shortage of suitable local accommodation to meet the heterogeneous needs of care leavers; and high thresholds for access to adult mental health and social care services (Brown et al. 2019).

COVID-19 also impacted the delivery of social services, leaving professionals constrained in their practice responses. Welsh Government (2020b, n.p.) guidance emphasised that it was "imperative" that pathway plans continue to be developed and completed with the involvement of professionals and young people, but this was accompanied by the caveat "as is reasonably practicable". Research with care leavers in Wales and Northern Ireland reported that while some young people experienced a continuance of support during the pandemic, others found it difficult to establish any contact with their personal advisers and were faced with navigating difficulties related to housing, finance, and well-being without the necessary support (Kelly et al. 2020; Roberts et al. 2021b).

Accordingly, whilst pathway planning is a key policy, in practice, both young people and practitioners have reported that the implementation does not necessarily engender the supportive framework that was intended in their design. The reliance on a key individual, such as the personal adviser, may be complicated in terms of the high turnover of staff in social care, and the circumstances of the pandemic made apparent the difficulties that young people can face in the absence of necessary support. Accounts from young people and practitioners also suggest that pathway plans need to move beyond being a bureaucratic exercise and be developed to support the individual needs of care

leavers—offering practical and timely support that responds to the subjective requirements of young people.

Extended Care

Legislation has been enacted across the United Kingdom to place extended care on a statutory footing, but there are variations in eligibility criteria and disparities in implementation support across the United Kingdom (Stabler et al. 2023b). In England, Northern Ireland, and Wales the operationalisation of extended care is in line with van Breda et al.’s definition as “a measure which allows *eligible groups* of care-leavers to voluntarily opt to remain in their *care placements* under certain conditions, until a later age” (2020, p. 2). In Scotland, Continuing Care offers a broader definition and refers to a local authority’s duty to provide young people who were last cared for in foster, formal kinship, or residential care with

the same accommodation and other assistance as was being provided for the person by the authority ... immediately before the person ceased to be looked after. (Scottish Government 2015, p. 37; emphasis added)

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 builds on the principles and philosophical underpinning provided in the Staying Put Scotland Guidance and emphasises the importance of young people being “encouraged, enabled and empowered” (Scottish Government 2013, p. 13) to remain in positive care settings until they have developed the practical skills, “emotional readiness” (Scottish Government 2013, p. 13), and networks of supportive relationships that can underpin successful adult life. The combined provisions of Part 11 (Continuing Care) and Part 10 (Aftercare) enable eligible young people to “stay put” in foster, residential, or other care settings, up until age 21 and then receive after-care support until age 26.

In every nation except Scotland, only young people in foster placements are eligible to enter extended care arrangements up to age 21 (or 25 in Wales). In England, exploration of the potential of offering Staying Put to young people in residential care identified potential barriers because children and adult social care have different regulations and inspection arrangements; potential challenges in safeguarding children and young people across a broad age range; and financial considerations (e.g., any reduction in levels of remuneration to providers once young people turn 18 years would serve as a disincentive for social services to offer Staying Put) (National Children’s Bureau et al. 2014).

The option of remaining with foster carers is provided through Staying Put (England), Continuing Care (Scotland), Going the Extra Mile (GEM) (Northern Ireland) and When I Am Ready (Wales). There is not a requirement to be in education, employment or training (EET) to be eligible to enter such arrangements at age 18. In Wales, placements with former carers may continue beyond 21 and up to 25, but these extensions are only permissible if young people are involved in a programme of education or training. However, extended care continues to be challenged by cultural assumptions, resourcing, and differential provision depending on care histories (Access All Areas NI 2017).

The historical legacy of abrupt endings in state care, has generated a perception amongst care-experienced young people that it is “normal” to leave care at 16–18 years, which may influence their decisions about whether or not to stay (Munro et al. 2011, 2012). This was illustrated in an evaluation of the implementation of Continuing Care in Scotland, which highlighted that a whole-system–culture shift is required to move from historic practices that were built on the expectation that young people would leave care at 16–18 years and become “independent” and “self-sufficient” and to instil and embed policy that promotes extended care and interdependence (Dennell et al. 2022).

