

# Post Lockdown Support Matters: For Care Leavers and their mental wellbeing Impact Report

The Beyond Lockdown research project sought to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on care leavers' well-being and support needs. The research was funded by the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration, Kent Surrey and Sussex (ARC KSS) and was undertaken by a partnership between University of Sussex and Creative Research Collective from June until December 2020 ([Beyond Lockdown – impact of COVID-19 on Care Leavers | Kent Surrey Sussex Academic Health Science Network \(kssahsn.net\)](https://kssahsn.net)).

The findings of the Beyond Lockdown research project were presented at a community of practice attended by stakeholders who work with care leavers within local authorities, universities, voluntary sector organisations, National Health Service England (NHSE) and Department for Education (DfE). Care Leavers from Kent and Sussex also produced key messages for service providers and other care leavers on what support was needed and how it could be provided. At the community of practice, in response to the research findings and the key messages produced by care leavers, the stakeholders made a total of 33 pledges – practical ways in which they would use the research findings to help support care leavers and those working with care leavers.

Two years after those pledges were made, the ARC KSS team followed-up with stakeholders to receive an update on their pledges, and to identify potential barriers to implementing them.



*[Above] Examples of pledges made by stakeholders*

## Stakeholder pledges, pledge updates and outcomes:

This section shares the stakeholder pledges, and the associated updates and outcomes of those pledges, which were made in response to the Beyond Lockdown research findings. The pledges have been grouped into the following topics:

- Share Beyond Lockdown research findings and key messages
- Establish social groups/activities and peer support
- Improve digital access
- Service development and service-user involvement

Pledges were made by stakeholders from across Kent, Surrey, Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, and West Sussex. Similar pledges made by multiple stakeholders have been compiled into one overarching pledge. Details about the individual or specific Leaving Care Team, university or local authority that made each pledge have been removed.

## Summary of pledges (with quick links to location in report):

<b>Share Beyond Lockdown research findings and key messages</b>	Disseminate Beyond Lockdown research findings, community of practice resources & pledges, and organise an additional community of practice event
	Reach care leavers with key messages from the Beyond Lockdown research study, and build on contacts from the study to facilitate further work with marginalised care leavers
<b>Establish social groups/activities and peer support</b>	To continue to provide drop-in sessions for care leavers throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic
	Establish a Facebook peer-to-peer group for contact and support between care leavers
	Start a coffee morning/parent and baby group for young parent care leavers
	To set up or continue to provide Christmas events and support, such as hosting Christmas lunches, or delivering Christmas meals or a Christmas gift
	Organise walking groups for care leavers
	Run a buddy initiative where young people can be paired with other young people to encourage social networks (peer mentoring)
<b>Improve digital access</b>	Implement a peer champion project
	Address challenges for care leavers to access the internet in shared accommodation
<b>Service development and service-user involvement</b>	Involve care leavers in the design and delivery of service-wide training and projects on key topics, such as higher education, accommodation, the Local Offer and pathway plans
	Share local practice between Leaving Care Teams

## Summary of outcomes:

- The Beyond Lockdown research findings led to the development of co-produced resources and national key messages, which have been shared nationally across 88 local authorities.
- The National Care Leaver Advisor for Care Leavers shared the research findings with the Department for Education and fed the findings into the national Care Review. The NHS England Regional Team shared the research findings and key messages to the Directors of Children's Social Care across the Southeast.
- The Care Leaver's voice has been acknowledged as a powerful tool to drive and reinforce change. Care Leavers have successfully been involved in (and continue to be involved in) the design and delivery of innovative service-wide projects, research and training.
- Peer support opportunities for care leavers were set up across the region, such as Facebook groups, virtual drop-ins, and face to face events.
- Work to share good practice, service innovations and resources between teams, and to implement regulations to support care leavers with issues such as housing, accessing services digitally and reducing stigma has been started.

