



Briefing Report
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Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic

**care
leaver
local
offer**

Foreword

In the aftermath of a sombre funeral, I found myself standing next to my sister, Hazel. She looked at me with a sadness that penetrated deep into her core, uttering words that will forever echo in my mind, "I will be next." At that moment, an urgent sense of resolve surged within me. I yearned to shift her perspective, to inject a spark of hope into her desolate prognosis.

As we navigated our way through the ensuing conversations, our discourse gradually turned towards the realm of systemic change. We envisaged a world where the care system, which had left such indelible marks on our lives, transformed into an entity that bred hope instead of despair. We dreamed of a reality where our pain, our experiences, our stories would serve as catalysts for change. A reality where those who followed us wouldn't have to tread the same treacherous path we had navigated.

But the harsh realities of life often pay no heed to our dreams and desires. Hazel left us before we could realize our shared vision. Her words came true, much earlier than I ever feared.

This work, this relentless pursuit of systemic change, is dedicated to Hazel. It's dedicated to her spirit, her hopes, and the dreams that she was unable to see materialize in her lifetime. But it doesn't stop at Hazel. This work is also dedicated to every other individual who has lived through the care experience and left us prematurely. Their stories, their struggles, their untapped potential are interwoven in the very fabric of this work.

As we move forward, we hold onto the belief that the lives and stories of those we've lost carry the power to inspire change. It is their voices that propel us towards action. Their experiences that compel us to challenge the system. Their memories that remind us of the immense work that lies ahead.

In honour of Hazel, and countless others like her, we press on. We commit ourselves to a future where the care experience does not define or limit one's life trajectory. This is more than an objective; it's a necessity. The memory of those we've lost serves as both a catalyst and a compass, guiding us towards a reality where pain finds meaning, and systemic change is not just an aspiration, but a tangible reality.

Terry Galloway

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Summary and recommendations
3. Care Experience: A Non-Symmetrical Model
4. Equitable Equality: Care Experience
5. Symmetrical Models of Protected Characteristics
6. Section 158 & 159 of the Equality Act: A Strong Case for Care Experience
7. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010
8. Part 1 “The Socio-Economic Duty”
9. Government response
10. Extending Corporate Parenting
11. Extending Corporate Parenting Responsibilities Without Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic
12. Extending Corporate Parenting Responsibilities With Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic
13. The Campaign to make Care Experience a Protected Characteristic
14. The impact of the young people on this campaign
15. Youth Voice and empowerment
16. Young people’s speeches

1. Introduction

There is an ongoing debate about the inclusion of additional protected characteristics in the UK Equality Act, with particular attention to whether 'social class's and care experience' should qualify as protected characteristics.

An important contrast between these two examples is that prohibitions on discrimination on the basis of social class might well be legislated on a 'symmetrical model', meaning legal protections would cover members of all social classes. If that happened, policies favouring lower social classes would be at risk of being found to be unlawfully discriminatory against members of higher social classes. Given this potential legal and ethical quandary, some take the view that making social class a 'protected characteristic' under the Equality Act 2010 would not be an effective strategy for achieving the intended social justice outcomes.

In contrast, prohibitions against discrimination based on 'care experience' are more likely to be on a 'non-symmetrical model', akin to existing legal provisions on disability discrimination. In particular, singling out members of this group for dedicated protections against discrimination is less likely to be seen as contentious, politically and otherwise: it is hard to imagine that anyone would think that legal protections for care experienced people ought to be accompanied by equivalent legal rights for those who have never been in care.

This distinction matters for policymakers. The concern is that if the Equality Act is amended to include additional protected characteristics, it could open the floodgates for a multitude of claims, such as those related to poverty or regional accents. However, this approach provides a conceptual tool to differentiate care experience from these other potential claims. It equips politicians with the arguments needed to advocate for care experience as a protected characteristic, whilst being able to challenge the inclusion of broader and more contentious characteristics such as social class.

The independent Review of Children's Social Care in England recommended making 'care experience' a protected characteristic, potentially marking the UK as the first country in the world to take this significant step. They also advised the UK Government to consult with care experienced people and devolved nations regarding this matter. However, the UK Government decided against this, opting instead to tackle discrimination through the application of corporate parenting principles, and declining to consult with care experienced people and the devolved nations on this issue.

It's important to highlight that the Care Review's recommendations only apply to England, and it was The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP Secretary of State for Education who announced the Government response, but the Equality Act covers the devolved nations Scotland and Wales.

This minister has no jurisdiction over Scotland and Wales on matters of children's social care and care experienced people. In fact, the Welsh Care Review has also proposed the introduction of 'care experience' as a protected characteristic.

The Welsh government lacks the jurisdiction to effect this change unilaterally. This presents an opportunity and a challenge that we aim to address through our campaign.

Part 2 of the Equality act 2010, which is what defines the Protected Characteristics is a political power reserved to the exclusive jurisdiction of Westminster which means this matter will apply across England, Scotland and Wales when it is implemented. Northern Ireland has a different system.

2. Summary and recommendations

This document has been written so we have something to give to the Children's commissioner for England and the Prime Minister when we visit on 14th June 2023.

However now it is written, it provides background to the campaign for Care Experience to become a Protected Characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

So far councils representing 17.97% of the population of England, Scotland and Wales have resolved to "Treat Care Experience as if it were a Protected Characteristic".

In the following pages we hope you will find what you need so that you can join the campaign. But this is moving all the time so if you need any further information or want to chat things through, please get in touch terry@ngalloway.co.uk

Every child entering the care system will cost £1,2m and every child requiring a social worker will cost £620,000. These costs are set to increase and outcomes are likely to get worse. Local Authorities are burdened with huge costs at the beginning of the journey for care experienced people but the higher cost is later in life after 18 years old when everyone has forgotten and we have disappeared and become unheard. Recommendation 5 is designed so that government and relevant departments across society seek us out and find out where we are.

We are making the following recommendations to Government.

1. Government should introduce legislation without delay, so that "Care Experience" becomes a Protected Characteristic in UK Equality law.
2. Government should commission an information campaign to inform care experienced people about Protected Characteristics, Equitable Equality, and the powers available in relation to section 149 and Equality Impact Assessments that could relate to Care Experienced people if it were a protected characteristic.
3. Government should consult with care experienced people and those who are associated with us about the difficulties we face in relation to stigma, direct and indirect discrimination and to explore the ramifications of introducing care experience as a Protected Characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.
4. Government should consult with and listen to the devolved nations of Scotland and Wales about whether protected characteristics for care experienced people should be introduced across the United Kingdom.
5. Government should commission a destinations study identifying where care experienced people are, which services they use and their long-term outcomes and experiences.

