

Learning independence

Views of care leavers, students in residential further education and boarders in boarding schools on moving on to independent adult life

Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England



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Introduction



Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England

As Children's Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care, as well as boarders in boarding schools and residential students in further education colleges, for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers, children placed for adoption, and children living in residential family centres.

As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people in care, getting children's social care support or living away from home. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

This report gives the views of young people who are about to leave boarding schools for adult life, of residential students in further education colleges, and of care leavers, about learning and preparing for life as independent adults. It compares the views of those moving into independent adulthood from these very different backgrounds.

You can download copies of this report, and of all our other children's views reports, on our website www.rights4me.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Children's Rights Director for England



The young people who gave us their views

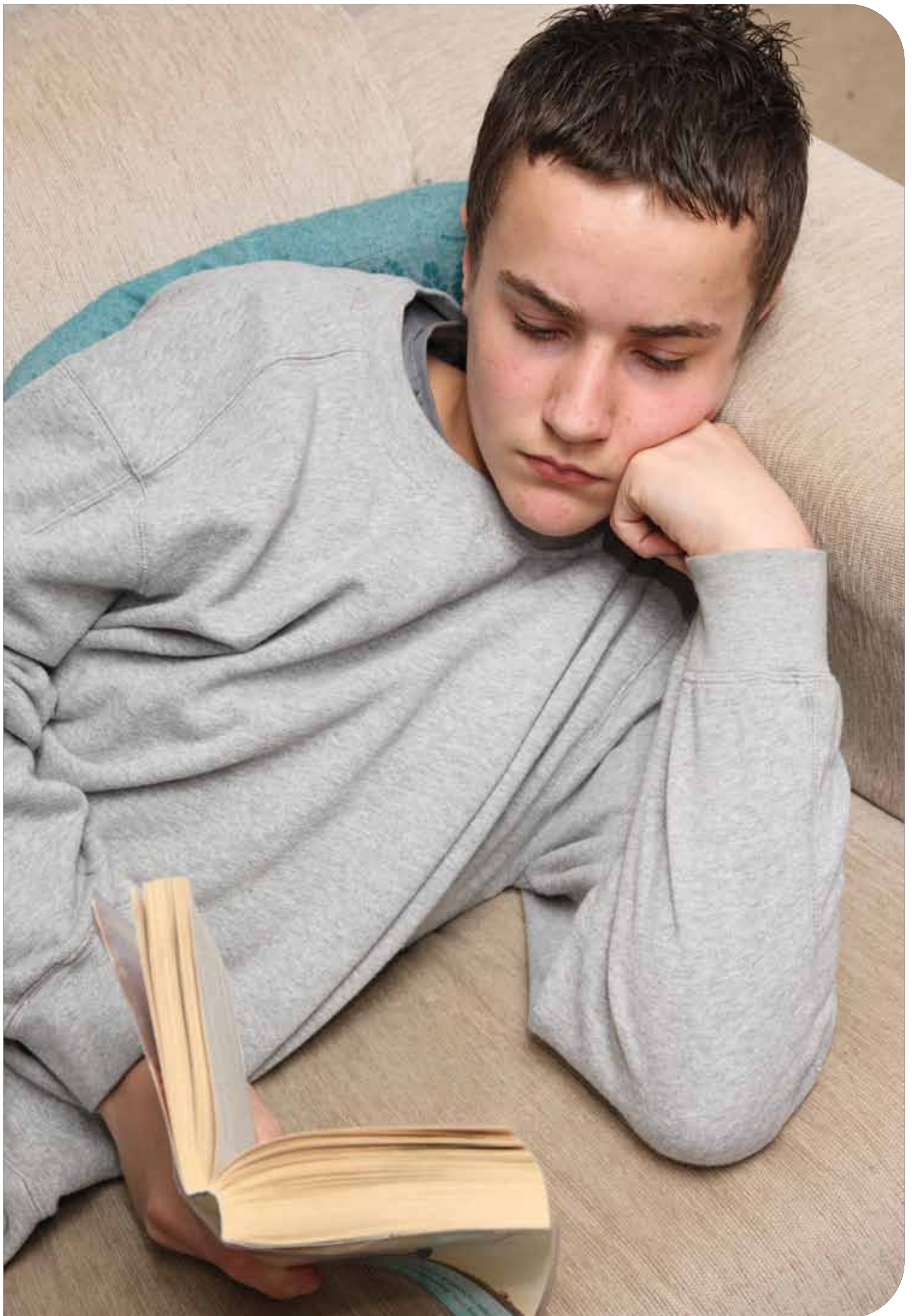
For this report, we have taken the views of 308 young people who had recently left care, or were about to leave care, together with the views of 56 boarders and residential further education college students, about the same issue – learning and preparing for independent adult life. We have also included the views of 12 young people who took part through our ‘BeHeard’ weekly mobile phone text consultation panel. This panel includes young people in care, care leavers, and boarders in boarding schools.

