Too much, too young.

Helping the most vulnerable young people to build stable homes after leaving care.
Action for Children works with over 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through 650 services across the UK. We are committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. Over the past six years we have developed our evidence base on child neglect, campaigned for change and used our knowledge and experience to support practitioners and develop innovative services to help neglected children.

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Childhood is short. It is the foundation of our self-esteem and sets the tone for most of our adult life. Children and young people need to feel loved, secure and safe. They should push boundaries knowing that someone will catch them when they make a mistake. They should know that there are people in their lives who will never give up on them.

When the state takes on the role of parent it should ensure that children receive the nurture and security that their families are not able to offer, no matter how complex their lives are.

Sadly, something is going very wrong for the most vulnerable young people leaving care. Too often those who have experienced the most traumatic early lives, the children who were beaten up and left for dead or dragged into criminality, are the very ones being failed by the different faces of their corporate parent.

Whether they need a safe home, decent mental health care or just a consistent person to rely on, the most vulnerable young people are falling between the gaps in our complicated and over-stretched support systems. Often, they unjustly place the blame on their own heads.

This report asks why this is happening. How can young people who have been in care end up living in a tent? Why are the good intentions of the care system not bearing fruit? Why are the most vulnerable not benefiting from welcome reforms? And why are those who need most support moving into a chaotic young adulthood without it?

The situation is urgent. Costs are escalating and pressure on local services continues. Resources are not being used effectively, particularly for the most vulnerable older children in or on the edge of care. Every year that passes, some of the most vulnerable young people who leave care, disappear from the radar, only reappearing when things have reached crisis point.

Summary
It is time to re-focus on our vision for children and young people in care. The state has a legal duty to meet its responsibilities to children in its care. It also has a moral imperative to behave less like a system and more like a parent who cares about what happens to their child as they take their first faltering steps towards adulthood.

We are calling on all aspects of the corporate parent – from the Secretary of State to the NHS to professionals working in a range of local agencies – to re-examine their role in good parenting. Whichever face young people are dealing with, it should offer love, security and safety.

As one young person reminded us:

“You only get one chance at childhood, and without it, you can’t reach your potential.”

Key findings

1. The most vulnerable young people experience the highest levels of instability and uncertainty.

The reasons they entered care, the care system itself and a lack of the right support after leaving care all contribute. This chaos continues into adulthood resulting in homelessness and the least stable housing. Current accommodation arrangements are not flexible enough, and do not provide sufficient support, especially for those young people not in foster care. Young people told us that the good corporate parent must not give up, especially when young people’s lives are at their most complex and challenging. They want to see a single, flexible framework that is centred around their needs rather than the needs of the system.

2. Emotional wellbeing should be our starting point. Without it, practical support is not enough for the most vulnerable young people.

Poor emotional health permeated young people’s stories. Essential support disappears rapidly after those with complex needs and disabilities leave care. The emotional and mental health of children in care is not sufficiently prioritised, with the Department for Health and NHS England needing to take greater responsibility for their role in corporate parenting. The most vulnerable children and young people need therapeutic care placements that actively develop emotional wellbeing; address psychological trauma, and help them develop resilient and positive relationships.
3. Young people need long-lasting relationships they can trust, to help them manage living independently and bounce back when things go wrong.

Young people consistently ask for continuity and support from a trusted adult after they have left care. This helps them to build resilience, manage their tenancies and prevent housing crises. Arrangements for young people with more complex needs are insufficiently financed and supported with Staying Put arrangements less likely to work for the most vulnerable young people.

4. Returning home or maintaining links with birth family can be complicated.

A large proportion of young people who have left care return to the family home or seek contact with family members. Re-establishing contact with their birth family can be a particularly risky time – emotionally and physically. Too often, this happens without support. In particular, there is not enough help for young people or their birth families to manage negative relationships and potentially risky situations.

5. Every part of the state and its services takes some responsibility to behave as a good corporate parent but too often, systems not designed for vulnerable young people leaving care create more instability.

The challenge of managing tenancies was made more difficult by unsafe locations and lack of choice about accommodation. "Endless chances" are needed for some of the most vulnerable young people to prevent spirals of evictions and debt.

Recommendations are set out at the end of the report.

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What is the problem?

The most vulnerable young people who have been in care are forced to grow up too quickly.

Too many young people who have left care live in unsafe housing, where they feel lonely and scared. They move frequently and many experience periods of homelessness.

Most young people who have been in care continue to cope with the lasting impact of a traumatic childhood. They can suffer from depression and anxiety, on top of dealing with the challenges of living on their own for the first time.