***"It was just such an interesting piece of work...I mean a lot of research ends up on shelves and doesn't go anywhere, but actually it was fundamentally important. The voice of young people was really powerful and that's the bit that gets me all the time"***

***- Leaving Care National Advisor, Department for Education and co-chair of the workshops***

## Pledges to share research findings and key messages:

**Pledge: Disseminate Beyond Lockdown research findings, community of practice resources & pledges, and organise an additional community of practice event**

This pledge combines two similar pledges made by stakeholders from the ARC KSS and the Department for Education.

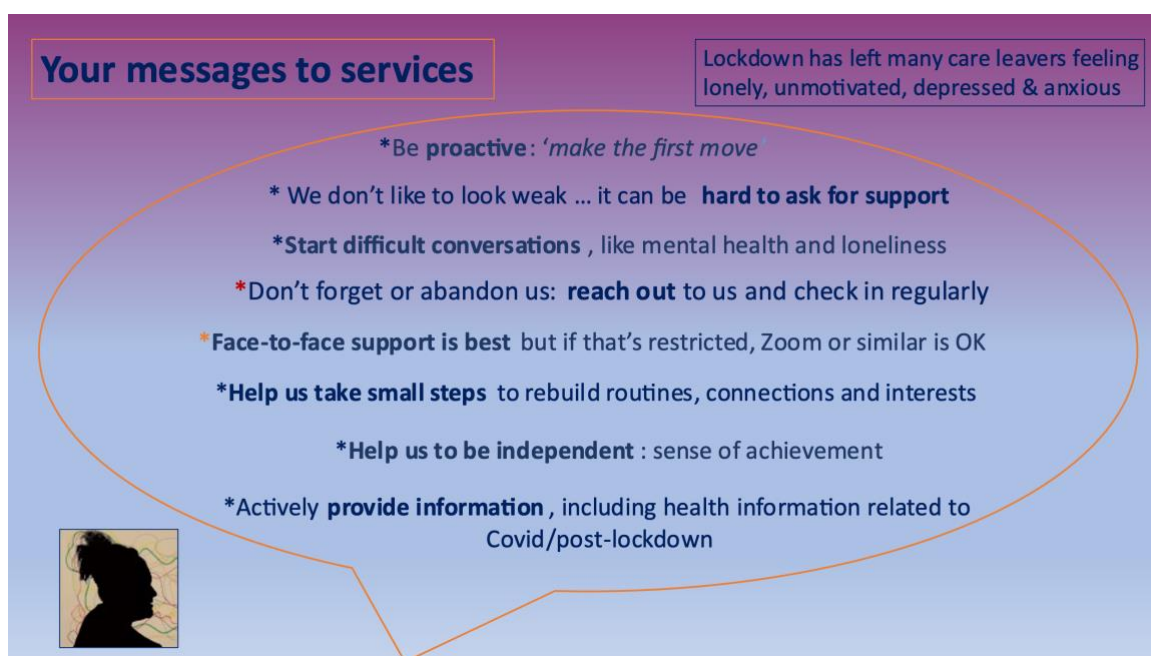
### Outcomes:

- Resources containing care leaver voices in the form of videos, audio clips, artwork and key messages were co-produced with care leavers.
- The resource packs and Beyond Lockdown research findings were shared to all those involved in the Community of Practice, as well as other relevant regional and national stakeholders. For instance, the research findings were fed into the National Care Review, a number of national conferences and were shared with local authorities, civil servants, the care leaver policy teams and other government departments.
- Care leavers involved in the research have since been invited to represent KSS on the Young People's National Benchmarking Forum, enabling the work to be embedded nationally with the co-creation of key messages shared with over 88 local authorities.