We had consulted the care leavers and those about to leave care for our recent report *After care*, and have included their views on preparing for independent adult life in this report too. Our consultations with them included two sessions in different parts of the country where young people entered their answers to questions on electronic pads, a survey, focus discussion groups, and submissions sent in by children’s rights groups.

We consulted boarders and residential college students through five focus discussion groups, four at their schools and colleges and one at another consultation event.

In our discussion groups, we met young people without their staff present, to help them to speak freely. Members of the Office of the Children’s Rights Director chaired the group and took notes of the views the young people gave.

In this report, as always in our children’s views reports, we have done our best to set out what the young people told us, as fully as possible. We have not left out views we might disagree with, or which councils, schools, colleges, Ofsted or the government might disagree with. Nor have we added any views or comments of our own. As far as we can make it, this report gives young people’s views, and nothing but young people’s views.



Key messages

The following key messages came from the children and young people we consulted for this report.

- Many care leavers thought they had left care too early, without enough preparation.
- The majority of care leavers (61%) thought being in care had made their lives better, while a quarter thought it had made their lives worse.
- Care leavers felt little prepared emotionally for living alone and for loneliness after leaving care.
- Young people leaving care, boarding school or residential college need more information about life outside school and care, and care leavers especially need more information about their entitlements and someone to call on readily for help and advice once they are on their own.
- Young people leaving care, boarding school or residential college need more help with handling money and everyday practical skills such as cooking.
- Young people living away from home in care, in boarding school or in residential college have a great deal done for them. Their main needs are met: items they need are provided, they are kept safe, and there are things to do with friends around. When they leave, they lose all this support and structure, and have to cope for themselves and deal with basic things that they had always been able to take for granted before.
- Boarders about to leave school were most worried about having enough money, getting to university and getting a job.
- Living away from home, in care or residential education, teaches independence, getting on with other people and getting to know yourself. For some, though, living away from home had not been a good experience and had not been right for them as individuals.
- There is prejudice against people from care, so half of care leavers try to keep it a secret that they are from care.
- During their time living away from home, care leavers had seen some improvements in personal support and listening to children, while boarders and residential college students had seen more emphasis on making living at school or college enjoyable, and on health and safety,

For those leaving care, boarding or residential college, future independent adult life is a daunting unknown: some worry about it, some fear it, others welcome it.



The questions and answers

How have you been prepared for life as an independent adult?

The care leavers who came to our voting sessions gave us two major messages about their experience of leaving care. One was that **most care leavers thought they had not left care at the right time for them**. Just under half (46%) told us that they had left care too early. The other message was about how well prepared they thought they had been for the independent life they would lead after leaving care. **Just under a quarter of the 123 care leavers we asked (24%) said they had been prepared well or very well**, and another 27% said that their preparation had been 'OK'. Almost half (49%) thought they had been prepared badly or very badly for leaving care. In eight of our discussion groups, care leavers told us that many had learned some of the everyday domestic skills they needed for independent living, but in five of the care leaver groups there were some who said they felt that they were not well prepared and had had to learn to fend for themselves.

Some had gone from children's homes or foster homes into supported accommodation, where they learned to cook and look after themselves with supervision. Some thought they didn't need much help to prepare them for independent life: 'I have not been prepared really – I don't feel I need help with anything.' Others had been given staff support, but this had not always worked well: 'I was prepared by a floating support worker, but someone who failed me.'

'I have not been prepared really – I don't feel I need help with anything'

The care leavers we spoke to also told us that **little attention had been paid to preparing them emotionally for the changes that leaving care would mean**. In particular, they had not really been prepared for how it would feel to leave the friends and carers they had lived with in care and were not able to stay in touch with after they left. Some told us that they had not fully understood just **how lonely their lives would become once they left care**.

Two of our **boarding school groups told us that they felt they were being well prepared, both for going to university and for work**. They described help in applying for university and being able to visit a selection of universities. In preparing for work, they said they had had career days and visits from people describing their different jobs, work experience placements, career assessments and interview practice. Their sixth form experience helped them to learn to self-direct their work. Another boarders' group thought that they still needed more help from school over choosing university courses, and finding out what courses and qualifications were available.

The issue of preparing for university came up in our care leavers' discussions too. One care leaver described to us how being in care had given them the support, funding and encouragement to stay on at school and prepare to go to university, which they would not have been able to do if they had not been taken into care.

One of the boarding groups said that their school experience had encouraged them to find out their own interests, and they had become motivated by what they had found they were good at and were interested in. They thought this would stand them in good stead for life after school.

The same group also told us that they thought much of their **boarding experience would be useful in preparing them for future adult life**, such as learning to take responsibility, to share responsibilities with others, to consider others, and to do practical tasks like looking after their belongings, buildings and environment. Learning to live away from home, and to cope with this emotionally, meant they were well prepared for the next steps in independence. They felt that a boarding house was less homely than home, and more like the sort of place they would need to live in as future students. Although there were lots of routines at boarding school, they thought you learned independence from these, and in boarding, 'if you make a mistake, it does have consequences – it's not all sugar-coated'.

