

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) on the [Routes into post-16 education and training](#)

RET 25

Ymateb gan: **Gwasanaeth Eiriolaeth Ieuentid Cenedlaethol Cymru**
Response from: **The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru (NYAS) Cymru**

NYAS Cymru thanks the Children, Young People and Education Committee for the inquiry regarding routes into post-16 education and training for young people in Wales and placing a focus on equity of access. Our evidence has been devised through a care-experience lens, highlighting the challenges and barriers facing care-experienced children and young people from accessing post-16 education and training in Wales.

Challenges facing care-experienced children and young people in pre-16 education

Educational attainment plays a significant role in determining an individual's outcomes in later life, and lower educational attainment is often associated with poorer outcomes in adulthood. Having experience of care as a child is strongly linked to lower educational attainment as well as a higher risk of poorer outcomes in later adulthood. Recognising the barriers and challenges facing care-experienced children and young people in pre-16 education is important within the context of exploring what their post-16 options look like and access to these.

The instability facing many care-experienced children and young people often negatively impacts their educational experiences. In 2023, nearly 700 care-experienced children and young people were moved homes three or more times during the year¹, and between 2022-2023 445 care-experienced students had one or more changes of school during the academic year.² Not only will these moves impact a student's academic experiences, but it will also impact other aspects of their education such as building friendships and trusted relationships with school staff which can be vital protective factors for promoting overall mental health and wellbeing, and academic achievements. Care-experienced students can encounter care-related discrimination and stigma during their time at school, which can make educational experiences far more challenging both from a social and academic perspective. In a survey by Cardiff University, 1 in 2 surveyed care-experienced students in Wales had experienced bullying, compared to 35% of non-care-experienced students.³ Other care leavers have told us that whilst in school, they often felt that teachers had lower expectations for them because of their care experience.

Care-experienced students in Wales have a much lower educational attainment than non-care experienced students, however the full extent of this is unknown as there is very limited data published by Welsh Government.⁴ The last published dataset from 2019 showed a gap of around 40% at Level 2 between the attainment of care-experienced students and non-care-experienced students in Wales.⁵ Data on the number of 'children aged 16 and over ceasing to be looked after and number of qualifications' has also not been updated by Welsh Government since 2016. The last data release in 2016 showed that 23% of care-experienced students left school with no qualifications, mainly due to student not sitting exams. Care-experienced students are also disproportionately impacted by

¹ [Children looked after by local authorities: April 2022 to March 2023 | GOV.WALES](#)

² [Children looked after during the year, by local authority](#)

³ [24-03-care-experienced-children-2024-final.pdf](#)

⁴ [24-03-care-experienced-children-2024-final.pdf](#)

⁵ [An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children report](#)

school exclusions and truancy compared to non-care-experience students, however there is currently no data published by Welsh Government regarding these figures. Overall, data that is available suggests that children in residential care are much more likely to be impacted by these issues, in comparison to both children in other types of care and children not in care at all.⁶

All these issues impacting care-experienced students during their secondary education ultimately impacts their post-16 options. Before even considering the barriers at post-16 level, it can be concluded that the negative experiences during secondary education place care-experience children and young people at a disadvantage compared to their non-care-experienced peers and limits the post-16 options available to them. Until these issues are addressed, care-experienced children and young people's access to post-16 education and training will remain unequal in comparison to children and young people without care experience. It is also evident that currently there is not enough data published by Welsh Government regarding the educational experiences of care-experienced students and the full extent of the educational disparities facing these students.

Impacts of transitions out of care on post-16 options

When care-experienced young people begin looking at post-16 options, they will also be faced with navigating their transition out of care. This transition can be extremely difficult due to a reduction in support services and difficulties accessing housing, which means there is a real risk of experiencing homelessness after leaving care. Care leavers working with NYAS Cymru have told us that this will negatively intrude on their routes into post-16 education and training as the transition out of care and finding somewhere to live takes priority, unlike non-care-experienced young people who can rely on parents for support.

While the 'When I'm Ready' Scheme can support care leavers transitioning out of care, the current eligibility criteria means it is only available for young people leaving foster care up until the age of 21 so it is not equally accessible for all care leavers. Care leavers can access the scheme until the age of 25 if they are in an agreed program of education or training, however accessing education and training is extremely challenging for many care leavers so this scheme too becomes inaccessible. We strongly believe that for care leavers to be best supported to access and explore post-16 options, there must be a robust support system in place for every young person leaving care, so no care leaver is left in a position where they must decide between prioritising beginning a college course or finding somewhere to live.