A further key barrier is resource and placement shortages (McGhee 2017). The duties local authorities have regarding care leavers have increased against a backdrop of cuts in public funding. Accordingly, across the four nations attention has been drawn to the gap between central funding and the expenditure incurred by local authorities in fulfilling their statutory duties concerning care leavers and maintaining placements (Fostering Network 2018; van Breda et al. 2020; Stabler et al. 2023b). Local authorities in Wales have also raised concerns that increased demand for When I Am Ready placements would result in financial pressures and have a detrimental impact on placement choice for younger children in care, given the challenges of recruiting and retaining sufficient foster carers to meet demand (Care Inspectorate Wales 2019). This applies across the four nations, and despite legislative directives to offer extended care, in practice, shortages persist and maintaining foster placements beyond age 18 exacerbates current pressures within the system and reduces the availability of placements for younger children (House of Commons Education Committee 2017).

Lack of resources may influence how proactively extended-care placements are promoted and whether or not young people are made aware of their entitlements. This was illustrated in a small-scale study exploring residential practitioners’ experiences of implementing Staying Put in Scotland, which suggested that, in the context of resource constraints, practitioners felt that policy developments were not being effectively embedded in practice (“its cash before care and that’s the case”) (McGhee 2017, p. 9). Similarly, analysis of data in England revealed wide variations in the proportion of young people in Staying Put (foster care after age 18) between local authorities (14 per cent, range 5 per cent to 29 per cent) and heavy reliance on transitional placements in semi-independent or supported accommodation (49 per cent, range 27 per cent to 78 per cent across 10 local authorities) for 16- to 18-year-olds (Munro et al. 2022). Heavy reliance on semi-independent provision was common in spite of concerns about the variable quality of these unregulated placements (Children’s Commissioner 2020a).³

Another barrier to the provision of extended-care placements is the level of resourcing and support provided to foster carers. The option of remain with foster carers is conditional upon their willingness to enter into these arrangements, and concerns have been raised that access to extended-care placements has been undermined by the absence of national minimum fostering allowances for foster carers who enter into these arrangements (Dennell et al. 2022). In some areas foster carers experience a drop-in income, meaning that it is not financially viable for them to maintain placements even though they would be willing to do so in principle (Fostering Network 2018; Welsh Parliament 2023).

These issues of resources, the availability of placements, and the extent to which foster carers can continue care, impact the number of young people who are able to access extended care. In England, 19 per cent of 18 year-old care leavers were living with former foster carers under Staying Put arrangements; amongst 19–21 year olds this figure dropped to 8 per cent (Department for Education 2022). In Northern Ireland, statistical returns for 2021–2022 show that one-third of care leavers ages 16 to 19 were living with former foster carers under the GEM Scheme (29 per cent of care leavers ages 16 to 18 and 38 per cent of care leavers age 19) (Department of Health 2023). The board’s annual report for 2019–2020, however, indicated that the numbers of young people availing of GEM placements are declining across the province (with the exception of one Trust area) and recommended additional financial support to minimise financial disincentives to continuing foster-care placements after age 18 (HSCB 2020). In Wales, 28 per cent of “looked-after” children whose “looked-after” episodes ceased between 16 and 18 years entered a When I Am Ready arrangement when they reached legal adulthood (Welsh Government 2021).

In Scotland, whilst the official data reports a numerical increase year-on-year in the uptake of Continuing Care (Scottish Government 2021a), there remains a concern that many eligible young people who might benefit from extended care are not availing of this provision. Whilst issues around accurate recording of data are highlighted (Scottish Government 2021a), recent research (Dennell et al. 2022) revealed other potential factors including clarity of legislation; differences between placement types; and local and individual interpretations and implementation of legislation, policy, and guidance. Many of these factors were considered to have the potential to have a negative impact on a young person’s options regarding Continuing Care uptake (Dennell et al. 2022). According to Dennell et al. (2022, p. 6), “despite individual good practice examples, there remains considerable variation and inconsistency in understanding, interpretation and implementation in relation to continuing care”.

There is a significant gap in extended-care provision for young people leaving residential care who, except in Scotland, are not eligible. This gap perpetuates the inverse care law (greatest need/least care) (Hart 1971), as young people in residential care often have complex needs and yet they are not afforded the right to choose whether or not to remain in their placement beyond 18 (Children’s Commissioner for Wales 2017; Munro 2019).

Financial Support

A number of financial supports are available to care leavers across the four nations, but recent research has highlighted the nature and extent of poverty in care leavers’ lives and how this was exacerbated during the pandemic (Kelly et al. 2020; Munro et al. 2022). This section focuses on specific measures taken in respect of exemption from the payment of council tax, support with the cost of living, and heightened awareness of and responses to digital poverty.