They tell us that too often they feel alone with these difficulties – even when they have been helped with the practicalities of transition and finding somewhere to live.

Leaving care is not the same as leaving home. Young people who have been in care rarely have the stability or support networks that most teenagers take for granted. Without that safety net, every poor decision can have serious consequences and prevent the most vulnerable young people from achieving their potential.

The reasons why they entered care remain present in their lives. Difficult emotions and relationships remain and, like any of us, they need help to cope with them.

It is well established that young people leaving care can have poor housing experiences. Calls for changes to both policy and practice have been made repeatedly, but the outcomes of young people who have been in care remain persistently poor.

Despite the collective efforts of national and local government, good intentions have not led to good results. The sheer volume of guidance and variety of services is testament to the efforts of politicians and professionals to create a system that works.

Somewhere, the focus on the best outcomes for young people has been lost. The gaps between services and systems have become potential crisis points for the most vulnerable care leavers.

Recommendations are set out at the end of the report.
Fundamental problems remain that leave them ill prepared for adult life and not supported in the ways that they tell us they need. Local areas continue to negotiate the costs of care and the even greater costs of poor care. Young people who leave care experience disproportionate levels of homelessness, unemployment, poor health and crime. The personal, social and economic impact is enormous and, while felt most acutely by the individual, ultimately this affects every one of us.

Policy context: Where are we now?
Some of the most vulnerable young people who leave care become homeless and embark on chaotic pathways into adulthood. It is clear that the system is not working and there is an urgent need to look at barriers and opportunities for change. The Government has recognised that providing greater stability for longer can improve young people’s outcomes. The Children and Families Act 2014 allows young people to remain in foster care up to the age of 21, but excludes those in residential care.

Therefore, not all children will benefit from these reforms, including some of the most vulnerable young people because they are not in foster care when they reach 18. There is a broad consensus that all young people should be able to choose to remain in settled care accommodation, including residential care, or to move on to housing in a supported and flexible way. The Education Select Committee has called for stronger entitlements for care leavers.5

Local and national government also recognise the urgent need to find better ways to support teenagers in and on the edge of care and the Government’s Innovation Programme is providing funding to identify improved models.6 Certainly, resources need to be invested more effectively and early intervention approaches are needed.7 There is a comprehensive policy framework for care leavers in England. When young people turn 18 entitlements include a Personal Advisor and a Pathway Plan. This must be regularly reviewed and accommodation must be checked to ensure it is suitable. They should receive financial help for setting up home and Higher Education, and expenses associated with employment, education and training.

However care leaving entitlements are based on age, education and employment status so some young people receive lower levels of support, including:

- Those not eligible for Staying Put arrangements which make it possible for young people to continue to live with former foster carers until 21, if their final placement was foster care when they turned 18. Assistance and support must be provided to the young person and former foster carer by the local authority.
- Young people who return home at 16 and 17 for a continuous period of six months to live with a parent or someone with parental responsibility are not entitled to support, such as pathway planning. If arrangements break down at home before they are 18 they can return to care.
- Young people not in education, employment and training as support up to 25 is provided if the young person intends to start, or is pursuing education and employment. Guidance outlines that young people not in education and employment should be informed of the support available to them and be encouraged to take it up.

Care leavers who require additional support
- 16/17 years olds are defined in law as either ‘eligible’ which means that they should receive the support that comes with being looked after or ‘relevant’ which means they are no longer in care but the local authority must keep in touch, provide suitable accommodation and maintenance; continuous needs assessment, pathway planning and help with education.
The most vulnerable care leavers

This report focuses on the experiences of the most vulnerable young people who leave care.

FIGURE 2: CARE LEAVERS MOST VULNERABLE TO POOR HOUSING OUTCOMES

- Young people who leave care at 16 and 17 years of age
- Those with social, emotional, mental health and behavioural problems
- Offenders, including those with a history of violence and substance misuse
- Young people who run away from care
- Young disabled people who do not meet the threshold for adult services
- Young asylum seekers
- Young People who experienced negative and multiple moves in care and after care
We examine the implications for better care for the most vulnerable older children, look at options for accommodation and for extending support into young adulthood. We pose a number of key questions and areas for further inquiry as well as suggesting recommendations for change.

Methodology

The research involved 28 care leavers across England and Wales, living in urban and rural communities. A total of 31 young people were interviewed, as an additional 3 young people on the edge of care were included. The young people represented the groups at risk of poor housing outcomes with most having an identified vulnerability in more than one area. See figure 2 and appendix 1 for detailed breakdown.