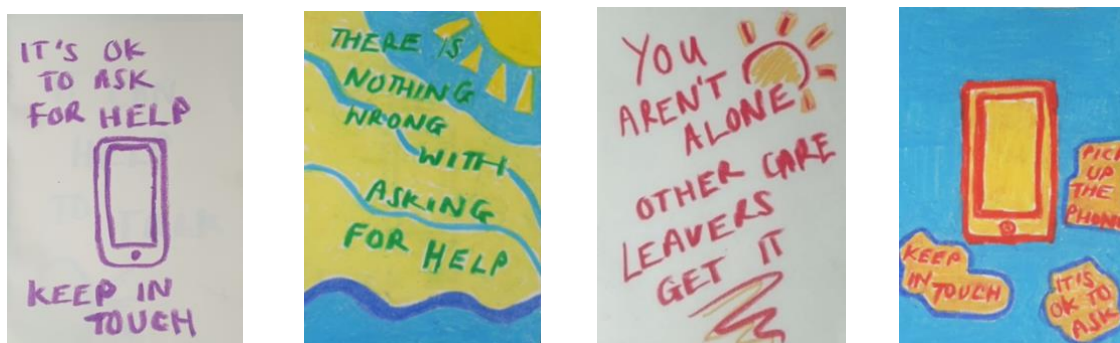
- A follow up community of practice was held in February 2022, chaired by Becca Randell, Kent, Surrey and Sussex CYP Mental Health Implementation Lead, KSS AHSN and the Care Leavers National Advisor for DFE to monitor the progress of the pledges. Feedback indicated this was a useful forum to share good practice, learn from each other and hear about service innovation.

*“Being part of the research project, I have been able to share my personal experience during the pandemic and in particular how this can impact on asylum young people. I enjoyed presenting to other local authorities to help them think about how to support care leavers” - Care experienced young person*

**Resources:** [Beyond Lockdown – impact of COVID-19 on Care Leavers | Kent Surrey Sussex Academic Health Science Network \(kssahsn.net\)](#)



[Above] Examples of care leaver messages to services



[Above] Examples of the artwork co-produced with care leavers

Pledge: Reach care leavers with key messages from the Beyond Lockdown research study, and build on contacts from the study to facilitate further work with marginalised care leavers

This pledge was made by researchers from the Beyond Lockdown research study.

Outcome:

- Messages from the Beyond Lockdown research study were collated and images were created in collaboration with a care experienced artist. These were shared nationally with young people within care leaver services (in local authorities and universities) and the relevant teams planned their own regional events to disseminate findings.
- Feedback from local authorities indicated that the research project was a worthwhile piece of work that they had learnt from. Other third sector organisations working with vulnerable people (such as, unaccompanied asylum seekers and homeless people) shared an interest to build on the work started by the Beyond Lockdown research study.

### **Pledges to *establish social groups/activities and peer support*:**

Pledge: To continue to provide drop-in sessions for care leavers throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic

This pledge combines two similar pledges made by stakeholders from two Leaving Care Services (from different local authorities).

Outcome:

- Drop-in sessions (face-to-face and online) were implemented, with plans to increase the locality of sessions to try and reach as many young people as possible. Sessions were used for a range of activities, such as quizzes, art competitions, photography or personal trainer sessions.
- Virtual/online sessions were attended less and were mostly run during government enforced lockdowns. However, for socially anxious young people, online sessions began to help with confidence and social skills.
- Face-to-face sessions were considered more successful and useful. For example, unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people were more likely to bring their friends along, and certain venues enabled young people who attended to also access support from a range of other professionals.

Pledge: Establish a Facebook peer-to-peer group for contact and support between care leavers

This pledge was made by a stakeholder from a local university who was a designated member of staff for Care Experienced students.

Outcome:

- A Facebook group was established and run by two student care leavers. Engagement with the group was low, which led to useful reflections about how



the chosen platform may not be the most appropriate for this population, and that care leavers may not want to be part of a care leaver group (in a university context).

### Pledge: Start a coffee morning/parent and baby group for young parent care leavers

This pledge was made by a stakeholder from a local authority Leaving Care Service.

#### Outcome:

- Young parent care leavers shared feedback that the pledged group would be beneficial, particularly due to how isolated they were during the COVID-19 pandemic. The plans to start the group had to be put on hold due to challenges accessing an appropriate venue.