We also are asking councils and all bodies providing services to care experienced people.

- 1 To "treat Care Experience as if it were a protected characteristic until such time as it becomes legislation.
- 2 To "Adopt the Corporate Parenting Principals until such time as it becomes legislation"

3. Care Experience: A Non-Symmetrical Model

"Care experience" refers to the experiences of individuals who spent part of their childhood in the care system due to situations beyond their control, primarily arising from abuse and neglect within their families. These individuals can face both direct and indirect discrimination throughout their lives.

In addition to direct and indirect discrimination, foster carers can face harassment and victimisation due to their responsibilities. Harassment may include mocking comments about the foster carer's involvement in case reviews, health appointments, school meetings, and contact visits with the biological family, which are critical for the well-being of care-experienced individuals. Such comments could create an intimidating or hostile environment for the foster carer. Additionally, victimisation can occur if foster carers are treated unfairly for raising concerns about discrimination or harassment related to their responsibilities. For example, a foster carer who complains about a lack of support or flexibility in their workplace due to their caring responsibilities may find themselves excluded from career development opportunities or subjected to unfair treatment.

It is vital to recognise that if care experience were to be a protected characteristic, this protection should extend by association to foster carers. This is because their role is inherently linked to the welfare of care-experienced individuals.

By recognising foster carers by association would ensure that they are safeguarded against discrimination and are supported in fulfilling their crucial role. This includes having the necessary flexibility and understanding from employers and society at large to attend case reviews, health appointments, training sessions, and other responsibilities essential in providing care and support to those with care experience. It is crucial that foster carers are recognised and supported as pivotal contributors to the well-being of care-experienced individuals.

Reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 could be extended to address their unique needs. For instance, educational institutions could consider reasonable adjustments in school allocation policies. While children in care are often given priority in school allocations, this typically occurs just before the start of the school term. However, children can come into care or change foster placements throughout the year. As such, it would be beneficial to have ongoing priority allocation policies that can adapt to the needs of care-experienced children throughout the year, ensuring they have access to suitable education whenever they come into care or move.

The shortage of foster carers and the inflexibility in school allocation policies have a direct impact on the daily lives of children in care. Due to the limited availability of foster placements and the lack of year-round priority in school allocation policies, children often find themselves placed in foster homes that are far from their schools. As a result, many children in care must rely on taxis for daily commutes to school, sometimes covering distances of up to 50 miles. Imagine how a young child feels, having to wake up extra early every day to embark on a long journey in a taxi. The child is likely to face questions from other pupils about why they are arriving in a taxi, which can make them feel self-conscious and isolated. Moreover, these lengthy commutes are not only exhausting for the children but also result in additional costs to local authorities. It is imperative to address the systemic issues, such as the shortage of foster carers and inflexibility in school allocation policies, to improve the day-to-day experiences and well-being of children in care.

Additionally, foster carers could be granted flexibility as part of reasonable adjustments in work schedules to attend essential meetings such as case reviews, educational planning, or life story work without the risk of career detriment. Local authorities could also consider making adjustments in housing policies to better accommodate the needs of foster families, such as prioritising them for housing that has the space needed for care-experienced individuals. Employers might also consider offering additional leave days for foster carers to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities, such as attending training or supporting a young person during transitions in their care arrangements. These reasonable adjustments recognise the specific challenges faced by care-experienced individuals and foster carers and aim to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for them.

The term “Care Experience” is a description of a definition in law which means that there is no ambiguity. It includes anyone that had the state as its corporate parent by virtue of a care order in accordance with the Children Act 1989 and amendments.

Direct discrimination is rather straightforward: care-experienced individuals are disadvantaged due to biases against them. Here are some examples:

1. **Job Market Discrimination:** Care-experienced individuals are frequently overlooked due to misconceptions labelling them as 'problem children.' This stigma casts a shadow on their potential and ability, despite their hardships primarily stemming from circumstances beyond their control.
2. **Housing Discrimination:** There can be biases in housing applications, where care-experienced individuals might be rejected due to prejudiced views of landlords or agencies.
3. **Educational Bias:** There might be lower expectations of care-experienced students, leading to them being overlooked for academic opportunities for advancement.
4. **Public Perception and Stigma:** Care-experienced individuals might be subject to unfavourable public opinion, leading to social exclusion.

Indirect discrimination, occurs when a provision, criterion, or practice is applied that, while appearing neutral, puts people with a protected characteristic at a particular disadvantage, and, further, this practice cannot be justified in the terms set out in the Equality Act 2010. For care-experienced individuals, this can manifest in several ways:

1. **Data Protection Policies:** Policies that redact photos and information about a person's life can inadvertently deny care-experienced individuals access to their own histories, an issue unique to their circumstances.
2. **University Accommodation Policies:** Universities might offer only term-time accommodation under the assumption that all students have a home to go to during holidays. This disproportionately disadvantages care-experienced individuals, who often lack a traditional family home.
3. **Health and Social Care Services:** Practices like 'off-rolling'—where individuals are removed from service lists when they move out of the area—can disproportionately impact care-experienced individuals who may have unstable living situations due to their care backgrounds.

The societal stigma associated with care experience extends to an institutional level, with planning applications for children's homes often meeting considerable resistance. This opposition, rooted in the misconception of care-experienced children being disruptive, further marginalizes this already vulnerable group.

The 'non-symmetrical model' directly applies to the notion of care experience - a person either has care experience or they do not, therefore no-one would think there was a case for legislation to prohibit non care experienced people from being discriminated against. There is a clear and unambiguous distinction between those who have this characteristic and those who do not, like the protected characteristic of disability. This lack of ambiguity is an essential component for a characteristic to be protected effectively by the law, ensuring there is no room for misinterpretation or misuse.

Recognizing 'care experience' as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it would provide a legal framework to challenge the discriminatory practices faced by care-experienced individuals. Unlike broader categories such as social class or regional accents, care experience is specific and measurable, which lends itself well to legislative protection. By specifically defining and recognizing care experience in law, it provides a concrete and clear basis for legal redress.

Secondly, embedding care experience into the legal landscape would shine a light on the prejudices experienced by this group. It would provide a clear signal that these forms of discrimination are unacceptable, contributing to a societal shift in attitudes and behaviours towards care-experienced individuals.

Lastly, recognising care experience as a protected characteristic would help foster a more inclusive society for care-experienced individuals. It would serve to counterbalance the disadvantages they face due to direct and indirect discrimination, enhancing their opportunities to thrive and contribute positively to society.

By recognising care experience as a protected characteristic, we acknowledge the unique challenges and discrimination faced by this group, giving them the protection, they deserve, and enabling them to reach their full potential in society. Legal recognition sends a powerful message to society about the value we place on equality and non-discrimination and underscores our commitment to fostering an inclusive society for all.