All participants were receiving support from the following types of services: Supported Housing and Homelessness support, Targeted Youth Support, Family Intervention Projects, Independent Visiting Schemes, Care Leaving Services, and Intensive Fostering, including alternative custody provision.

A review of the literature and data on care leavers’ accommodation destinations, housing outcomes and experience of homelessness was also undertaken. This study builds on focus groups with 37 care leavers undertaken with Action for Children’s services in 2013 where young care leavers identified accommodation issues as one of their top concerns.

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Early help - What we are looking at and why

Action for Children is committed to supporting children and young people early to prevent problems from getting worse. Focussing on the accommodation journeys of some of the most vulnerable young people who have been in care, this report examines the importance of identifying problems early and the difference preventative support could make. It explores:

- Barriers to stability, what increases the risk of homelessness and poor housing outcomes for the most vulnerable young people who have been in care
- Key factors that help to facilitate stable accommodation pathways and prevent instability for the most vulnerable young people

We believe that if it is possible to identify which young people are more likely to need additional help, or have more complex needs then it is reasonable to expect services and support to be planned and arranged accordingly.

There is an urgent need to strengthen our understanding of the particular challenges for the most vulnerable care leavers and what early help will not only make a long-term difference to them, but also prevent unnecessary and escalating costs to society.

Research shows which young people who have been in care are more likely to experience difficulties with their accommodation when they leave care. But some groups are particularly at risk. Leaving care at 16 or 17 and having more complex needs like a disability, mental health or behavioural problem, can not only impact upon young people’s ability to manage independent living successfully, but also affect the security of their housing over the long-term.

Despite this, there is a lack of understanding about how to improve the experiences of the most vulnerable care leavers so as to prevent entrenched poor housing outcomes.

All young people leaving care are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness. Some of the ways to assist them when they get into difficulties have been identified. However, it is harder to help the most vulnerable young people leaving care and less is known about what will help prevent them from experiencing insecure housing over their lifetime.

The young people who are most likely to experience poor housing over the longer term have a lot of problems because of what happened to them before entering care; this can be compounded by a poor experience in care. As a result they are more likely to go on to have the most severe and costly problems later in life, including unemployment, poor health, substance misuse and prison.

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The scale of the issue: What do we know about care leavers housing outcomes?

**FIGURE 3: CARE LEAVERS AND RISK OF HOMELESSNESS**

- There is no national data on the exact number experiencing homelessness at some point after care.
- But research shows approximately one third experience homelessness at some point between 6 and 24 months after leaving care.
- Increase in overall numbers of people accepted as homeless over the last 5 years.
- Homelessness is ‘hidden’.

**FIGURE 4: HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING OUTCOMES**

- Increase in number of care leavers NOT IN TOUCH with local authorities who don’t know where they are living.
  - Up to 520 (2013) compared with 340 in (2009) and much higher in some local authorities – 120 in one area.
- Increase in number of care leavers in UNSUITABLE ACCOMODATION aged 19.
  - 840 (2013) compared with 600 (2010).
  - 540 (2014) but local authorities have ‘no information’ about 1,020 19-year olds and 2,130 21-year olds.
The level of instability experienced has been found to vary between local areas because of varying sufficiency of accommodation options. But, the extent to which care leavers experience instability across different types of accommodation, including return to family in between other accommodation and housing options, is unknown.

Barrier to stability - Coming into care as a teenager

Instability in care is linked to the age and reasons why young people entered care. Adolescents who come into care are the most likely to have multiple placements and the least stable experiences of care, in part because of contact with family and challenging behaviour.

Our research focussed on young people most vulnerable to poor housing and homelessness. Over a third (11/28) of the young people we spoke to came into care as adolescents: four young people came into care aged 14, five at 15 and two at 16. Several young people had entered care as teenagers after being on the edge of care for several years. We found that entering care in the teenage years impacted on their ability to settle in their placements or benefit from longer term therapeutic support.

Unaccompanied young people were also late entrants to the care system and were more likely to be expected to manage in lodgings rather than receive a placement in a care home or with a foster family.

Research findings

1. The most vulnerable young people experience the highest levels of instability and uncertainty.

Barrier to accommodation stability - Instability in care

The majority of the young people we spoke to had experienced high levels of instability when they were in care.

- 14 young people had 3 or more placements
- 7 young people had 5 or more placements
- 3 young people had 10 or more placements (12, 24 and 26 placements)

Moves in care were mostly due to placement disruption and sometimes returns to their family home had broken down.