Care leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET)

Welsh Government currently publishes NEET data for on young people in Wales this does not include specific data for care leavers. In England, this data is routinely published by the Department for Education, and we know this issue was raised during the Committee's inquiry into radical reform in 2023. Welsh Government previously published data on the outcomes of care leavers on their 19th birthday, however the last release in this data set was 2016 and there have been no further updates since. Last published data showed that over a third of care leavers were not in education, employment or training on their 19th birthday during the year ending 31 March 2016.⁷ While care leavers are more

⁶ [24-03-care-experienced-children-2024-final.pdf](#)

⁷ [23-01-care-experienced-children-web.pdf](#)

likely to be recorded as NEET, the full extent of this in Wales cannot be understood without datasets, which ultimately makes it more challenging for services to put effective and targeted support measures in place. NYAS Cymru strongly calls for Welsh Government to routinely publish data regarding care leavers outcomes each year in respect of education, employment and training.

Access to further and higher education

There is limited data on the number of care-experienced students entering higher education across Wales. A UK-wide survey from UCAS in 2022 showed that out of nearly 9,000 care-experienced applicants, only 500 shared information about their care-experienced background.⁸ While alerting universities to their experiences of care can increase support for students, there are also concerns that this could place a negative label on them. Many care leavers tell us that the quality of a university's care leaver offer is a significant factor in deciding whether to apply to the university or not. Some care leavers have told us about some of the barriers they can face however when wanting to access further and higher education in Wales. Some of these include:

- Not having someone to support them during their UCAS application
- Not enough support from personal advisors
- Financial concerns and challenges to accessing information about student finance entitlement
- Not being able to secure accommodation because of issues such as not having a rent deposit or a guarantor, or accommodation not being available for all 12 months of the year
- Not having access to additional learning support
- Not having access to transport to attend classes

One young person shared their experience with us about trying to access further education, and their story highlights how often care-experienced young people will face multiple barriers all at once:

"My ed psych got me a place in college but the Government won't fund transport costs for me because they weren't the ones that got me a place there. I had to get proof from my therapist from when I lived in England to show that I can't do two hours of public transport to and from college every day, but they're in England which is where I was placed in care. I have no support to do this so I just can't go to college now.

I asked my advocate to speak to my Personal Advisor about online courses. My PA told my advocate that they 'don't think I'm ready' to do online courses because of my anxiety... She then told me to do some BBC Bitesize, I'm not a child. It's embarrassing. I know I struggle with maths and English to an extent but not to a point where I need BBC Bitesize. She hasn't worked with me for long; she doesn't know me that well. She doesn't know what's going on, what I struggle with, or what I manage. It amazes me that she can say I'm not ready when I've done them before. It upsets me because I've had all my decisions made for me growing up, let me make some decisions now I'm an adult." Care leaver working with NYAS Cymru

Within the care-experience population, care-experienced young mothers are much more likely to face discrimination and barriers to accessing education and training opportunities. Data from NYAS

⁸ [Next Steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education? | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

Cymru's Project Unity service mid-term review in 2022 showed that 83% of young women were not in education, training or employment when they first came into contact with Project Unity, and around one in 10 young women wanted help with issues which make accessing education or employment more challenging for them (for example, organising childcare so they could attend classes, interviews or work shifts).⁹ However, we have also heard of some good examples of practice from care-experienced young mothers where they have been fully supported by services and the positive difference this has made to accessing higher education:

"University was quite easy to get in to as they didn't 'press' too much about me being care experienced. Student finance was a bit more difficult but as soon as I said I was care-experienced, they didn't question anything and even gave me guidance on what additional support I can get to cover my son's needs. The university provided me loads of information about staff and student crèches nearby, and loads of information about what I can do if he's ill or if I had to bring him in." Care leaver working with NYAS Cymru

Side by Side care leavers programme

NYAS Cymru's Side by Side programme aims to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness for care leavers and to bridge the gap between leaving care and finding their own way in the world by embarking on their journey 'Side by Side' with them, helping them when they need it. The programme matches young people with a mentor for a 12-month period, where they can access a broad range of support, as well as access to a £500 care leaver bursary. Side by Side is currently supporting 8 young people in Neath Port Talbot, and often our mentors will support care leavers to access education, employment and training opportunities. The support can be invaluable for young care leavers and can make the difference in helping to access post-16 opportunities:

"When I started working with the young person, they were interested in a role in the manufacturing industry but did not know how to go about it or what the interview will be like. I worked with the young person to research more about the industry and usual interview questions. I helped to create an information sheet for the young person so they could prepare, which they were really grateful for and I knew how important this job was for them. The young person applied and ahead of the interview, we had a practice run through of what the interview might be like. The young person messaged me a week later to say they'd been offered the job, and I was so happy for them! I continued to support the young person as they started their new role, and two months in, they were promoted. By understanding the young person's aspirations and providing tailored support, I was able to equip them with the knowledge and confidence to excel. Their success—first in securing the job and then earning a promotion within months—is a testament to their hard work and commitment, as well as the effectiveness of our collaborative effort." NYAS Cymru Side by Side Project Worker

Welsh Government's role to improving equity of access

To improve care-experienced children and young people's access to post-16 education and training, we first believe Welsh Government must look at the barriers facing these students during their primary and secondary education. Identifying and understanding how these barriers negatively impact post-16 opportunities would be a strong starting point to determining what services and policy

⁹ [NYAS-Project-Unity-MidTerm-Review-Jan-2022](#)

reforms are needed to improve future access to education and training.

Welsh Government must also continue to prioritise improving the transition out of care for all young people in Wales. Too many care leavers are experiencing negative transitions out of care, and this is creating profound challenges as they begin adulthood, including when trying to access post-16 education and training options. We believe Welsh Government could improve this transition through several measures, including:

- Making the 'When I'm Ready' available to all care leavers leaving all types of care until the age of 25 years old
- Making basic income available for all care leavers across Wales to reduce the financial pressures facing care leavers
- Continue to encourage organisations and public bodies to sign up to the Corporate Parenting Charter

We also strongly believe there needs to be much more specific and young person-centred support for care leavers when trying to access further and higher education, employment and apprenticeship schemes. We know that care leavers can face additional barriers to accessing these opportunities, therefore there must be more targeted support in place to remove these barriers, such as:

- Making public transport, including transport to and from education, free for all care-experienced children, young people and care leavers until the age of 25.
- Creating more paid internships and apprenticeships programmes across Welsh Government and public bodies which are specifically for care-experienced children and young people, like the existing scheme ran by the Civil Service.
- Encouraging more education, apprenticeship and traineeship providers in Wales to sign up to the Corporate Parenting Charter, so it is clear what their responsibilities are to support care-experienced children and young people to access their post-16 options.
- Making sure care-experienced mothers are supported and empowered to explore post-16 opportunities and improve the childcare offer that is available to them.
- Making sure all universities in Wales will provide care-experienced students with accommodation for 365 days of the year.

There is a significant data gap regarding the education, employment and training outcomes and experiences of care-experienced children and young people in Wales. NYAS Cymru would like to thank the CYPE Committee for previously raising this as a recommendation in their 'If not now, then when' report in 2023. We regret to see Welsh Government rejected this recommendation and would strongly recommend for Welsh Government to make a commitment to routinely publish data on the education, employment and training outcomes and experiences of care-experienced children and young people in Wales.

Youth work

Youth work holds a fundamental role in supporting young people from different backgrounds across Wales, by providing them with opportunities to build new friendships, improve their self-esteem and

confidence, develop new skills, create a sense of belongingness, acts as another means of safeguarding, provides safe spaces for non-formal education and is another route into post-16 options.

Unfortunately, we know that youth work is not always recognised, understood or valued within Wales. NYAS Cymru welcomed Welsh Government's recently published Proposed Statutory Framework for Youth Work, and we were pleased to see a statutory definition of youth work within this. However, we have expressed concerns that the proposed definition does not capture the non-formal education element of youth work, rather only defining it as a 'distinct educational approach'. One of the key elements of youth work is that it allows young people opportunities to learn away from a traditional educational setting through a young person led approach. This form of learning can and does have a significant positive impact on young people, particularly those who find formal education challenging, and acts as an additional post-16 option. We have called for this definition to be changed to 'non-formal education' to make sure the learning experience of youth work is clear and distinctive from traditional learning.

Along with amending the proposed definition of youth work, NYAS Cymru calls for the following measures to be taken to advance the profile of youth work in Wales and it's a role as another post-16 option for young people:

- A long-term funding plan for the delivery of youth work provision across Wales.
- Creating national toolkits for youth work provision
- Appointing a National Body for Youth Work in Wales, as recommended to Welsh Government in the Interim Youth Work Board for Wales Final 2021 report, "Time to Deliver" (recommendation 5)
- Improving young people's participation in the design and delivery of youth work and particularly ensuring there is representation from young people with protected characteristics and additional needs or vulnerabilities

For further information, please contact NYAS' policy team at policy@nyas.net