Council Tax

Council tax is an annual fee charged by local authorities to cover the costs associated with provision of services, including, police and fire services, libraries and education services, waste collection and disposal, and transport and highway services. In Northern Ireland, there is a rates system that applies to homeowners only, so the Council Tax system is not relevant for young people transitioning out of care. However, in the other three nations, young people leaving the care system have been identified as being at high risk of falling into Council Tax debt, and the pace of the escalation of debt can be a frightening experience (Capron and Ayre 2015).

Responding to campaigns from care-experienced young people and the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant Alliance (McGhee 2018a, 2018b), in 2018, Scotland was first UK nation to allow care leavers under 26 years of age to be exempt from Council Tax (Scottish Government 2018a, 2018b). More recently, Wales has also put provisions into place to exempt care leavers ages 18 to 24 from Council Tax (Welsh Government 2022a).

In England, Council Tax exemption for care leavers is more complex and has been described as a postcode lottery of care-related poverty (Children's Society 2020). In January 2021, the government issued a letter to local authorities outlining that they could offer Council Tax reductions to care leavers on a discretionary basis. The "Fairer Start for Care Leavers" campaign has also supported the introduction of Council Tax exemptions in a number of local authorities. Twenty-nine of London's 33 local authorities now have some form of policy in place to exempt care leavers from paying the Council Tax (Children's Society 2021). Nonetheless, exemption is a post-code lottery, and, even in areas where care leavers can access an exemption in some areas, this is means tested to prove their eligibility (Foley and Library Specialists 2022). In the absence of automatic application of the exemption, the onus is on young people to know their entitlement and to navigate the complex application system, which can serve as a barrier to access and can be stigmatising.

Support with Cost of Living

Financial support with cost of living is a complex area, and there are variations in what must be provided versus discretionary supports. This section illustrates some of the measures in place across the four nations.

Care leavers in Northern Ireland who are under 18 are eligible for a personal allowance and support with costs of accommodation. Financial assistance must also be provided to meet the young person's assessed needs as outlined in their pathway plan, including costs related to education, training or employment, clothing, family contact, recreational activities, and therapeutic needs. Care leavers can also access a setting-up-home allowance of £2,500, although this payment has not increased commensurate with inflation. Trusts do not have to provide accommodation or personal allowances for care leavers ages 18 and over but should continue to provide support, particularly with costs related to supporting engagement in education, training, and employment. At this age, financial support—including floating support to live independently or in supported accommodation—is available from the social security agency and the NI Housing Executive. Care leavers, however, can face significant challenges in securing appropriate

housing often due to a lack of available social housing and unaffordable private rental properties (Department for Communities 2020). Access All Areas Northern Ireland (2017, p. 28) called for corporate parents to have a responsibility to “channel financial support or to top up benefits to help young people to maintain financial and housing stability.” However, any available support seems to be channelled through various agencies and means tested or based on a needs assessment. Guidance recommends that care leavers contact their local trusts for advice on available support and any additional financial support indicating that those not in contact with their local trust may have limited information concerning how to access the range of support available (VOYPIC 2022). The expert panel advising on Anti-Poverty Strategy for NI (Department for Communities 2020) highlighted the inadequacies of the welfare benefit system for youth experiencing poverty and recommended introducing antipoverty legislation to reduce poverty. However, political instability in Northern Ireland continues to stall potential policy developments informed by this report.

In England, care leavers can ask their local authority for £2,000 towards setting up home, making sure that they have the equipment and household items they need to set up safe, secure, and stable accommodation (Local Government Association 2017). However, the children’s commissioner for England (2020b) recommended that there should be improved local offers for care leavers, including through authorities offering free local travel, driving lessons, and business discounts and acting as a guarantor for accommodation. Evidence of good practice in this area can be found in the 10 local authorities that make up the Greater Manchester Combined Authority who established a Greater Manchester-wide Care Leavers Trust. In these areas care leavers receive free transport across the region until age 21 (Children’s Society 2021).

The Scottish Government has recently made a commitment (Scottish Government 2021b) to introduce a Care Experience Grant (Scottish Government 2021b). The intention is that the grant will comprise an £200 annual payment over 10 years to young people with care experience between the ages of 16 and 26. This is intended to provide an additional layer of financial security for those with care experience who may not have the same family support network that many of their peers are able to draw on.