These young people’s lives were punctuated by moves between foster carers, residential homes, secure units, sofa surfing and being up all night walking the streets. The use of Bed and Breakfast was frequently referenced. One young person resorted to living in a tent and another sheltered in the back of a car.

In addition, young people often spoke about the lack of continuity in their care resulting from repeated changes of social worker. The concept of permanence as ‘a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity […] a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond’ was denied to these young people.

Unstable accommodation after leaving care and frequent moves is due to a number of reasons, including:

- Temporary placements because a tenancy has broken down or was unsuitable
- Being moved on from semi-independent accommodation which is in short supply

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FIGURE 5: TOP THREE HIGHEST NUMBER OF PLACEMENTS BY REASON FOR ENTERING CARE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Number of placements</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abuse and neglect</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family dysfunction</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family in acute stress</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Carl’s story

“I went into care 5 years ago when I was 15 – it wasn’t my mum’s fault, she tried everything but when I was found beaten up and left for dead - she knew she couldn’t protect me anymore…..I was glad that I went into care…it was the best decision for me at the time. The problem was that I lost my school place and my college placement when I went into care because of the distance.

I went to a children’s home for 6 months - I had a great key worker, it’s good to chose your own key worker because you need to have a relationship with them….I felt listened to whilst I was there and they used to get me involved in things like recruiting staff…it was good…it helped me….I still keep in touch with a couple of staff there now and they have offered me support and signposted me when I’ve needed it…..

When I was 16, my dad who I had had no contact with found me via Facebook and came to get me out of care. He lived over 200 miles away. Social care were meant to check him out but didn’t…..My mum told me not to go but I took no notice…it was a bad experience for me, there wasn’t room for me in the home that he had made with his new partner and family – after two weeks he had assaulted me and it all broke down.

I was homeless when I first came back – I slept at lots of different places – family, friends sofas or in a tent, anywhere that I could get really….

My girlfriend got pregnant and we were then offered a temporary, homeless flat together and we went on to have two babies while we were there. They taught us about budgeting and we learned practical skills – this was a good service but it was miles away from anywhere – doctors, dentists etc….

The place that we have now is great – it is near everything we need – shops, children’s centre, friends, family…it is good to have people around you. It was the right move for us but every time you move, it messes your benefits up and you need help to get it sorted out….

The Family Intervention Project is great, and even though we’ve stepped down from that now, they are still there to help and show us where to go if we need support….

Things are going ok for us at the moment… we have two great kids and they are the most important thing at the moment… I don’t have any firm plans for the future but I would like to get a job……”
Maya’s accommodation journey

I came into care aged 15 years. I had a difficult relationship with my mum.

Then I went abroad and stayed with family there.

I eventually got my own flat.

From there I went into temporary accommodation.

I came back and lived at Mums.

I went to a mother and baby flat. It was good. It helped me to get ready to become a parent.

My partner was a key person in my support network but nobody acknowledged him so I used to pretend that I was with my family when I was actually with him.

I stayed in an awful B&B where I felt scared and lonely, that is the worst place to put a young person.

“I didn’t have the best start in life. I moved around relatives for a while. I didn’t have a stable family home.”

“I feel that I had limited support while in care. There was no support for my emotional needs while in care to deal with my trauma.”

“My nurse didn’t patronise me or ask me about my past…she just helped me to learn how to be a good mother by teaching me practical skills and encouraging me. That is exactly what I needed at that time.”

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2. Emotional wellbeing should be our starting point. Without it, practical support is not enough for the most vulnerable young people.

Barrier to stability - Reasons young people came into care

The feelings and difficulties that the young people talked about were often linked to the reasons for being in care, including the experience of chronic neglect and abuse earlier in their lives. Poor emotional health and wellbeing permeated through young people’s views about their current circumstances. They described feelings of worthlessness, self-blame, and hopelessness and said that depression and anxiety prevented them from being able to cope with living on their own. These feelings were linked to their views about having had little or no education and worries that they would never get a job.

Young people who had received help from psychologists and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) indicated that their challenges with their mental health stemmed from trauma they had experienced in their childhoods; including sexual abuse, domestic violence, neglect and physical harm.

Some young people talked about how they dealt with difficult feelings and issues in their lives through self-harm and substance misuse. Others spoke about struggles with negative labels and the stigma associated with behavioural difficulties and disability. Typically, young people felt that they had brought these problems on themselves and their parents through their bad behaviour.