A critical tool in this fight against discrimination is the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA). EIAs provide a systematic approach for policymakers and decision-makers to assess the potential impact of their proposed policies on different groups, particularly those with protected characteristics. By recognising care experience as a protected characteristic, EIAs would give a voice to care-experienced individuals in arenas where they have not been heard before.

Including care experience within EIAs would ensure the unique experiences and needs of care-experienced individuals are considered at the policy level. It would highlight potential implications of decisions on this group, promoting informed, equitable decision-making.

4. Equitable Equality: Care Experience

Equitable equality is a concept that goes beyond just treating everyone the same or 'equal treatment'. Instead, it recognizes that different individuals or groups may have unique needs or face specific disadvantages that need to be accounted for and addressed to achieve true equality. In this context, adding 'care experience' as a protected characteristic would be a step towards equitable equality as it recognises the specific needs and challenges of care-experienced individuals.

Under the Equality Act 2010, having a protected characteristic means that individuals should not be unfairly disadvantaged, discriminated against, or harassed based on that characteristic. By introducing care experience as a protected characteristic, it provides a legal tool for challenging instances of both direct and indirect discrimination and allows for better protection and representation of care-experienced individuals in various domains including education, employment, health services, and housing.

For example, in terms of policy changes, a university might review its accommodation policy. Currently, many universities only provide term-time accommodation, potentially disadvantaging care-experienced students who may not have a home to return to during holiday periods. If care experience were a protected characteristic, universities might be required to conduct an Equality Impact Assessment, considering the effects of their accommodation policy on care-experienced students. As a result, they might implement year-round accommodation options to meet these students' needs.

Another example could be with housing guarantor policies. Some housing agencies have policies that require tenants to provide a guarantor who can cover the rent if the tenant is unable to. This can disadvantage care-experienced individuals who may not have a family member or friend who can act as a guarantor. Recognising care experience as a protected characteristic could lead to a revision of these policies, ensuring they don't indirectly discriminate against care-experienced individuals.

In health services, the recognition of care experience as a protected characteristic could lead to better access and support for care-experienced individuals who often face higher rates of mental health issues due to their backgrounds. Services could be reformed to ensure they are accessible, responsive, and sensitive to the specific needs of care-experienced individuals.

Overall, making care experience a protected characteristic would promote equitable equality by ensuring that laws, policies and practices are scrutinised to avoid discrimination and promote inclusion of care-experienced individuals, thus recognising and addressing their specific needs and challenges.

5. Symmetrical Models of Protected Characteristics

In our discussions on protected characteristics, it is vital to understand the difference between symmetrical and non-symmetrical protections against discrimination. Symmetrical models refer to those in which protection applies to all individuals who in some way have that identity.

For example, protections against age and religion or belief discrimination are provided symmetrically. Different age groups are protected equally under the Equality Act – both young and old can be victims of age discrimination. Similarly, people with different religions and beliefs (and lacks thereof) are protected, meaning, for example, that individuals cannot lawfully be discriminated against because of their specific faith or because they choose not to follow a religion.

Social class is often debated as a potential candidate for symmetrical protection from discrimination. This is because, theoretically, individuals from all social classes - high, middle, and low - could face discrimination or bias based on their social status or background. However, making social class a protected characteristic raises complex challenges. For example, this might make positive measures to increase equality for those from lower social classes unlawful.

Applying this understanding, the idea of introducing social class as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010 provokes contention. If protections against discrimination on the basis of social class were given symmetrically, those in higher social classes might claim discrimination when positive action is taken to reduce inequality for lower social classes. If protections are given non-symmetrically, some might see this as deeply unfair.

Understanding the symmetrical model is crucial in our ongoing discussions about expanding the definition of protected characteristics, highlighting the nuanced complexities we must navigate to achieve equitable equality. The recognition of these complexities informs our approach and reinforces the unique position of care experience as appropriate for non-symmetrical prohibitions against discrimination.

6. Section 158 & 159 of the Equality Act: A Strong Case for Care Experience

The Equality Act's Section 158 and 159 are cornerstones for fostering 'positive action'. These sections are designed to aid groups that are underrepresented, face unique hardships, or exhibit distinct needs.

Section 158, 'Positive Action', permits organisations to proactively engage with underrepresented groups, through measures such as targeted training programmes and encouragement of applications. Currently, this section applies to groups defined by existing protected characteristics such as race, gender, age, disability, and so on. For instance, employers can run leadership training specifically for women to address their underrepresentation in leadership roles, or host work preparation programmes for young people with disabilities.

Section 159, 'Positive Action in Recruitment and Promotion', offers employers the possibility to favour an individual with a protected characteristic over another candidate of equal qualification, if the employer reasonably believes that individuals with that characteristic are underrepresented or disadvantaged. An example here might be an employer selecting a candidate from a racial minority group over another equally qualified candidate if that racial group is underrepresented within the organisation.

If 'care experience' were to be recognized as a protected characteristic, it would align well with the provisions of Sections 158 and 159. Non-symmetrical protection would allow for targeted policies to be developed without fear of disadvantaging another group. For instance, employers could offer internships specifically for care-experienced individuals to help them gain a foothold in the job market, or housing providers could prioritise care leavers in their allocation policies.

In the realm of recruitment and promotion, care-experienced individuals could be prioritised when they are equally qualified with other candidates, helping to redress any past disadvantage and underrepresentation they might have faced.

The inclusion of care experience as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act would not only align with the existing framework of positive action embodied in Sections 158 and 159, but would also open new possibilities for proactive measures to improve outcomes for this underrepresented and disadvantaged group.

7. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010:

Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, known as the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), requires public authorities to consider how their policies, practices, and decisions affect people who are protected under the Equality Act. It mandates that public authorities must have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different groups.

Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are a practical tool that helps public authorities to meet the requirements of the PSED. Through EIAs, authorities can systematically assess the likely or actual effects of their policies, practices, or decisions on different groups, particularly those with protected characteristics. EIAs enable public bodies to ensure that their actions do not inadvertently discriminate against certain groups and that they actively promote equality where possible.

In essence, EIAs are integral to fulfilling the obligations of Section 149. They help in analysing the potential impact of a proposed policy or action, ensuring that public authorities take into account the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations. By employing EIAs, public authorities are better equipped to make informed decisions that align with the aims and obligations of the PSED as outlined in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010.

Regarding mental health services, care-experienced individuals face disruption as they often move, losing their place in waiting lists, and have to face the stark transition from child to adult services at 18. Under Section 149, mental health providers could be encouraged to offer more adaptable services that ensure continuity of care, taking into account that brain development continues until around 25.