Those in one boarding group said that although boarding taught independence, it was sheltered enough these days for some young people to keep to themselves too much in their individual rooms outside class time, away from everyone else and without much contact with the real world. Preparation for an independent future needed to include helping these lone boarders to 'come out of their shells' more. This was much the same message that we had heard from the care leavers, who said they needed more preparation for the loneliness they would feel once they had left their care placements.

One group of boarders told us how those who had been boarding since they were very young had learned

a lot from the matrons in their boarding houses about everyday skills like ironing clothes and keeping a room clean and tidy. These particular boarders had also learned how to do basic cooking. So far this group did not think there were any big gaps in their everyday skills that needed filling.

Just over a quarter of the care leavers we asked about what extra preparation they thought they needed for living independently said that they needed **more training in doing these 'domestic skills'**. **The examples given by most boarders and care leavers were much the same – cooking, washing and cleaning.**

Another boarding group told us that preparation for independent adult life was as much up to the individual boarder as it was to what the school might teach them. They thought they had been given general information that would be useful for their future adult life, if they made good use of it. This included taking part in school activities and learning how to relax and enjoy themselves, PHSE lessons, being taught 'cooking to survive', and general studies lessons on wider issues than things they were studying for examinations, such as world cultures. They felt that their school did put trust in its sixth form pupils, and they needed to learn from that experience for themselves.

Two boarding groups thought that their **experience at school was too sheltered, and had not given them enough knowledge of life and events in the wider world, which they needed to know about.** They thought schools and colleges should do more to give information about current affairs, and about things like how to deal as an adult with the government and the NHS. They also thought that in a multicultural society, it would be useful to be offered basic language classes too.

'Cooking to survive'

Care leavers we consulted also wanted more information about things they needed to know for life after they left. They particularly wanted to know about what help and support they were entitled to. Nearly two thirds (64%) of the 122 care leavers who answered our question on this said they did not know enough about their rights and entitlements at the time they left care, though 29% said they knew fully or mostly about their care leaving rights and entitlements.

Many of our care leavers had already left care, and so could tell us whether or not the advice they had been given by their care authority was useful in living independently. Just over half of the 124 care leavers who told us about this (51%) had found the advice they had been given useful to some extent. Almost a third (32%) said it had been quite or very useful, though 26% said it had not been very useful or not useful at all. **One in five care leavers, 20%, told us they had not received any advice as care leavers.**

In one residential college, students told us that they had been given careers advice, personal tutorial classes and sex education to prepare them for future independent life. One of our boarding groups agreed with the students that they **needed more sex education, rather than staff assuming that what they had been told when much younger was enough.** On careers, the student group said they would have found it useful to have more help in writing CVs to apply for jobs. Another boarders' group said that they needed more help with writing personal statements, which they needed to apply for university courses.

One group of **residential FE college students we spoke to were worried that they had not learned much about how to cook** – as one put it, 'I'm sure that more than a microwave exists.' However, like the boarders, many had learned to do things at college that they had arrived knowing nothing about, but would need as adults in the future – like washing clothes, vacuuming and tidying a room. One student told us, 'I'd never made a bed before.' More training

and practice at cooking – and using an ordinary oven rather than just a microwave – would have been welcome. Another group of students told us that at their college they had learned to wash clothes, cook, and shop using an everyday allowance. Cooking was something many care leavers told us they needed more help with before leaving care.

Both care leavers and one of our groups of boarders told us that young people needed to be taught more about handling money and keeping an account – things they saw their parents or carers having to do, but were not taught much about in care, at home, or at school or college.

From our consultations with care leavers, we heard what sorts of extra preparations they wished they had been given for their independent lives after care. They highlighted four main sorts of extra help they thought they needed. These were: **more help with money for living after care; more practical help with things like accommodation and learning how to shop, handle money and cook; being given important documents like passports, birth certificates and national insurance documents; and finally being given the name of someone they could turn to in the future for everyday practical advice or emotional support.** Out of those who had already left care, 42% told us that their care authority had provided them with a Personal Adviser to give them support (care leavers are legally entitled to have such an adviser).

'I'd never made a bed before'

The care leavers who had already left care told us about the financial support they did get from their care authorities. Twenty-nine per cent of the 122 care leavers answering this question for our *After care* report told us that they were given enough, or nearly enough, financial help with daily living expenses, and 19% said that they were not getting any such help from their care authorities. Out of 117 care leavers who had already left care and told us about financial help for their education or training, over half (56%) said they were receiving some financial help from their care authorities for this.

In our *After care* report, we gave this summary of how many (but not all) care leavers had described their preparation for leaving care and moving on to independent adult life: **‘Many have said that they think it has improved their lives... it has given them opportunities to keep safe, improve their education, meet new people and make new friends, enjoy new experiences and grow with increasing confidence and independence to become their own person.’** For those who had a good experience in care, this does not sound that different from what boarders whose experience of boarding had been good told us they had got from their time at boarding school.