Entering care with poor emotional and mental health can make it difficult for children to settle in care, which in turn creates more instability. Lots of moves and insecurity in care then impacts upon the level of stability after leaving care.

Barrier to stability – Lack of recognition of emotional and complex needs and on-going support

We found that difficult and conflicted feelings about family and loss continued to have a significant impact on young people after moving on from being in care.

The most important thing is to feel love and feel accepted – I don’t have that. Every single day is a struggle for me because I know that I am not wanted. I try not to form attachments because people let me down. I have learned to hide my emotions but I am in a bad place at the moment.

(Young Person)
A growing body of research on child development shows that exposure to stress, being abused or neglected at a young age and as a teenager can result in long term difficulties, including with:

- Managing and regulating emotions
- Abstract thinking and social interaction
- Coping with stressful situations and making decisions
- Risk taking behaviour and understanding what is safe

Often comparisons are made between children and young people who have been in care and the outcomes for other young people. Yet the impact of adverse experiences mean that children in care often do not reach the same stage of development as their peers by the same age.

Practitioners also linked some young people’s learning disabilities to developmental issues resulting from maltreatment, delayed entry into care and yo-yoing in and out of care with young people’s needs continuing to go unmet. They expressed concerns about the most vulnerable young people becoming independent as young as 16 or 17 years old when their developmental age was in fact much younger.

He feels a burden of shame and guilt for what has happened to him. He sees it as his fault and says that he was wild and couldn’t be controlled. However he should have been picked up a lot sooner.

(Practitioner)

Issues such as unpaid gas bills that had been left by previous tenants posed unexpected obstacles. Young people left bills they did not understand unpaid in the hope that the ‘problem would go away’. They talked about not having had the right ‘head space’ to prepare for leaving care and felt that they struggled when they were on their own.

I have a really bad memory and I would have wanted someone to help me with that, strategies and things...support remembering to pay bills and stuff.

(Young Person)

Both young people and practitioners agreed that there was scope to be prepared for independent living before leaving care, but that the complexity of young people’s needs meant that expectations for them to manage without similar or high levels of on-going care were unrealistic.

Receiving support from adult care services was unusual for disabled care leavers. Services supporting young people with learning and physical disabilities reported a ‘huge gap’ in accommodation options that would enable independent living. Staying with foster carers who offered to look after the young person when they turned 18 was often the only option.

Enablers of stability – Emotional and mental health support, therapeutic care and practical preparation

Whilst approaches to help all young people reach their potential and to be self - reliant are important, we found that young people with more complex needs faced additional challenges.

Practical skills like decorating, cooking and budgeting were all identified as important areas for support by young people, as well as dealing with the complexity of the housing system. Young people who had had to find somewhere to live by themselves said this was a particular challenge.

Young people were clear that they needed support in a ‘hands on’ and practical way. Many spoke positively about the input they had had with day to day challenges of living. Evidence suggests that care leaving services are focussed on improving help for young people in these areas.

There are unrealistic expectations that young people with high level of emotional and behavioural needs can function as ‘adults’ when they hit their 18th birthday.

(Practitioner)

He had a statement and went to a Special School so one minute he is seen as a child who needs additional support and then he wakes up on his 18th birthday and he is meant to perform and function as an adult.

(Foster Carer)

Particular issues arose when young people had a disability or mental health problem that fell below adult thresholds for support. Several of these young people were coping without the support they had received before the age of 18. Specialist services disappeared as a result of high adult eligibility thresholds.

The young person has been referred to the Community Mental Health Team twice, and the Local Authority’s Learning Disabilities Team and the Vulnerable Adults Team but they have assessed them as not needing a service. This has been difficult for the young person to deal with.

(Practitioner)

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Young people were clear that they needed support in a ‘hands on’ and practical way. Many spoke positively about the input they had had with day to day challenges of living. Evidence suggests that care leaving services are focussed on improving help for young people in these areas.
However, a distinction was made by young people between the help they received with practical skills and moving into independent accommodation and help with their past experiences and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

They helped me with therapy skills so that I could live an easier happier everyday life. They helped sort out my emotions and relationships using mindfulness to deal with situations that may arise. (Young Person)

Both were identified as important, but young people who had not received any therapeutic help with their experiences identified ‘having someone to talk to’ as something that would have helped earlier when they were in care as well as now.