Access to primary healthcare, including GPs and dentists, is crucial. Care-experienced individuals are often deregistered when they move, making access to birth control and other medical services difficult. PSED could facilitate the creation of flexible registration and service models for this group, making sure they are not disproportionately disadvantaged.

The emotional impact of care-experienced individuals receiving redacted care records can be devastating. Seeing their history, even photographs, being redacted elicits feelings of unworthiness and erasure. PSED could motivate the Information Commissioner to issue specific guidelines for redaction and data protection, focused on the emotional well-being of care-experienced individuals.

Police forces need to re-evaluate how they respond to incidents in care homes when dealing with care experienced people. Under PSED, they could use Equality Impact Assessments to analyse their policies critically. For example, if a child in a care home slams a door, breaking it, is it proportionate for them to be taken to a police station, compared to the handling of similar incidents in family homes?

There are various check lists that Local Authorities promote to determine whether the police need to be called, but this is not systemic, having a protected characteristic would mean the Police force and Crown Prosecution Service has to consider this issue by law, which in turn would also reduce wasted time and better increased awareness.

Considering housing, care-experienced individuals might need to move to new areas for a fresh start, especially if they are targeted by criminal groups. Section 149 could be utilised to ensure that local connection rules do not hinder their ability to relocate, similar to provisions for those fleeing domestic violence.

Housing associations should also reassess policies regarding eviction. When care leavers experience 'cuckooing', where their property is taken over by gangs for criminal activities, they shouldn't be labelled as 'intentionally homeless'. Under PSED, housing associations could be urged to develop policies that recognise the vulnerability of care leavers and provide them support instead of eviction.

Finally, Section 149 can be influential in reshaping community infrastructure policies, including the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 agreements with developers. It could facilitate obligations for developers to contribute towards housing for care leavers, create repair and maintenance schemes, and provide extensions for foster carers. This would not only foster community support but also provide stability and resources desperately needed by care-experienced individuals.

In conclusion, by actively engaging with Section 149, public authorities have the potential to enact transformative changes that address the unique challenges faced by care-experienced individuals. This would go a long way in ensuring that these individuals are supported, empowered, and given the opportunities they need to thrive.

8. Part 1 “The Socio-Economic Duty”

The Socio-Economic Duty, laid out in Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010, requires specific public authorities to take into account the impact of their decisions on socio-economic inequalities. This means that when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise their functions, these public authorities are obligated to consider how such decisions might help to reduce the inequalities associated with socio-economic status.

This part of the Act is particularly pertinent when considering the broader context of social class. For care-experienced individuals, their challenges often intersect with issues of socio-economic disadvantage. The Socio-Economic Duty can serve as a legislative means of ensuring that the needs and challenges faced by care-experienced individuals, which are often exacerbated by socio-economic factors, are considered in the decision-making processes of public authorities.

Part 1 of the Equality Act has not been enacted in England, but Scotland and Wales have taken steps to enact this Duty, highlighting their commitment to reducing socio-economic inequalities.

9. Government response

On the recommendation set out in the Independent review of children's social care;

“Government should make care experience a protected characteristic, following consultation with care experienced people and the devolved administrations”.

However, in its response the government said. “We have carefully considered the recommendation to make ‘care experience’ a protected characteristic. There are significant concerns in the sector that self-declaration of care experience could increase stigma. We will not be taking forward this recommendation at this time and will prioritise our proposals to extend corporate parenting responsibilities, which we believe will be more impactful in driving real change in the way in which policies and services are designed and delivered to take account of the challenges that care leavers face.”

We feel that the Government should create an information campaign, consult with the devolved nations care experienced people about this, which we feel is the civil rights issue of our time. So far the government has not been able to produce any evidence of ‘Significant Concerns in the sector’ despite continually asking.

At the very least Care Experience people deserve to be heard.

10. Extending Corporate Parenting

As already mentioned previously the government accepted this recommendation by the care review and is now consulting on their proposals. We support wholeheartedly the concept of extending corporate parenting across other public bodies and anticipate that the government may strengthen them to reduce stigma and discrimination.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 Section 1 introduced the seven Corporate Parenting Principals. These principals also extended to lower tier district councils and combined authorities in England.

Well-being, to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of children and young people.

Voice, to encourage those children and young people to express their views wishes and feelings.

Heard, to take into account the views wishes and feelings of those children and young people.

Aspirational, to promote high aspirations and seek to secure the best outcomes for those children and young people.

Equality of Opportunity, to help those children and young people gain access to and make the best use of services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners.

Relationships, for those children and young people to be safe and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work.

Preparing for Adulthood, to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 in England made significant strides in extending support for care leavers. A key provision of the Act was the introduction of local authority Personal Advisers for care leavers up to the age of 25, regardless of whether they are in education or training.

Prior to this legislation, support was more limited and often ceased when a young person turned 21 unless they were in education or training. Personal Advisers are tasked with assisting care leavers in various aspects of their life, including education, employment, and housing.

The extension of this support via the Children and Social Work Act 2017 acknowledged the challenges care leavers face in transitioning to adulthood and aimed to ensure that they have continued guidance and assistance during this critical period.

However, before the Children and Social Work Act 2017, Scotland had introduced The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 which had already extended the age range of individuals eligible for support, meaning that young people leaving care could receive continued support up until the age of 26. This recognised that support needs do not end abruptly when young people leave care.

The Scottish Corporate Parenting Principals as set out by Section 58 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and are set out below. These were in legislation 3 years before similar provisions were introduced in England.

These are the corporate parenting responsibilities in Scotland

(a) to be alert to matters which, or which might, adversely affect the wellbeing of children and young people to whom this Part applies,

(b) to assess the needs of those children and young people for services and support it provides,

(c) to promote the interests of those children and young people,

(d) to seek to provide those children and young people with opportunities to participate in activities designed to promote their wellbeing,

(e) to take such action as it considers appropriate to help those children and young people

(i) to access opportunities, it provides in pursuance of paragraph (d), and

(ii) to make use of services, and access support, which it provides, and

(f) to take such other action as it considers appropriate for the purposes of improving the way in which it exercises its functions in relation to those children and young people.

However, The Children and Young People (Scotland) 2014 Act had Section 56, Schedule 4 which extended Corporate Parenting in Scotland to include a wider range of public bodies. It represented a significant development in the support provided to care-experienced individuals by bringing in other public bodies.

Corporate parenting in Scotland essentially refers to the collective responsibility of public bodies to provide the necessary support to children and young people in care to ensure their well-being, safety, and development, much like a responsible parent would. The aim is to improve the life chances and outcomes for children and young people in care.

Schedule 4 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 defined who were Corporate Parents.