In one of our regular questions to our Be Heard mobile phone text consultation panel, we asked how young people would want to use any money that had been

‘We need support with getting ID so we can be independent and work. I cannot work without my National Insurance number and I need my birth certificate’

saved for their future as adults. One text response gave the priorities as ‘accommodation, uni, food, living costs’. Here are two fuller responses.

‘Living arrangements. If the first priority is stable I would use the money towards driving lessons. If I had my licence then I would look at education equipment: books, uniform, transport, etc. (I understand that some young people would rather spend their money on education equipment first over driving but I am working this out based on my circumstances, not on general paths.) If everything else was sorted then I would keep most of it in case of an emergency, a saving account would be my best bet. I cannot really think of anything else important to spend it on.’

‘Basic things such as living expenses like rent, food, bills ensuring that you can manage to live for the time being off this, although for some people they would probably spend this on clothes and holidays. Also of importance would be furniture and household goods for the place in which you lived, such as washing machine, cooker etc and also things such as a TV licence if this is needed.’

In overall conclusion, **the two most common areas where more practical preparation is needed for independent adult life, from our consultations with young people from many different settings, were: how to budget and handle money, and how to shop and cook for yourself. Young people from different settings differed in the sort of emotional preparation they needed for the future.**

What worries you most about your future life as an independent adult?

Many of our care leavers had just left care, but none of our boarders had left their boarding schools yet, so in this section we focus mainly on what worried boarders about a future they had not yet started on, but were facing shortly.

The main worry in all our boarders' groups was money. This included student debt from going to university, managing money, paying taxes, and having to work long hours to make ends meet. Most boarders in our groups also felt they had not been taught enough about how to manage money, or about different sources of benefits or funding they might need if they became students in the future. They realised that going to university was likely to mean trying to get a part-time job to get enough money to live on while they were there, and worried about whether they would be able to get work. Money worries also included having to start paying for basics that had always been there for them as children – like toilet paper and a toothbrush.

Money worries were also mentioned in our text responses from our BeHeard mobile phone consultation panel. One text summed this up for many: 'The responsibility of money troubles.'

Our two groups of residential college students also said that they were worried about money in the future. This came through as their biggest single worry for the future. It was also one of the biggest worries among care leavers.

Another big worry for boarders was getting into university and on to the right course. There were then worries about coping with university life after the support and structures of school life. At university they would need to learn quickly how to take much more everyday responsibility for themselves, knowing their own limits without rules around them.

One of our boarders' groups told us they were seriously worried about not being able to get a job, and becoming unemployed. They were worried

that their chances of getting jobs were going down with problems in the economy. If they could not manage to get a job, or to get the right job for them, there was the worry that they would have to settle for a lifestyle that they didn't want. College students too worried about whether they would be able to get a job in the future, given the problems in the economy these days. The worry was raised in one boarding group that the country's economy might crumble altogether, and they would become victims without experience in coping with financial problems. Another group said they were worried that the way things were, they might have difficulty finding housing in the future.

Boarders were worried that when they moved on from school, they would lose all the support that school had given them, and all the help that had always been there for them. 'School's your own little world, and after that there's no one there to help you.' They would have to organise themselves in ways they had never had to do as children: 'Not being a child any more – have to grow up a bit and not looking forward to it.' They would need to learn quickly to live without the restrictions, structure and monitoring they were used to and relied on. The view of one group of boarders about to leave school was summed up by the young person who said, 'Here is a safe bubble' that they were about to leave for ever.

One group of boarders went further than this, and said that after having the security and community of

'School's your own little world and after that there's no one to help you'

boarding school life, they worried about life alone and becoming lonely. They not only worried about coping with things like cooking and paying bills, but also that they might fail badly and, as one put it, ‘accidentally burn the place down’. They worried about taking on everyday serious responsibilities, without either parents or school around them for support and help, and without there always being friends with them to talk to. **Life could become dull, and social life and friends would have to be found rather than always being there for you.** One said, ‘There will probably be so many responsibilities you don’t have fun any more.’

One group of residential students we spoke to said much the same. They were worried about having to do without all the support they had from college welfare staff. Staff had done a great deal to keep them safe, too. As one put it, their two main worries about life after leaving were **‘finance and safety’**. Students told us they had realised what a lot of support they had been given while they were students aged under 18, such as support from staff wardens, student wardens, mentoring, and the stability and safety of residential college life. In the future, there would be ‘no one with you to turn to when you get into trouble’.

These students were also worried that they wouldn’t know how to do some vital basic things they would soon need to do as independent adults, like paying a gas or electricity bill. One student told us they wouldn’t have a clue how to run a house for themselves.