*“...the venue works really well for a drop-in, but doesn’t work well for a parent and baby group... because it’s a too public kind of space... getting the mothers and babies, that wasn’t a problem...one of my workers talking to their young mums felt particularly isolated and would have benefited from it ...it’s a shame that we haven’t been able to set that up. It’s on the backburner though, it’s not gone away” - Stakeholder, Leaving Care Service*

### Pledge: To set up or continue to provide Christmas events and support, such as hosting Christmas lunches, or delivering Christmas meals or a Christmas gift

This pledge combines four similar pledges made by stakeholders from a youth participation team and three Leaving Care Services (across three local authorities).

#### Outcome:

- Face-to-face Christmas lunches were successfully hosted, with plans proposed to assess how to improve the event and how to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people to attend.
- When face-to-face events couldn’t be held due to COVID-19 restrictions, other local Christmas lunch campaigns were publicised, Christmas themed virtual events were hosted, or three-course meals and presents were delivered.
- There was also a more proactive effort to instigate conversations about loneliness and social connection over the holiday period, working with young people to ensure they were going to see other people. This included finding and promoting charities with social events, such as a Christmas day walk for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.

### Pledge: Organise walking groups for care leavers

This pledge was made by a stakeholder from a local authority Leaving Care Service.

#### Outcome:

- Walking groups were established, but engagement with the group was low. Social media was used instead to encourage young people to engage in outdoor activities with housemates (during the COVID-19 pandemic).

- The implementation of the group led to ideas about alternative approaches:
  - Introduce groups with a focus on preferred activities, such as, football.
  - Existing community activity groups could be located and promoted by the care leaver apprentice team.
  - The walking group could continue as a 1:1 activity (which seemed more successful and led young people to have more confidence to go for walks with own friends). Plans were proposed to review the capacity and feasibility to manage this approach in the future.

Talking about the difficulties of a walking group during the COVID-19 pandemic...  
***“everybody was just scared of what we could or couldn’t do...[and] trying to help our young people, especially with the language barrier, understand the severity of this illness, and how to protect themselves, look after themselves, to try not to give them mixed messages, of how to do things safely”- Stakeholder, Leaving Care Service***

### **Pledge: Implement a peer champion project**

This pledge was made by a stakeholder from a local authority Leaving Care Service.

#### **Outcome:**

- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people were successfully trained to support new young people accessing the service. However, it was felt that the COVID-19 enforced restrictions limited the project.
- To improve the project, there are plans to explore:
  - An alumni style approach: set-up informal peer support with care leavers who can share expertise. For example, being able to talk to someone who has set up their own business.
  - Implementing a welcoming and informal introduction to the service from a care leaver’s perspective.

***“I think the initial idea when we did train the first group was brilliant...we did a mini graduation...and they all got a certificate. The US [unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people] love it, you know, for some, ‘I’ve got a qualification’ that’s something, they’ve got something really important” - Stakeholder, Leaving Care Service***

### **Pledge: Run a buddy initiative where young people can be paired with other young people to encourage social networks (peer mentoring)**

This pledge was made by a stakeholder from a local authority Participation Team.

#### **Outcome:**

- The idea of the buddy scheme progressed into piloting a mentoring programme for the looked after children and care leaver populations. The pilot will focus on mentoring relationships by care leavers with shared experiences, such as moving to university or becoming a parent. It is hoped that the pilot will build evidence to support a funding bid to see the project expand across services.

## **Pledge to improve digital access:**

**Pledge:** Address challenges for care leavers to access the internet in shared accommodation

This pledge was made by a stakeholder from a local authority Leaving Care Service.

**Outcome:**

- The issue was taken to the relevant management team, and it has since been agreed for internet access to be made available in each property.

## **Pledges for service development and service-user involvement:**

**Pledge:** Involve care leavers in the design and delivery of service-wide training and projects on key topics, such as higher education, accommodation, the Local Offer and pathway plans

This pledge combines two similar pledges made by stakeholders from two different local authority Leaving Care Services.