SCHEDULE 4

Corporate parents in Scotland

1 The Scottish Ministers	13 The Scottish Social Services Council
2 A local authority	14 The Scottish Sports Council
3 The National Convener of Children’s Hearings Scotland	15 The chief constable of the Police Service of Scotland
4 Children’s Hearings Scotland	16 The Scottish Police Authority
5 The Principal Reporter	17 The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
6 The Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration	18 The Scottish Legal Aid Board
7 A health board	19 The Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland
8 A board constituted under section 2(1)(b) of the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978	20 The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland
9 Healthcare Improvement Scotland	21 The Scottish Housing Regulator
10 The Scottish Qualifications Authority	22 Bòrd na Gàidhlig
11 Skills Development Scotland Co. Ltd (registered number SC 202659)	23 Creative Scotland
12 Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland	24 A body which is a “post-16 education body” for the purposes of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005

When legislation was introduced across England in 2017, the government chose not to extend corporate parenting to other public bodies like had been done in Scotland. There was an exception however, and that was that district councils and combined authorities would for the first time, also have corporate parenting duties and they would have to create ‘Local offer for care leavers’ which meant they must publish information about services which the local authority offers for care leavers as a result of its functions under the Children Act 1989 and other services which the local authority offers that may assist care leavers in, or in preparing for, adulthood and independent living.

Despite district councils being designated as corporate parents under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 Section 1, there remains a postcode lottery of support available to care leavers. The quality and extent of the support often hinge on the local authority from which the young person comes, and in many cases, it is conditional.

Worryingly, when we consulted with the district councils in 2021 whilst creating the www.careleaveroffer.co.uk website about their corporate parenting duties, only 12% acknowledged having such responsibilities, despite this being enshrined in law. This illustrates a glaring disconnect and a lack of awareness or acknowledgement among many district councils.

The government are now moving forward with implementing an extension of corporate parenting to other public bodies, we think this is a good thing as it could bolster awareness and potentially augment the resources available to aid young people in transitioning to adulthood.

Extending corporate parenting principles to other public bodies beyond local authorities can lead to a more comprehensive and integrated approach to supporting children in care and care leavers. When various agencies work together in a coordinated manner, it helps in utilising resources more efficiently and ensuring that children in care receive the support they need in various aspects of their lives.

11. Extending Corporate Parenting Responsibilities Without Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic

This approach primarily involves extending Corporate Parenting Responsibilities to other public bodies. It focuses on the well-being, voice, aspirations, equal opportunities, stable relationships, and preparation for adulthood of care-experienced individuals.

Positive Aspects:

- **Increased Collaboration:** Encourages collaboration among public bodies to address the needs of care-experienced individuals.

Limitations:

- **Inconsistent Implementation:** Without care experience as a protected characteristic, there is no legal mandate, and implementation is likely to be inconsistent.
- **Dependence on Dedicated Personnel:** The focus on care-experienced individuals may remain within specialised teams or individuals, rather than being integrated throughout an organisation.
- **Lack of Familiarity Outside Social Care:** Those outside of social care might not be familiar with corporate parenting responsibilities and may not engage with them effectively.

12. Extending Corporate Parenting Responsibilities With Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic

Recognising care experience as a protected characteristic in conjunction with extending Corporate Parenting Responsibilities ensures legal backing and integrates the support for care-experienced individuals into existing mechanisms that public bodies are already familiar with.

Positive Aspects:

- **Utilisation of Established Mechanisms:** By integrating care experience into Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and Equality Impact Assessments, which have been in place since 2010, organisations and public bodies can use established mechanisms. This makes it more accessible for those outside of social care who are already familiar with these processes.
- **Organisation-wide Responsibility:** As a protected characteristic, the responsibility to support care-experienced individuals becomes an intrinsic part of an organisation's culture and decision-making process. It is no longer relegated to specialised teams but is a responsibility that permeates all levels of an organisation.
- **Legal Obligation Ensures Consistency:** The legal obligations associated with protected characteristics ensure that public bodies must systematically and consistently consider the needs and rights of care-experienced individuals. This guarantees a uniform approach across different regions and organisations.
- **Equitable Policy Development:** The incorporation of care experience into Equality Impact Assessments means that when policies are being developed or reviewed, the specific needs and challenges faced by care-experienced individuals must be considered. This results in more equitable policies that proactively address inequalities.
- **Enhanced Cross-Departmental Collaboration:** In local authorities, government departments and other organisations this approach would ensure better cross-departmental collaboration, as all departments would be legally required to consider care experience in their policies and decision-making processes.

Limitations:

- **Increased Administrative Oversight:** Compliance with legal obligations may require additional administrative oversight.

In summary, recognising care experience as a protected characteristic is a transformative approach. It not only enshrines the support for care-experienced individuals in law but also integrates this support into established mechanisms that public bodies are already familiar with. This ensures that supporting care-experienced individuals is not an add-on, but a fundamental aspect of policy development and decision-making. The approach guarantees that policies are developed with equity in mind, ensuring that care-experienced individuals have the support and opportunities they need to thrive.

13. The Campaign to make Care Experience a Protected Characteristic

On 15th March 2022 Liberal Democrat Cllr Tammy Palmer proposed a motion at Haringey Council asking her to support the campaign. The campaign was about persuading the then Chair of the English Independent Review of Children's social care that he should recommend to government in his final recommendations that the UK become the first country in the world to make "Care Experience a Protected Characteristic" and that Corporate Parenting should be extended to all public bodies.

"I was put in completely unsuitable and unsafe accommodation," she said, detailing struggles with bullying at school, loneliness and self-harm.

"I heard throughout my childhood from adults that I would fail. The expectations for me were very low," Palmer added, "I am here today as a grown woman with a career, a home, a family, the things that I thought people like me couldn't have."

"You think those perceptions and stereotypes might have changed throughout my life, but they really haven't. Recently I heard a group of individuals talking about some looked-after children that might be coming to live near them, saying 'we don't want kids like that here, they'll be into drink and drugs, they'll smash our car windows, they'll put a brick through the house windows, we don't want those kinds of kids near our kids'," she said.

Cllr Tammy Palmer (Lib Dem)

Following that speech Cllr Seem Chanwani (Labour) also disclosed her care experience and the motion was carried unanimously.

Recommendations of the Care Review

The care review did indeed make the recommendations we were asking for in respect of Protected Characteristics and an Extension of Corporate Parenting to all public bodies.

On 27th July 2022 Cllr Emma Williamson (Labour) at the new Unitary Authority proposed the first motion in the UK that meant her council would voluntarily adopt Protected Characteristics for Care Experienced People.