‘There will probably be so many responsibilities you don’t have fun any more’

Many in one group of boarders were worried **about the challenges ahead of becoming responsible for earning enough money to bring up a family of their own.** They realised that they lacked experience in living as adults, and of the world of work, and were worried that they didn’t really know what their future life was going to be like.

Even though most of our care leavers had actually left care, we did hear from some who were still in care and about to leave. Two of the messages from our mobile text consultation panel described major worries about the emotional side of leaving care.

‘My main worry... is the thought of always feeling isolated from everyone else – exactly as I felt as a child – and never feeling I belong anywhere.’

‘I fear that if I don’t battle my demons, and win, that I will end up exactly like the woman who made me the way I am and feel today. In my opinion, when you’re constantly battling your memories and fears, time is just a matter of semantics – it doesn’t matter how old you are, your traumas will always be a part of you. Evidently I have yet fully to accept this observation of mine.’

Three young people answered our mobile phone text questions about preparing for the future by saying that we shouldn’t assume that the future might be something to worry about: ‘no, I look forward to it’; ‘it happens gradually and I am more excited than anything to turn 18’; ‘I will be able to manage, and if I do need help, I will get it from friends and family’. This last answer came from a young person about to leave foster care.

What advantages has living away from home given you for life as an independent adult?

One group of boarders told us that having lived away from home for a long time meant that they would not be homesick at university, and would already know how to be independent. All our boarding groups talked in different ways about how living in a community had taught them to be broadminded and to get on with other people, communicate easily with others, meet new people, get on with young people of different age groups, get on with adults, be tolerant, make compromises, put up with both good and bad in others and never write anyone else off. They had learned that other people, as well as themselves, need space, have moods, and are not always happy. Living in a residential setting had taught them self-reliance, which would always prove useful. They thought they had also learned everyday skills that other students might struggle with, like doing their own washing and mending.

One group added that as well as learning to deal with different people and different situations in a boarding community, they had also learned how to live with noise. They thought this would stand them in good stead in the future.

One boarding group told us that **boarding had taught them how to live without parents there all the time for them, and had also given them the experience of living with other people in the same shoes, helping others and being helped by others.**

Those in this group said that they had learned from **peer pressure at school how to get on with necessary things** like working, rather than dither and delay before starting things they didn't want to do, as they often did at home.

As we have already seen, cooking came up again and again in all our discussions about learning independence. In this part of our discussions, views differed between different groups of boarders about whether they would be leaving boarding school with skills at cooking. One group told us this was a practical skill they would leave school having learned to do, while others said this was something their school hadn't taught them. **Those who had learned basic cooking told us it was a major advantage they took away from school with them.**

Our boarding groups thought that their **boarding experience had also given them the advantage of getting to know themselves and what they could and could not do.** They had had many chances to try different activities, and had learned what they liked doing. As older boarders, many had learned to cope with various responsibilities, some through schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, or from being prefects or heads of house. Care leavers gave us a similar message, telling us how **being in care had helped them to get to know themselves, and to sort themselves out after experiencing problems earlier in their lives.**

Some of our care leavers told us how being in care had sorted out problems in their lives. Some also told us how particular people, such as the foster carers who had taken them into their families, had helped them sort themselves out during their time in care. A few care leavers told us that they thought that having

'Being in care has made me think more about what's right to what's wrong in my life'

been in care meant they could go ahead with their lives positively, rather than with major problems they would have had otherwise: ‘it changed my life for the better’; ‘I would have been an alcoholic otherwise’.

One boarding school group told us how boarding had given them experience in making everyday decisions and choices about practical things, which they saw as a great advantage for their future.

Two groups of boarders spoke of how they **had learned how to keep a balance between work and leisure** in their lives, which would be useful for the future. One of these groups said they would leave boarding school with the advantage of having skills in sharing their time and energies between work, friends and practical everyday tasks that have to be done.

Residential college students also told us that they thought living away from home had given them a good start for adult life by teaching them independence, responsibility and confidence. One group of students said that their college experience would be an advantage when they got to university. Another group felt that living at college was naturally midway between life at home and independent life as an adult. It was somewhere they had become more mature as individuals by living for a while away from home, but in the care of residential staff. Like the boarders, they talked to us about the advantages of being used to living with other people, and having learned to respect other people, their privacy and their boundaries. Being able to make friends easily and meet new people, and finding it easy to talk with different people, would help in the important job of simply getting a job.

We heard from care leavers too that living away from home in care had made them grow up faster than they thought they would have done otherwise. As one care leaver put it, **‘Being in care made me grow up an awful lot quicker.’**

There were **different views in our boarding and college student groups about whether it was or wasn’t helpful to have become used to being told what to do for a lot of the time.** Most agreed that they had benefited from having a solid support system around them. Some thought this would make it difficult to do things and decide things on their own when there was no longer someone there to tell them what to do and guide them. Others thought that they had learned from the guidance of staff and the support of others, so would be in a better position in the future to take responsibility for their own actions.

Children from abroad in one boarding group thought that they would be likely to make it to university, and said that schooling and then university in the UK would give them an internationally recognised qualification, which they would not have been able to get otherwise.