In Wales, the Basic Income pilot has been introduced as an opportunity to provide care-experienced young people with the “best possible chance to make their way in life and the transition out of care better, easier and more positive” (Welsh Government 2022b, n.p). All looked-after young people turning 18 between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023, are eligible. Participants in the programme will receive 24 months of payments of £1600 per month (Hutt 2022). Payments are taxed so young people receive £1280 per month and can take on paid employment, which will not affect these payments. However, the pilot income would affect other benefits as this Basic Income would be paid instead of other benefits. Ministers have allocated £20 million to the delivery of this Basic Income pilot over the course of three years in recognition that “care-experienced people are disproportionately disadvantaged and are statistically more likely to experience issues such as homelessness, addiction and mental ill-health” (Welsh Government 2022b, n.p). An evaluation of the Basic Income pilot is underway, which should assist in understanding the benefits of universal financial support for young people leaving care.

Digital Poverty and Exclusion

The use of digital communication technology by care-experienced young people has mainly been approached hesitantly and from a risk paradigm (MacDonald et al. 2023). Yet research has illustrated the role that informal online social networks play in combating loneliness and supporting the well-being of care-experienced young people (Hammond et al. 2018). Young people in and leaving care have long since experienced barriers to accessing digital resources and having the autonomy and privacy to build relational networks online (Mannay et al. 2022; Stabler et al. 2023a).

The pandemic brought the issue of digital exclusion amongst care leavers into sharper focus. Studies have illustrated the problems experienced because of a lack of access to equipment and wi-fi (Kelly et al. 2020; McGhee and Roesch-March 2020; Roesch-Marsh et al. 2021; Roberts et al. 2021a, 2021b; Mannay et al. 2022; Munro et al. 2022). Young people facing digital exclusion and data poverty discussed how this was a barrier to accessing education and support for mental health and well-being, as well as creating a barrier to social interactions. Care leavers reported that they did not always have access to the Internet or have enough mobile data to maintain contact with services, friends, and family (Kelly et al. 2020).

The Scottish Government's Connected Scotland programme targeted help with access to digital devices, connection, training, and support for young care leavers (Scottish Government 2022). In England, a report by the Partnership for Young London and the Pan London Children in Care Council found that almost half of young care leavers faced difficulties connecting to the Internet daily (Children's Society 2021). Some positive steps have been taken to address digital exclusion in some authorities—for example, Islington Council's commitment to providing all care leavers with free wi-fi in their first year of living independently (Children's Society 2021). However, this is again a postcode lottery, as interventions and support systems are variable.

The Welsh Government (2020a) acknowledged that digital poverty is an issue and that inequalities were made more visible during the pandemic; understanding the links between digital exclusion, data poverty, and financial and social exclusion is a priority (Welsh Government 2021). In Northern Ireland, the Executive Office undertook a consultation on the digital divide and digital poverty; however, without a programme in place, strategies for tackling the issues identified and providing direct support to care-experienced young people experiencing digital poverty have not yet been published (NICVA 2022).

Although there has been a political commitment to tackling the digital divide and some initiatives to support digital inclusion for care leavers, much more needs to be delivered in policy and practice to ensure that care leavers do not continue to be disadvantaged in a society that is reliant on digital technology for communications with services, education providers, and social networks. While authorities have offered some targeted help, these interventions necessitate identifying as care experienced and applying for assistance that may vary across authority areas. Therefore, whilst opportunities to access digital devices and wi-fi connection are welcomed, it may be less stigmatising and more effective to ensure that care leavers have an adequate income that reduces the risk of digital exclusion, rather than expecting care leavers to negotiate the processes of applying for piecemeal interventions.

Concluding Discussion

Preparation, planning, and after-care support are foundational principles that promote the rights of young people leaving care (General Assembly of the United Nations 2010). Comparatively speaking, the four nations of the United Kingdom have robust legal and policy frameworks governing care leaving. This paper has explored the commonalities and differences in access to personal advisers and pathway planning, extended care placement provision, and specific types of financial support across the four nations. It also examined some of the reasons why, in spite of reforms, implementation gaps and challenges in embedding interventions persist.

Progressive developments in legislation, policy, and regulation surrounding care leaving have created opportunities to strengthen practice and improve outcomes; these include the relaxing of the requirement for young people to be in education, employment, or training to access personal adviser support beyond age 21; permitting those in residential care to benefit from extended-care placements in Scotland and the piloting and evaluation of Staying Close in England; and the Basic Income pilot in Wales. However, despite a strong foundational base and these progressive developments in policy, as McGhee (2017) acknowledges,

Legislation and policy provide only the enabling context; there are inherent complexities involved in delivery and practice. Cultural and organisational pressures, along with the motivations and drivers for individual young people, can result in a chaotic morass of often contradictory expectations. The danger is that young people's needs, and their right to care and ongoing support, can get lost. (p. 2)

This paper has recognised the value of personal advisers and pathway planning, but issues remain in transferring policy into practice. Workforce capacity issues and disparity in the range and quality of support available to care leavers means that not all care leavers have a personal adviser and pathway planning is sometimes interpreted by young people as a bureaucratic exercise rather than a supportive mechanism that recognises their individual requirements. This signals the need for more training and engagement with care-experienced young people to ensure that provisions are meaningful to them.