Since then, there have been 29 councils in England and 2 in Scotland that have passed similar motions. These motions also call on partners to introduce Protected Characteristics and introduce Corporate Parenting across their organisations.

In most cases these motions have gone through unanimously and no-one has voted against them except for the Conservative group of 9 at Westmorland and Furness Council on 29th September 2022 and the Conservative grouping of 11 at Edinburgh Council abstaining. Both conservative groupings were very small minorities on those councils, so each motion was carried overwhelmingly by all other parties and independents.

Since the Local Elections of 2023 several local authorities are in pipeline of bringing these motions to their own councils over the next few months.

These are the 31 councils that have passed the motions so far:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Cumberland (29/07/2022) | 16. Lancashire (23/02/2023) |
| 2. Westmorland and Furness (28/09/2022) | 17. Doncaster (27/02/2023) |
| 3. Ashfield District Council (29/09/2022) | 18. Telford and Wrekin (02/03/2023) |
| 4. Manchester (05/10/2022) | 19. Newark and Sherwood (09/03/2023) |
| 5. Redcar and Cleveland (13/10/2022) | 20. Bradford City Council (14/03/2023) |
| 6. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (14/12/2022) | 21. Southampton (15/03/2023) |
| 7. Edinburgh (24/11/2022) | 22. Salford City Council (15/03/2023) |
| 8. Wigan (07/12/2022) | 23. Oldham Council (15/03/2023) |
| 9. Nottingham (10/01/2023) | 24. Trafford Council (15/03/2023) |
| 10. Southend on sea Borough Council (12/01/2023) | 25. Plymouth City Council (27/03/2023) |
| 11. Nottinghamshire (19/01/2023) | 26. North Ayrshire (29/03/2023) |
| 12. Sefton (19/01/2023) | 27. Birmingham City Council (18/04/2023) |
| 13. Lambeth (25/01/2023) | 28. Ealing (25/04/2023) |
| 14. Sunderland Council (25/01/2023) | 29. Waltham (27/04/2023) |
| 15. London borough of Sutton (20/02/2023) | 30. Cambridgeshire County Council (16/05/2023) |
| | 31. Somerset Council (24/05/2023) |

In the councils listed above at the time these motions went through there were 1,991 council members representing 11,665,985 people and 17.97% of the UK population (excluding NI)

Total number of Councillors		
Labour		1,004
Conservative		455
Liberal Democrat		291
Independent		162
Green		48
SNP		31
	Total	1,991

Nation	No represented	% of Population
England	10,000,985	19.54%
Scotland	666,000	12.19%
Wales	0	0.00%
Total Population	10,666,985	17.97%

These motions have been proposed by Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green Party and Independents. In the main conservative groupings have also been supporting these motions with some fantastic speeches calling on more to be done.

Who has proposed these motions?		
Labour		20
Liberal Democrat		5
Independent		2
SNP		2
Green Party		1
Youth Council		1
	Total	31

Political Control of these councils?		
Labour		18
Liberal Democrat		5
Conservative		3
No Overall Control (NOC)		3
SNP		1
Independent		1
	Total	31

We have been asking that councils use this as their model motion. One council has passed a motion that did not have the words “**Will treat care experience as if it were a Protected Characteristic**” so it has not been counted in these figures.

This is the model motion:

That this Council **will treat care experience as if it were a Protected Characteristic** so that future services and policies made and adopted by the Council should be assessed through Equality Impact Assessments to determine the impact of changes on people with care experience, alongside those who formally share a Protected Characteristic;

that in the delivery of the **Public Sector Equality Duty** the Council includes care experience in the publication and review of Equality Objectives and the annual publication of information relating to people who share a Protected Characteristic in services and employment.

to formally call upon all **other bodies to treat care experience as a Protected Characteristic** until such time as it may be introduced by legislation.

to formally **call upon all other bodies to adopt corporate parenting** for children in care and care leavers until such time as it may be introduced by legislation.

for the Council to proactively **seek out and listen to the voices of care experienced** people when developing new policies based on their views.

14. The impact of the young people on this campaign

There have been some fantastic speeches in these councils in support of protected characteristics for care experienced people. It has been a pleasure speaking at councils myself and listening to Councillors across the country argue for things to change for care experienced people. This is a movement which is growing every day.

Right from the beginning I wanted to create a movement that could get systemic change for care experienced people so that they did not have to go through what me and my family did as we went through the care system.

But I also wanted to empower young people to use their voice for change, but be part of that change and witness it in a way that inspires them to become changemakers of the future.

In the early part of this campaign, I travelled the length and breadth of our great United Kingdom campaigning for councils to adopt these motions. I've spoken at many council meetings; I get nervous every time and when you listen back to those speeches you can really tell. But I've done this in the hope that others join this campaign and that they too start bringing motions and speaking at council meetings so that we gain the critical mass that this campaign needs.

I'm care experienced and I have been through so much trauma. I do not speak for all care experienced people because we are such a diverse group of people, and all our experiences are so different. But what I can say is that we are suffering and what unites us is that we need change.

During this campaign I've met many young people who are breaking my heart. They are telling me about the discrimination, prejudice, and trauma they are facing, and it resonates with me, it drives me on because this must stop.

This report is going to be handed to Dame Rachel De Souza on 14th June 2023 when we meet in London with a group of Care Experienced individuals that have contributed to this campaign in so many ways. They have spoken at their own local councils about the trauma they have been through and the change they want. They have driven their local councils to pass these motions.

Many have been in tears, Councillors up and down the country have cried and, in some cases, had to postpone their meetings because emotions have got overwhelming for politicians. I can't stop crying because the impact these young people are making for care experienced people everywhere cannot be understated and when I hear their voice it hits me like a sledgehammer.

15. Youth Voice and empowerment

As you will see from the model motion above there is a paragraph that resolves; "for the Council to proactively **seek out and listen to the voices of care experienced** people when developing new policies based on their views.

Oldham council is committed to this principal and is the only council in the UK that has within the standing orders of it's constitution provisions that empower its youth council to bring motions that are important to them.

In those councils that have passed the Protected Characteristics motion for Care Experienced People I'd like to recommend that they empower their youth councils in the same way. When we created the www.careleaveroffer.co.uk website I asked every council if it had a children in care council and if that council had it's own constitution, its own budget and its own bank account.

None of the councils had a constitution for their children in care councils, nor a budget, nor a bank account. At the time I was hugely disappointed as I'd been a participant at the Krakow Conference helping to revise the European Charter on The Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life and I knew Children in Care Councils across the country were perceived to be very tokenistic. I believed they needed their own constitution and budget to effect change and be truly independent.