Some care leavers too – but not the majority – told us that living away from home, by coming into care, had helped their education for the future. Care leavers gave us a mixed picture. Just over a third (35%) of the care leavers in our voting sessions told us they thought they had not done as well in their education as they might have done if they had not been taken into care, while between a quarter and a third (29%) told us they thought they had done better in their education as a result of coming into care. Just over a quarter (27%) thought coming into care had made no difference to how they had done in their education.

‘My foster parents – so glad I met them, they have had such an impact on my life’

Clearly, **different care leavers had very different views and experiences of how the education they needed for the future had been affected by living in care.** Living away from home in care could be an advantage for the education of some, but a disadvantage for others.

Care leavers voted on whether they thought that, overall, living away from home in care had made things better or worse for them as they now moved on into independent life. The majority vote was that being in care had made their lives better. **Sixty-one per cent of the care leavers we asked said that their lives in care had made things better or a lot better for them.** There were some very different experiences of care though, and a significant minority – **just over a quarter (26%) of our care leavers told us that being in care had made their lives worse.**

What disadvantages has living away from home given you for life as an independent adult?

Two groups of boarders told us that **one disadvantage of spending a long time at a boarding school was that they had got too used to being organised all the time.** Without the structure and routine they had got so used to at school, when they left they might make poor use of their time, get lazy and let things slip. It would be hard to adapt to life without a familiar routine, or to adapt to very different routines from the ones they had known at school. Some residential college students thought that getting used to other people telling you what you needed to do all the time might prove to be a disadvantage as an independent adult. They said that **it could be a real disadvantage if you had learned simply to rely on things being done for you.**

Care leavers gave us a rather different view on things being organised. About a quarter of the care leavers who told us about this said that they thought that the rules they had learned to live by while they were in care were too strict. Six of our care leaver discussion

groups raised the same point. This was not just about children and young people not liking rules, though. What they said was mainly about **rules that prevented children in care from having many of the experiences that other children had.** We heard about ‘constant health and safety risk assessments’, and ‘needing consent forms signed for everything’.

Care leavers told us that rules about **friends’ parents having to be police checked before they were allowed to stay overnight** like other teenagers could have limited their ability to stay with friends who weren’t in care: ‘Hated the fact that I had to get permission and people having to be police checked if I wanted to sleep over.’ (In fact, there is no law or government guidance that friends’ parents should be police checked before a young person in care stays overnight. Unless the young person’s care plan says otherwise, foster carers and children’s home staff should make the decision exactly as any other young person’s parents would.)

One care leaver told us that being looked after in care meant that things that other children and young people could do freely had involved a lot of special paperwork, and this had limited what they could do: ‘A lot of paperwork that has to be filled in – because you’re in care, teachers had to fill in paperwork; they’d get you to one side and filled it in.’

Some care leavers did wonder what the effect of rules and rewards systems in care would be for their futures, and one group discussed **how children in care are**

‘Food won’t be just in the dining room and everything in life for you on a plate’

rewarded for doing good things as well as having rules and sanctions for doing bad things. We heard the view that although there might be a lot of rules about some things, life in care is not strict enough in other ways, and children might be getting rewarded too easily: 'They are not strict enough on us – sets a bad example. People are getting rewarded for stuff they should be doing anyway.'

This was a social problem, because most care leavers wanted to be treated like other children and young people at school or college, and many tried to keep it a secret that they were actually in care. **Exactly half of all the care leavers in our *After care* voting sessions told us that they sometimes, often or always tried to keep it a secret that they were from care.**

A disadvantage of living away from home described by one group of boarders we spoke to was that at boarding school they had got used to life being made easy for them, and things they needed being just provided for them. They now realised that this was about to change dramatically and things were not going to be there for them so easily in future: 'Food won't be just in the dining room and everything in life for you on a plate.'

Exactly the same point was made by the care leavers who said, 'When you're in care you don't have to worry about bills and cooking or meals. All of a sudden when you leave it's harder to manage and it stresses you out.'

'No family contact now as no one kept me in touch with them as I was growing up'

One of our college student groups made the same point, saying that they expected to find things very different when they had to provide for themselves, and do everything for themselves. One student commented that having had cooking and cleaning done for them for so long, they realised that they didn't want to have to start doing this for themselves.

A young person about to leave a children's home summarised the issue for many from different backgrounds: 'I don't want to live alone and I have always had people doing things for me – we had a chef, cleaners and stuff like that.'

The point was made in one boarders' group that **those for whom boarding was not the right thing from the start might find themselves at a disadvantage.** If they had been boarders from the age of eight, but had never been suited to boarding life, they might have had their 'personality brought down'.

Other things boarders told us they would have got too used to at boarding school, which would be a disadvantage when they left, were having lots of opportunities and activities laid on for them, and the security they had always had while living on a safe school campus. One group of boarders told us how they thought that getting used to living with other people in a school community might not turn out to be such an advantage after all – it would probably be a shock to move out into the wider community when they left.