High quality care placements focused on attachment and building resilience are fundamental to reducing the impact of negative pre-care experiences. Ensuring that care is focused on maximising protective factors as well as providing a stable base needs to be prioritised to help ensure that the most vulnerable young people have more stable experiences in care, are equipped to move on from care and experience less instability when they live independently. (Practitioner)

Barrier to stability – Significant gaps in preventative and mental health support

Early help to deal with traumatic experiences and complex behavioral needs was seen by practitioners as fundamental to later success in living independently.

A clear and definitive barrier is that the young person has not had the opportunity to learn independent living skills. Pre 18 the young person displayed consistent challenging behaviour towards support providers regarding learning and the distribution of responsibility when becoming independent. Post 18 the young person has not engaged fully with support services so has not had the opportunity to learn the skills needed for successful independent living. (Practitioner)

Practitioners suggested that young people who are most likely to be vulnerable should be prioritised for therapeutic support focussed on emotional regulation and resilience, and that this could help to prevent young people from embarking on a chaotic pathway and experiences such as homelessness, drug abuse and involvement in crime.

They expressed concern that resources are primarily targeted towards those young people who are already costing the authority most, rather than investing in preventing the challenges from emerging in the first place. People are always reluctant to spend money at the early stage but we will always be playing catch up if we don’t invest. (Practitioner)

Despite the majority of children in care requiring professional support for mental health problems, over 70 per cent of children entering care in one study, there is a lack of coherent mental health support. Provision for some of the most vulnerable young people in residential care has been found to be particularly poor, and the type of support that looked after children require to help with attachment and developmental issues is scarce. People are always reluctant to spend money at the early stage but we will always be playing catch up if we don’t invest. (Practitioner)

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Action for Children’s Multi-disciplinary Intervention Service Torfaen (MIST)

Therapeutic care, impact and outcomes

MIST is ‘wraparound’ therapeutic support for looked-after young people aged 11-21 who have complex needs. All have experienced abuse, repeated placement disruptions and often display significant risk taking behaviour. At MIST young people are understood in light of their life experiences, developmental stage and family circumstances. Alongside their families they are supported to develop pro social behaviours, build self-esteem, long lasting relationships and emotional intelligence. As a result of contact with MIST, young people:

- Improve their emotional and physical wellbeing
- Are less involved in behaviours and relationships that are harmful to themselves and others
- More engaged in education and more settled in stable foster-care placements
- Have enhanced capacity to parent their own children and break intergenerational cycles of being in care

For every £1 invested in the service, the likely social value generated is £5.10, due to young people being able to remain in foster care rather than costly out-of-area residential care.

3. Young people need long-lasting relationships they can trust, to help them manage living independently and bounce back when things go wrong.

Enabler to stability – Continuity of important relationships to help build resilience

Stable accommodation has been described as the ‘vehicle’ to stability, but our findings highlight that good emotional health and resilience is the starting point. Practitioners emphasised the primacy of building emotional resilience and the difference it can make, both to stability in care and for stable accommodation pathways after care.

Risk taking behaviour can be exacerbated by exposure to risks in unsuitable accommodation like hostels and in unsafe communities. On-going and supportive relationships with professionals and carers can act as a protective factor and help booster resilience. However, the protective influences of important relationships, including with neighbours, friends and other members of the community are under-used.

We found that flexible access to a trusted adult helped to equip young people to manage day-to-day challenges, including keeping themselves safe and navigating risky situations and people they were likely to come into contact with.

Barrier – Lack of continuity and broken relationships

Care leavers wanted more flexible contact with a trusted adult, in particular at evening and weekends, to help calm them down and talk through particular challenges. They described the benefits of having a mentor or Independent Visitor, as someone they could trust and who was independent of the local authority. Schemes that provide on-going contact between Independent Visitors and care leavers were proposed by some practitioners as a good way to ensure continuity and crucial protective relationships.

An adult that genuinely cares for their welfare is really significant. Yes there are practical things to learn about independence like managing money and going shopping but they are secondary to the importance of relationships.

(Practitioner)

Care leavers spoke about an all or nothing approach – they were either in contact with their Personal Advisor or had no contact at all. For some of the most marginalised and vulnerable young people trusted relationships with workers and carers in residential and foster care were of particular importance.
Some young people lost contact with services for significant periods of time, their circumstances changing daily or weekly, but returned to the service when they needed help or had become homeless. They did not necessarily have to have contact with an individual in these settings, but they still identified the services as a source of support. Sometimes contact was re-established because workers went to extra lengths to keep in touch, even if they didn’t see the young person, such as writing to several addresses and visiting family members.