However, it took a conversation with a care experienced individual at Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority to make me reflect to a deeper understanding of stigma and equality. We were discussing how she would not have liked to have declared her care experience to get privileges to get her job. My go to was that no one ever must declare their care experience as part of Protected Characteristics. It's a personal choice.

During my explanation I talked about people with disabilities not having to declare when using services because they were designed around them, such as a ramp entering a doctor's surgery. A person with mobility constraints could go up the ramp in a wheelchair without having to identify as disabled. And at a crossing in the road, a person with sight impairment would be able to use a crossing by listening to it bleep rather than watch it flash without telling everyone.

My point has always been that equitable equality and accessibility must change; it must get to a point where people can use these services without the need to declare anything, the design takes account of those with protected characteristics so there is no need to declare anything.

That gets me thinking about Oldham Borough Council and its unique position of having within its constitution youth voice. Before we talk about that lets discuss the legalities of what has happened at Oldham. There is a standing item within its constitution of 20 minutes for the youth council to speak and bring motions. The constitution also puts in place a youth mayor and deputy with specific duties across the year.

The format is well developed and allowed for Precious, 13, care experienced young person to bring the motion to Oldham Borough Council as the children in care council is affiliated to the Youth Council who have those rights within the constitution.

When we break this down we are really talking about equitable equality because utilising a Youth Council with rights under a constitution and a Children in Care Council accessing those rights under the umbrella of the Youth Council can be described as an example of equitable equality.

- **Equality Aspect:** The Youth Council, with its rights under a constitution, provides a platform for all young individuals to have a say in matters that affect them. This is the equality aspect, where every young person, irrespective of their background or circumstances, has the same access to this platform.
- **Equity Aspect:** The Children in Care Council represents children who are in care and might have specific needs and challenges due to their circumstances. By creating a Children in Care Council under the umbrella of the Youth Council, the organisation acknowledges that children in care may need additional support or a more tailored approach to effectively participate and voice their concerns. This represents the equity aspect.

In effect, the organisation is ensuring equal access to participation (equality) whilst also providing the support needed to make this participation meaningful and effective for those with specific challenges (equity).

Additionally, by focusing on care-experienced individuals as a protected group and addressing their specific needs through this framework, a precedent is set for acknowledging and accommodating the diverse needs of all young people. This approach is essentially about individualised support and ensuring equal opportunities for all. The attention to care-experienced young people's needs can foster an inclusive and supportive culture within the organisation, which can extend to accommodate the varying needs of all youths. Therefore, through equitable equality, not only are the rights and needs of care-experienced individuals being addressed, but a more inclusive and empathetic environment is being cultivated for the benefit of all young people.

For councils across the UK that have passed motions regarding protected characteristics, particularly focusing on care-experienced individuals, it is strongly recommended to consider adopting Youth Council structures akin to those established by Oldham Borough Council. This approach aligns seamlessly with the essence of the motion, which is "for the Council to proactively seek out and listen to the voices of care-experienced people when developing new policies based on their views."

By integrating care-experienced young people within a wider Youth Council, councils can create an environment that is inherently geared towards proactively seeking and valuing the input of care-experienced individuals. Oldham's model has proven to be effective in not only enhancing youth participation but also ensuring equitable equality for those with care experience. In this structure, care-experienced individuals can receive tailored support that enables them to participate alongside their peers actively and effectively. This inclusive approach not only serves to reduce the stigma associated with being in care but also facilitates a richer understanding of the diverse perspectives within the youth community.

Adopting such a structure can become a powerful conduit for councils to meaningfully engage with care-experienced young people, fostering a culture of inclusivity and responsiveness that is in perfect harmony with the principles laid down in the motion regarding protected characteristics. This holistic approach to youth engagement empowers care-experienced individuals to have their voices heard and ensures that the development of new policies is informed by the lived experiences and insights of those directly impacted. Councils across the UK would be taking a significant and progressive stride towards more inclusive, equitable, and responsive policymaking by embracing this model.

16. Young people's speeches

Oldham Borough Council

Precious is a child in care aged 13. She stood side by side with Penelope to deliver a speech at Oldham Borough Council that blew me away. She has this message for those reading this report.

“The motion I gave for care experience to become a protected characteristic on behalf of Oldham’s Children in Care Council is so important to me; not only me, but to my peers who are also walking in the same shoes. We are encouraged to use our platform to talk, to share our experience but what happens after this? Our voices are only truly heard when we can see the action that our words make. To be able to address the stigma that can have negative impacts on our lives will only measure up when it is openly discussed, and real change is implemented for all young people. As mentioned in our motion, that despite the resilience of many care experienced people, society too often does not take their needs into account and can lead to discrimination and stigma across housing, health, education, relationships, employment and in the criminal justice system. It’s time to make a change.”

Precious

Penelope is not Care Experienced but she stood side by side with Precious to deliver a joint speech. Penelope wants to galvanise all Youth Councils across the UK to propose these motions.

As the current Vice-Chair of Oldham Youth Council, I feel privileged that we can constitutionally take a motion to our local council here in Oldham and take forward subjects that are important to its young people. We were inspired and motivated to support our very own Children in Care Council to champion care experience to be included in the list of protected characteristics. We feel it is imperative to speak and advocate for the needs and wants of ALL young people including those who are care experienced; to ensure they equally receive the same opportunities in work, education, and life as non-care experienced people; We are all young people first.

Penelope

Doncaster Council

"I would like to share with you my experience of feeling stigmatised and discriminated against. This has been especially apparent throughout my time in school and college. I never felt supported by teachers, I have always felt left out, uninvited, and excluded. I have always felt like I never fitted in because I had corporate parents and not parents!

I was even told more than once by other children at school that I was not loved by my parents because I was in care. I was never invited to birthday parties, to sleepovers, and I felt this keenly. This was damaging and debilitating for me and I know will stay with me for a lifetime. The people that have discriminated against me are the next generation and if they continue to think that it is ok to treat people that way then things will never change, and they have to. They just have to."

Rebecca 18, Care Leaver, part of the 'Hear us out' group, lived in foster care, children's homes and is now in semi-independent.

My name is Fay and I am also going to share some experiences with you. It's not easy to speak out about this, but it is important. I have had a few health issues and some of these have been around my mental health. I remember when I had to go to A&E to be treated for an injury and as soon as it was mentioned that I was a care experienced person attending with carers from my children's home I was ushered into a room that is used for prisoners! It was hurtful and unnecessary and left me feeling degraded and pretty rubbish about myself at a time when what I really needed was care and support. It's not right to make a person feel so devalued and it feels very unfair.