Another group of boarders talked about similar issues. Although they had learned about other people at school, they did not have experience of integrating into the outside world. They had spent a lot of time with their own age group, but had not talked much to elderly people, or worked alongside people from lots of different walks of life.

One of the big issues that care leavers raised about living away from home in care, which had not been mentioned as a disadvantage of being a boarder in a boarding school or a residential college student, was that of losing contact with your family over time. Not

only had many of those in care for a long time lost contact with their birth families while they were away in care, but many told us they did not think they were going to get contact with their families back once they had left care.

We have already heard boarding school described as a 'safe bubble'. Two different groups of boarders quite separately described boarding school as like 'living in a bubble', and even being safely 'bubble wrapped'. Living in this 'safe bubble' at boarding school had both advantages and disadvantages. It had meant a safe place to grow up, but perhaps not being so well prepared for the realities of the outside world, where there would no longer be people looking out for them. One boarder said, 'It's a nice bubble, but one day it'll pop as you leave it and you'll hit the ground hard.' One group told us that you can live in a boarding school and get too used to being in a closed school environment. Some told us they had been so focused on what was going on in school that they realised they had been too 'oblivious of the outside world'. As one put it: 'Your entire world is here.'

Boarders also told us that in a community of children and young people they had got used to being loud, but this would not be acceptable when they were in a more adult community after they left. This was the other side of having got used to living with noise.

Our care leaver groups told us that although staff and carers usually tried to help children in care to overcome problems, **many care leavers were left with memories of what had happened to them before care and in care, and these stayed with them and affected their lives and relationships afterwards**: 'I did not feel wanted and will always have bad memories that will never leave. They're always part of you.' We heard of this as both a disadvantage of coming from care, and as something care leavers were worried about for their future.

Many of our care leavers also told us about how they had been affected by **moving from one placement to another while they were living in care, and how**

this was a disadvantage for the future: 'You don't have stability, being with lots of different people.' Moving from one place to another was seen as giving many care leavers a disadvantage for the future, but was not something that was raised by boarders or residential students, even though some boarders told us they had experienced moves from one boarding school to another.

One boarding group thought that having been privileged during their school days could turn out to be a disadvantage after they left school. As one put it, 'We are privileged now, but we won't be once we leave here and are on our own.'

On the other hand, most care leavers who commented did not think they came out from their upbringing with a privilege, but that they carried **a stigma for coming from care that would stay with them afterwards**. Even where there was no actual prejudice against being from care, leavers often found it difficult to cope with people's curiosity and their assumptions about what had happened to children to bring them into care, and this affected meetings with other people: 'Every time you tell people you are a care leaver they always want to know why you were in care.' However, one care leaver said they thought it was important to 'focus on the positives – publicise positive outcomes of care'.

As we heard from our consultations, half of all care leavers try to keep it a secret that they come from care. Nobody in our boarders' or residential college

'We are privileged now, but we won't be once we leave here and are on our own'



discussion groups said they tried to keep it a secret that they had been to boarding school or a residential FE college. Two quotes from care leavers summarised the views of very many: 'being stigmatised for being looked after'; 'I do not want to be singled out'.

The residential college students we met were worried too that in the present economic climate, there was much more focus than before on getting a degree from college, even though for many students, **getting an apprenticeship might give them a better chance of getting a good job.**

We heard from boarders in **single-sex boarding school that only experiencing life living with their own sex was not a realistic preparation for future life**, and would be a disadvantage to them when they left school.

In one group of boarders we were told that in a boarding school community you learn to trust the other people there, and this can be a disadvantage: 'It is not realistic for real life – not everyone is trustworthy.' The same issue came out the other way around from one of our care leavers' groups, where members of the group told us that they had learned from being in care not to trust other people: 'Being in care has made me learn not to trust anyone.' **Both boarders and care leavers groups discussing this issue thought that trust was an important issue, and both felt that they were moving into their adult lives with a disadvantage about trusting people – but these were very different sorts of disadvantage.**

How has being looked after away from home changed over the time you have experienced it?

One of our boarding school discussion groups told us that there had been two big changes in boarding life since they had become boarders. First, there was much more of a 'massive drive for happiness' nowadays, with lots of **focus on helping children to get on with each other, not to bully each other, and to**

enjoy life more. This was especially true for very young boarders. Another group told us that there was much less fear than in the past, such as fear of being punished physically. Yet another group of boarders described the change as having a lot to do with a change in staff attitudes – boarding had become less institutional, less structured and much more flexible.

Care leavers too told us about improvements in care over the time they had spent being looked after by their local care authorities. **Almost half of those who told us about this said that there had been improvement in at least one part of their care, and around one in six said that care overall had improved during their time in care.** Only around one in eight care leavers told us that in their experience care hadn't generally improved at all.