**Outcome:**

- Care leaver advisory groups have been established and care leaver's have successfully been consulted and involved in various workshops and training events for professionals and service-wide teams and projects, such as working with the accommodation team and the education training & employment team to produce information resources, or delivering training to foster carers to support the arrival of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.
- For one service, consultation with care leavers led an initial pledge to develop a single Education, Training & Employment workbook to evolve to become multiple stand-alone booklets focusing on different topics.
- This service reflected on how critical it is to work flexibly and have the right day-to-day support to help apprentices to become 'work ready', and to meet their individual experiences and interests.

***"...our parent care leaver also wants to do one for parents that are possibly looking to get back into some kind of learning or work...so it's evolved into quite a bigger piece of work, rather than just one little booklet...that's been nice for the apprentice to be involved in, because they started looking at the original drafts" - Stakeholder, Leaving Care Service***

**Pledge:** Share local practice between Leaving Care Teams

This represents a shared pledge made by Leaving Care Services from two different local authorities.

**Outcome:**



- Local Leaving Care Teams met to share resources and to discuss good practice, how their services run, and how they managed to implement new innovations. This led to a proposal for service changes, and a pledge to continue to share good practice and resources.

*“...she shared some really good practice on how their Care-Leavers Service ran... a lot of what they already had in place was things that our Care-Leavers have been raising... she shared loads of resources with me, which was brilliant” – Stakeholder, Leaving Care Service*

## Learning for the Future...

This section shares key messages about what we could learn for the future. This is a summary of the comments and reflections that stakeholders shared when discussing the pledges that they had made in response to the Beyond Lockdown research findings. It looks to share what stakeholders felt had worked well, and what barriers may have gotten in the way.

### What's worked well?

- **Pledges were a useful mechanism** to call stakeholders to action, and to measure the impact and implementation of such action and research.
- The Beyond Lockdown project has shown that for a **small amount of money you can deliver impactful research** (*but you do need to invest time*).
- **Lived experience** perspectives and experiences are powerful, moving and influential. They can reinforce and drive local and national change.
- Young people with lived experience want to be involved with sharing feedback and implementing change. Being listened to is highly valued and enjoyable (*even when it is acknowledged that change cannot always be implemented quickly or easily*). To do this, services may sometimes need to offer flexibility and day-to-day support for those with lived experience to be 'work ready'.
- **Collaborating and sharing with neighbouring authorities** can be insightful and can also reinforce and drive change.
- Trying to **implement change**, *even when attempts are not as successful as hoped*, still offers a valuable, interesting and useful opportunity to learn from.
- The **relationship between personal advisors (PA) and care leavers** can support initial engagement with new opportunities. For example, young people were more comfortable to attend drop-in sessions when their PA was there.
- The **implementation (and continuation) of service delivery changes** and practice innovations are driven by the hard work and passion of the team. *However, it should be acknowledged that this is often dependent on staff going beyond their job role and working on top of their existing caseload.*

## What barriers might get in the way?

- The type of **venue or platform** used to host events/groups is important. It can change the atmosphere and what service delivery is possible. For example, a planned mother and baby group couldn't be held in the available venue because the space was too public. Funding and securing appropriate venues is hard, and services often need to use free venues offered by the local community to keep costs to a minimum.
- Services often lack the **funding and resources** to implement and maintain changes. Most practice innovations need careful thought about how staff will share and work beyond heavy caseloads to manage the planned change.
- Services found it exceptionally hard to pioneer and maintain new pieces of work during the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Services needed to prioritise other areas of support for care leavers, such as increased mental health problems, and it was challenging to respond to changing government enforced restrictions.
- The need to **communicate remotely** during the COVID-19 pandemic limited opportunities for relationship building, which was considered fundamental to working with young people and other organisations. This was compounded by some service-users lacking the ability or understanding to access the internet.
- Some of the issues raised in the Beyond Lockdown research were not new and services had been working to address the service-user needs that were raised. Some further work might be needed to **promote the opportunities that are available**, and to help manage young people's expectations and perceptions.

## For more information, contact:

[Beyond Lockdown – impact of COVID-19 on Care Leavers | Kent Surrey Sussex Academic Health Science Network \(kssahsn.net\)](#)

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