Practitioners expressed the importance of recognising the particular challenges in keeping in touch with the most vulnerable young people who had left care. The unpredictability and insecurity of their lives meant that flexibility and accessibility was key. At one service, all former residents were invited for Christmas lunch providing an opportunity for young people to return and receive advice and support if needed.

Addressing mental health, substance misuse and behavioural challenges is essential to enable the most vulnerable young people to remain in stable placements. Practitioners raised concerns that the most vulnerable young people in care will not benefit from Staying Put reforms, putting the continuity of good relationships with foster carers at risk. In one case arrangements to finance the placement partly through the benefit system was a problem.

He doesn’t attend his appointments and [because of sanctions] he doesn’t get the money he is meant to give us for his food and rent.

(Foster carer who provides lodgings)

The additional difficulties for carers in maintaining placements for the most vulnerable young people, as well as cost implications for local authorities for providing additional support, need to be taken into account.

The risk of discontinuity and broken relationships in the care system is well known. Further attention must be given to whether current Staying Put arrangements are sufficient for the most vulnerable young people. It is vital that the reforms do not further disadvantage the most vulnerable care leavers and undermine the stated objective to provide further stability until 21.

Enabler - Positive family and peer relationships

Whilst many of the young people in the research had little or no contact with their birth family, a wide range of extended family members, friends, partners and having their own children featured most highly when young people talked about what made them feel safe, secure and happy.

Some young people felt that important people in their lives had been ignored and that being moved away from friends and contacts made coping in independent accommodation more difficult.

Looking back I should have been offered more support. My partner was a key person in my support network but nobody acknowledged him so I used to pretend that I was with my family when I was actually with him.

(Young Person)

A third of young people involved in this research were also young parents. Becoming a mum or dad appeared to provide them with a sense of purpose and security. They were more likely to see themselves as having turned their lives around for the better. There is potential for young care leavers who have families of their own to receive support from family support services.

I am a dad now, my baby boy was born last month – his mother is slightly older than me, she is 20 years old and we are in a stable relationship – the baby was planned.

(Young Person)
4. Returning home or maintaining links with birth family can be complicated.

Children and young people who come into care are still part of families, even if they no longer see them or live at home. However difficult and complicated, attachment to family relationships and for many on-going contact with family members is important and inevitable.

Accommodation instability is linked to when young people return home to live with family, including after being moved from supported accommodation or when tenancies had broken down.34

The second highest accommodation destination for care leavers is living with parents or relatives. This number has increased over the last three years, 1,060 19 year old care leavers were living with parents or relatives in 2014 compared with 800 in 2012.35

These figures are likely to be an underestimate of the actual number of care leavers who return home at some point after leaving care. We found that when young people reach transition they are more likely to exert more control over their life and decide to return home intermittently or visit family at some point after leaving care without the support of social workers or care leaving services.

Importantly, the young people we spoke to who returned home were also those young people who were most likely to have contact with family because they had entered care in their teenage years.

We heard several accounts of where young people made the decision to return home without any assessment or challenge and little was known about the birth family. Yet almost half of those who enter care because of abuse or neglect have been found to be abused again if they return home, and a third of those who remain at home continue to receive poor standards of care, including confirmed incidents of abuse and neglect.37

Young people we spoke to described relationships breaking down and being ‘kicked out’ shortly after returning home, resulting in homelessness.

In one case, the father of a 16 year old got in touch through social media which resulted in the young person removing himself from care to live with him. He had had no contact with his father for most of his life. This decision was allowed by social services, but no assessment of the man’s circumstances was made. The arrangement quickly broke down and the young man became homeless.

A practitioner from a Leaving Care Service talked about the push-pull factors of families on young people, describing a situation where;

The young person keeps in contact with their family independently; this for them is a huge source of support. I however can see negativity where the young person would willingly miss important meetings involving professionals who are dealing with crises to go and spend time with family. It can be difficult to discuss the importance of balance in the young person’s life.

(Practitioner)

Whilst young people themselves may make the decision to return home, the known risks about their family circumstances supports the case for careful planning and continued support. High quality assessment is vital for identifying potentially negative and disruptive birth family influences as well as identifying positive relationships and networks. It is also key to ensuring that young people experience the right care placement. If young people feel settled and safe, they are less likely to ‘vote with their feet’ and remove themselves from care.