Like the boarders, some care leavers had noted improvements in support over time. Around one in five of the care leavers we asked about the support they had been given in care told us that **personal support had improved during the time they had spent in care.**

The second big change our boarding groups told us about was that there was now **much more stress on child protection, health and safety** than our older boarders remembered when they had first become boarders. There were many more safety precautions, and much more supervision, than some years ago. Residential college students told us the same. They had seen an increase in **safeguarding training for**

'[There's been a] massive drive for happiness'

everyone working with students. They thought this had gone further than those who really needed it, and now included all staff members and people such as bar staff. One student group told us there was much more use of curfews than in the past, and that if a student was 10 or 15 minutes late back from somewhere, they were now called on their mobile phones, when in the past nobody would have worried that they were only slightly overdue. They thought that this was too much of a restriction for people of student age – particularly if they were still somewhere on the college premises – and that curfews should only be used if agreed by the parents of a student aged under 18. Boarders too told us about greater restrictions these days on older pupils going off the school campus – for example, to pick up a takeaway – which they used to be allowed to do.

One of our boarding groups told us how their school was nowadays much stricter about visits by family members. They no longer allowed fathers, grandparents or other relatives to be shown around boarding areas, for the safety of other pupils. Another part of this increased security was that staff and visitors nowadays had to wear identity badges when they were on the school site. One group told us their school also now had a security guard patrolling the site.

The **boarding groups saw these changes as both positive and negative.** They were positive because boarders were generally more looked after and treated better than they used to be. But they were

negative too, because they were more organised and restricted than they remembered when they first became boarders. Safety restrictions made for younger boarders also affected older ones, and younger boarders were more controlled, instead of being allowed to grow up more on their own. Social life in boarding houses now involved more organising of social relationships, more ‘organised fun’ and more ‘team-building’, instead of just letting children make their own friends.

Residential college students told us in their group that **staff were nowadays much more aware than they used to be about a very wide range of different problems students might need help with,** from Asperger’s Syndrome to drug abuse problems. They felt that in the past there had been a much more basic focus on things like first aid, but now staff were trained more in providing different sorts of support.

Our older boarders thought that these changes had led to **less hierarchy between years in boarding school, and much more relaxation in relationships between staff and pupils.** But they thought too that younger boarders were less likely to learn things on their own, or from older boarders, and that younger boarders nowadays showed less ‘respect’ towards older ones. They also thought **staff sometimes found it difficult to keep a balance between carrying out friendly, relaxed and parenting roles some of the time, while being more formal teachers at other times.**

Residential college students thought there was **more ‘red tape’ around how colleges had to look after their students and train their staff,** and this had made things less straightforward than they used to be. They also thought that there was more inspection of their college nowadays, and one said that the main change while they had been residential students had been ‘all Ofsted and everything’. The problem with this was that if inspectors found something wrong with the college, what usually happened was that life got tighter and more controlled for the students there. One student told us that **special measures for a college led to shut-downs for students.**

‘More opportunities to get involved in groups for care’

Many of the care leavers we consulted told us that **over their time in care there had been more opportunities for young people themselves to get involved in improving things.** Three of our care leavers' discussion groups told us about different groups young people in care could join in their local areas, and they especially welcomed the start-up of Children in Care Councils in local authorities, where young people in care could comment on and make a difference to their local services.

Along with this positive change noted by some, six of our care leavers' discussion groups did say, however, that they thought **children and young people in care were still not being consulted enough, or that their views were not being taken seriously enough.**

Two of our care leavers' groups told us that during their time in care they had noticed more girls having their own babies while in care.

One boarding group told us that their school had increased the opportunities available for boarders over the time they had been there. There were now more activities and outings. School facilities and levels of privacy had improved too. The quality and variety of food had also improved a lot. But on the other hand, boarding numbers had now increased at their school too, and there was much more pressure on their living space.

Another change seen by our groups of boarders was that **boarding schools had become far more of an international community** than they had been a few years ago. One result of this was described in one group as more acceptance that the school was multicultural and so less insistence on things like going to chapel services.

Boarders from one school thought that the school authorities were nowadays much more conscious than in the past about the image of the school. Boarders were now expected to help keep up the 'brand of boarding'.



From what we were told by the care leavers, **there weren't any big ways that most young people said the care system had changed during their time in it. This probably shows that they had their own, very personal and different, experiences of care, rather than all having similar experiences.**

'Young people get a bit more of a say, it's a bit better'

Last thoughts...

From our discussions, here are some final thoughts from young people themselves on moving on to adult independence from care, boarding or residential college.

‘Be less safety-oriented and teach children more how to stand on their own two feet’

‘School is an unrealistic preparation for the real world’

‘No one can ever prepare you for having to manage on your own’

‘There are fewer rules but you have more responsibility’

‘Out there is hell – we don’t really know what out there is’

And here is a very last message to us and all readers of this report from one young person we consulted.

‘When you are trying to improve something, don’t always look for new things – sometimes you just need to look back a bit in time’

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