I also remember a time when I was being interviewed for a job, I felt the interview was going really well and I mentioned that I had grown up in care. The reaction was immediate, the look on the interviewers' face, the temperature dropped! I knew I had made a mistake in telling them and I knew I was not getting the job! I had been encouraged never to be ashamed, that being in care was not my fault. But that is not how other people think, even today in 2023 care carries a stigma. It's hard, and it's humiliating, and it's misunderstood by so many. It needs to change, and we would like you to help us.

Fay, 17, Care Leaver, part of 'Hear us out' group, lived in children's homes and is now in semi supported accommodation.

On the motion passing "Today was emotional, quite heartfelt, it really touched me. It was nice to see cllrs coming forward about their own experience of being in care. Nice to know we are not alone.

I love my boy so much but during and after pregnancy I felt so much discrimination. In hospital after having given birth, when I mentioned about being a care leaver, I felt them judging me, checking me out, they made me feel like I should be a super mum and that I could not ask for help because otherwise I'd have my child taken away.

During my pregnancy not a single person said congratulations other than other care experienced people or my friends."

Danielle 19, Care Leaver, part of 'Hear us out' group, lived in foster care and now has her own child.

Waltham Forest

There were times when I was placed in care homes and I felt that I was treated differently because of things like having personal conversation about my private in the presence of others including young people. I would be laughed at if I did not speak English properly and was not supported to say what I wanted to say and this would leave me feeling anxious and cautious about sharing any further information.

I am of the view this left me feeling pushed behind and I did not progress in areas of education and my general health and relationships. This has left me feeling whether I am accepted by others or not.

It has taken me a lot of confidence and time to rebuild myself and I have now started University at the age of 25yrs.

I would want the Protected Characteristic to help young people access services for Mental health without having to wait long queues.

Madina Sahag, Care Leaver

Coming into care I was 16 years of age till then I was living with my mother so I saw the change in behaviour in teachers/peers once becoming section 20. My traumas and pain was treated like an excuse more than a problem, my first year of college I remember having my first pep meeting, the college was coming down on me hard for my assignments and attendance, my key worker/social worker continued to defend me. I don't come home to cooked meals or clean clothes I am 16 with the responsibilities of an adult and it's not a choice I made. In second year of college my teacher would call parents and warn them about me being in care, it wasn't for her to share and I don't have any behavioural issues so it's hurtful to think someone could section me out just because of mistakes my parents made. Students see it as a Tracy beaker home or you must've been kicked out for being bad. Not many people take the time to think it was the parents fault and they don't consider how much we could've learnt and grown if we had safe spaces growing up. When it came to housing it's hard to get in contact with them and they aren't understanding to the overwhelming feeling of calling waiting for hours then hearing it'll be fixed next week for someone to never come.

I would want the housing team to support us with repairs and take us seriously.

Maria Kiyanimehr, Care Leaver

I felt the tone was rude when I said I was a care leaver, they check that I was doing all the things necessary to qualify for Universal credit. I felt that the support was limited and they did not explore what career or aspirations I had for the future it felt like a tick box exercise. It felt the staff had made their mind that I would not achieve much.

I got little if any support from them to get into my current role as Front of house member at the Victoria and Albert Museum. My other experience is when I was nominated for my social housing and was offered "one offer", I felt this was not suitable for me because of the size/layout of the home.

The Housing officer placed me under stress and pressured me into making a decision and I felt put on the spot and was made to feel that I should be grateful for the offer. If I don't accept the one offer than I would lose this opportunity of social housing which I feel is unfair. I am of the view that care experienced young people should at least get two offers and be able to view the home or have photographs before bidding for the home to make an informed decision about their future home.

I want to be able to have a choice as a care leaver and would like this in respect of housing from the "protected characteristic" motion.

Ridwan Omar, Care Leaver

Cambridgeshire County Council

Care experience is often misunderstood. The first words that are usually said to me once I tell somebody that I was in foster care, are 'you mean like Tracey Beaker'? Followed by a long, awkward pause. Of course, it is understandable why people react like this given the presentation of us in the media alone. It's enough to scare anyone, and this is without the added mystery and misconceptions of being taken out of class regularly to meet with a social worker, or police, or support staff – all of which the system requires. Combine this with outcomes for children in care and it doesn't look great. But we need to shift our perspectives. It's common for these children to have experienced trauma, neglect, separation from siblings and family and moved all over the country. As a child. It's important to remember this; that these are vulnerable children.

I'm one of the lucky ones actually. I get to sit here and tell my story; but I have a job, next week I will be graduating from a fantastic University, and I have the unconditional love and support of both of my foster parents. I'm often told I "Made it out". But every day, I struggle with the label of being in care. I face decisions none of my peers face. To choose to leave my family behind as they did not support my decision to attend university. To work multiple jobs alongside my degree to get me through. To even get to university I had to car hop to attend open days – which already made me feel like I didn't belong. When I made it to University, I had to learn how to maintain friendships even how to write an essay – because I had never been anywhere long enough to learn these skills.

In 3 months, I will have no home, no job, no degree course and there is an expectation I will know what to do. To start this process of transitioning into the real-world, I am interviewing for jobs. I of course, value the work that I do with children in care; and as a result, my CV reflects this because of my work with fostering charities, and my roles outside of university, and of course, my own background. But this is not shared by employers. When employers find out about my care experience, I often have questions about what it means. Funnily enough, they do not like to hear that you were abused and traumatised as a child and put into this "dumping ground" filled with other vulnerable children. Despite the achievements I have made since and the resilience I have continuously shown. This isn't just employers – it stands with friendships and relationships too. It affects all areas of my life. But of course, these are few examples.

It often feels like I have to find something to say to justify this upbringing and why I deserve to live a normal life.

So, for those reasons alone, the recognition and understanding of what care experience is, is significant. Often these children feel alone, they've often been left without connections, networks, skills and opportunities – all of which are needed in order to have a chance at life. Policy such as this, is the only way for this to even begin to change. Recognising that this group is disadvantaged is one thing. But recognising that this group is also discriminated against, is another. Whilst we cannot undo the disadvantage, and take away this trauma, ensuring these children are considered and prevented from further discrimination when it comes to policy and decision-making, is a positive starting point for change. It is a wonder that this action has not been taken already.

This is an opportunity for Cambridgeshire to be at the forefront of innovative thinking and change, which in my experience and understanding, has not been the case in the past. Whether its data gathering, engagement in virtual schools, campaigning or even simply a social media post – I have seen efforts from many local authorities in care experienced matters... but never my own. What we are doing, is not enough. It is my hope that with this motion, we can begin to move forward, improve understanding around care experience and ensure future policy is made that considers a group which for too long has been disregarded.

Elle Johnson 23, Care Leaver

We invite you to join us in this crucial endeavour.

The change starts with us. Together, we can make a difference.



Twitter @terrygalloway