

Improving care leavers' experiences of the welfare system

About the project

With the support of Lloyds Bank Foundation, Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is working with young people from Leicestershire Cares, Drive Forward and Homes2Inspire to understand care leavers' experiences of the welfare system.

Care leavers face a number of challenges as they prepare to leave the care system and navigate towards living independently at a young age. They often need support to help them move into education, employment or training. However, there is evidence that the welfare system isn't doing enough to support care leavers.

Like all young people, care leavers' education, and the employment opportunities available to them, have been disrupted because of the Covid-19 pandemic. While most young people have the support of their family, care leavers are often facing the challenges on their own. For many this has resulted in increased levels of isolation, anxiety and concern about their future. As the recovery continues it is important that the welfare system provides the support that care leavers need to help them progress in education and employment, and live full and active lives.

Through consultations with care leavers, desk research and expert interviews, L&W and young people from Leicestershire Cares, Drive Forward and Homes2Inspire have identified six policy changes that we believe would improve care leavers' experiences of the welfare system and help them to achieve better outcomes.

Proposed policy changes

1. A designated lead at every Jobcentre Plus, focused on care leavers

DWP should require and fund every Jobcentre Plus to have a designated member of staff responsible for care leavers. This staff member should have knowledge of care leavers' lives and specialist training – it is essential that they have a good understanding of the challenges that care leavers often face. They should also have time to oversee the claims of all care leavers, build rapport and trust, gain an understanding of their individual circumstances and offer support tailored to them. This person should also be the 'single point of contact' with the relevant local authority leaving care team. Their role should involve building strong links at operational and strategic level to enable:

- Forward planning of individual care leavers' transitions into the welfare system, to avoid gaps in support and the 'cliff edge' that care leavers often describe.
- Fast track verification of care leavers' identities and approval of claims.

- Effective sharing of information about individual care leavers, to ensure tailored support can be put in place, for example mental health support.
- Jobcentre Plus and the local authority leaving care team to provide joined up, comprehensive support that is built around each young person.

2. Introduction of a 'marker' for care leavers when they enter into the welfare system

The support that care leavers receive varies substantially across the country – it is currently a postcode lottery. DWP should introduce a care leaver 'marker', which clearly tells work coaches that a young person has been in care. This should trigger a full menu of support options so that care leavers fully understand their rights. Care leavers' rights and entitlements in the welfare system should be set out in an accessible guide – a website or a printed document. This should clearly set out how they can make a claim, the support they should receive and who from, their options and rights, their responsibilities and how the sanction process works.

3. All care leavers should be entitled to the over-25s rate in Universal Credit

UC claimants over the age of 25 receive approximately £16 per week more than claimants under the age of 25 on the basis that they are likely to be living independently and face greater financial responsibility. However, the majority of care leavers transition to independent living between the ages of 16-18 and do not typically receive financial or wider support from their family. All care leavers should be entitled to the over 25s rate in UC, regardless of their age. The cost of this to government is estimated to be £24 million per year.

4. Right to advanced payment grant (not loan)

From submitting a UC claim, to receiving the first payment can take 5 weeks. Many care leavers struggle during this time, particularly when they transition from being in care to living on their own and without financial support from family. It is vital that they have the financial support to survive.

Whilst care leavers can request an advance payment, this is currently a loan, which the young person needs to re-pay from their future benefits. This often leads to re-payment problems and debt. The advance payment should be changed so that care leavers are not required to repay it. It should be a one-off grant, rather than a loan.

5. Clear step by step escalation protocol for applying sanctions

Sanctioning a care leaver should be the last resort. DWP should publish a clear escalation protocol setting out the steps that must be in place before a care leaver is sanctioned. This should include:

- That a care leaver cannot be sanctioned for the first breach of an agreement, and a meeting between the work coach and care leaver / personal adviser must be arranged to discuss the breach.
- That a care leaver cannot be sanctioned without their JCP work coach discussing this with their personal adviser.
- That the onus is on the work coach to understand the circumstances of the care leaver and provide clear support, training timeframes and expectations, before implementing a sanction.

6. All care leavers should be exempt from paying council tax, up to the age of 25

Approximately 130 out of 151 local authorities exempt care leavers from paying council tax or offer a discount. The remaining 20 or so do not. As a result, care leavers face a postcode lottery in support and costs. The government should learn from good practice and implement a national exemption for care leavers up to the age of 25, so that care leavers do not face a different set of costs based on the area they happen to live within.