Furthermore, despite the widespread recognition of the role and value of extended care as a vehicle to improve outcomes for care leavers, in practice the proportion of care leavers benefitting has been lower than anticipated and there are wide variations in the proportion of young people in these arrangements in different local authorities and jurisdictions (Fostering Network 2018; Department for Education 2022; Munro et al. 2022). Such disparity in provision places an onus on young people leaving care to find out about cross-sector services available in their area and to be proactive in seeking access to support. Those who are not engaged with a personal adviser or after-care services and those with more-complex needs may find it particularly difficult to navigate these complex support systems. Accordingly, despite a strong legislative base, messages from research suggest a postcode lottery of provision, where not all young people can necessarily access their entitlements (Dennell et al. 2022; Munro et al. 2022). In terms of financial support, this was also impacted by a postcode lottery both between the four nations and within nations, that is characterised by differential interventions managed at the level of local authorities.

There have been calls to explore what support may be making a difference to young people at the local level and to share practice from the geographical areas where young people report a more positive experience (Briheim-Crookall et al. 2020). In both England and Northern Ireland, Benchmarking Forums bring together practitioners and managers from a number of local authorities and trusts to exchange ideas and discuss service delivery (Pinkerton 2021). Such networking activities can promote the implementation of new practices quickly (Greenhalgh et al. 2004) and their benefits should not be underestimated; however, this paper has illustrated the ways in which a lack of necessary resources and a depleted workforce can create significant implementation gaps.

It is noteworthy that the rapid expansion of duties relative to care leavers has occurred during periods of austerity and budgetary cuts, resulting in both heightened demands and competing demands for resources (Munro 2018; Pinkerton 2021). In this climate, progress may be undermined by the resurgence of social and political attitudes concerning who is deserving of support and concerns surrounding the costs of welfare dependency. These macro issues and competing perspectives on the purpose of care and role of the state and on who is “deserving” of enhanced services shape and play out in everyday practice.

Culture and values, both at the organizational and individual levels, can serve to support or inhibit implementation of interventions, and care leavers find themselves placed in competition with younger children in terms of where budgets can and should be allocated and who is most in need or deserving of available care placements (House of Commons Education Committee 2017; McGhee 2017; Care Inspectorate Wales 2019; Dennell et al. 2022). The gap between central funding and the expenditures incurred by local authorities in fulfilling their statutory duties towards care leavers and maintaining placements has been further exacerbated by cuts in public spending. The absence of national minimum fostering allowances for foster carers who provide extended care means that in some local authority areas it is not financially viable for foster carers to maintain placements (Fostering Network 2018).

In comparing policy across the four nations of the United Kingdom it is clear that it is orientated towards extended and gradual transitions, financial initiatives, and the relational and practical support enabled by personal advisers. Nonetheless, in practice, for too many care leavers there remains a mismatch between what they say they want and need and what is available (Kelly et al. 2016; Munro et al. 2016, 2022). In the absence of adequate resources, the ideology of policy will be at odds with the everyday practice that can address the precarity faced by those leaving care and ensure safe, secure, and stable lives beyond care.

The findings of this paper lend weight to wider calls for greater attentiveness to and systematic evaluation of the implementation process to understand the challenges encountered in sustaining, scaling, and spreading innovations to support care leavers (Alderson et al. 2023). However, the focus of future research should be concerned not only with implementation but also with careful evaluations of systems and subsystems of law, policy, and practice expressed in the complex relationships within and between England and each of the devolved nations—Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Highlighting areas of convergence and divergence has reiterated the opportunity for additional comparative studies to advance a more nuanced understanding of these

complexities and to contribute to more-informed leaving-care policy and practice across the four nations of the United Kingdom.

Notes

1. Differences in approaches to welfare policy predate devolution. For example, the Scottish Children's Hearing System integrates child welfare and justice in a system of lay tribunals that is intended to be less adversarial than the court-based approaches in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (McGhee et al. 2018).
2. In Scotland, local authorities have a legal duty to support care leavers up to the age of 19, and to assess any eligible needs for aftercare support until age 26.
3. The government has recently published new quality standards that providers of supported accommodation will be required to meet, and new regulations and an inspection framework are being introduced.

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