There is a clear case for agencies to work together to integrate support and mediate between young people and their families to prevent homelessness.38 Investing in early intervention approaches is identified as an underpinning feature of positive accommodation and support pathways to minimise risk of youth homelessness.39

Managing relationships: What helps

Action for Children’s Intensive Fostering services provide support, such as family therapy sessions to help young people make sense of the relationships they held with their family; how to regulate their feelings and keep themselves emotionally safe. Young people are helped to identify and understand unhealthy or healthy relationships with their biological family. As a result young people were better equipped to build resilience, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Evidence based intensive support services demonstrate the benefits of working with young people alongside their families for successful reunification after care. However, we found little evidence of support being offered to care leavers or their families when they returned home or planning to consider the risks or impact on either the young person or their family.
The policy framework around children in care aims to protect them, but it also defines where children are in the system in ways that don’t reflect the reality of children and young people’s lives. Entitlements for young people who leave care are not based on their needs, but on their age, education and employment status. For the most vulnerable young people it is vital that agencies work together better to plan and provide support when it is needed.

The impact of traumatic experiences like severe neglect and family breakdown is enduring. Life for young people who have been in care is not always easy or predictable. They want to do well and many do go on to fulfil their potential. But managing independence is challenging. Relationships can be complicated and risky which is why, as for all young people, being able to learn from mistakes is vital.

The need for support does not disappear overnight, but leaving care in an accelerated process and for some support drops away suddenly. This is particularly difficult for the most vulnerable young people, for those who have suffered the most traumatic experiences, who have been in care for a short time or who experienced lots of instability. They all need a safety net to fall back on.

The care and care leaving systems need to mirror the real experiences and needs of children and young people, those who were taken into care because they needed protection. Many care leaving services are doing a good job, but we have identified a preoccupation with processes and practical considerations, rather than a focus on addressing the reasons why young people entered care in the first place.

5. Every part of the state and its services takes some responsibility to behave as a good corporate parent. Too often, systems not specifically designed for vulnerable young people leaving care create more instability.

Difficulties arose for some young people when their tenancies were terminated because of breach of tenancy rules. For some of the most vulnerable young people, losing accommodation quickly resulted in patterns of evictions, spirals of debt and knock on effects on the likelihood of being able to live in stable accommodation.

The supported lodgings services had clear ground rules for young people but emphasised the need for ‘endless chances’ for the most vulnerable care leavers, who struggled with learning needs and cognitive impairment from long histories of neglect and abuse.

We have a points system with warnings, but on the rare occasion we have to give someone notice to leave, then they have 21 days and we work with them to try and turn things around.

(Practitioner)

The challenge of managing tenancies and resulting instability for some of the most vulnerable young people, was compounded by the location and the lack of choice about accommodation, a common finding in other studies. Accommodation was often isolated and in run down communities. Care leavers found themselves in risky environments. Where young people refused to live in unsafe accommodation, they would lose their place on the housing list.

It is much easier to be welcomed by those who are involved in offending and anti-social behaviour, no one else wants to know you.

(Young Person)

I have a two year old girl but was I was placed in a flat below a drug dealer. Having a say in where I could be housed is important. I was told I had to take the flat offered or moved down the property fat.

(Young Person)

The importance of joint working between care leaving and housing services was highlighted, and the risk that housing and welfare policies can have unintended consequences for the most vulnerable care leavers. It is clear that responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of young people who have been in care must be shared by all agencies and Government departments as outlined in the Care Leavers Strategy.

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The importance of joint working between care leaving and housing services was highlighted, and the risk that housing and welfare policies can have unintended consequences for the most vulnerable care leavers. It is clear that responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of young people who have been in care must be shared by all agencies and Government departments as outlined in the Care Leavers Strategy.
The current approach is not effective and the cost implications are not sustainable. The recognition that young people are forced to live independently too young led to the introduction of the Staying Put entitlements to remain in foster care until 21. But, young people with the most complex needs are least likely to benefit from this opportunity. Good parents do not turn their backs on their children when they are at their most challenging or life becomes difficult. We must ensure that the corporate parent is also flexible enough for the most vulnerable young people or they will loose out.

Care leaving processes focussed on building young people’s practical independent living skills must go hand in hand with approaches that support young people to develop emotional skills and resilience and prioritise therapeutic needs for support. Our research supports the case for re-thinking models of care and extending a more flexible model into young adulthood, particularly for the most vulnerable young people. This report does not propose to unnecessarily add to the care leaving framework which is already complex and challenging to implement. Instead… re-think.

**Action for Children calls for action in the following areas.**

1. **All political parties must review the role of the corporate parent in children and young people’s lives. This should include their journeys before, during and after care. The result should be a single framework focused on children and young people’s needs.**
   - The Department for Health and NHS England must take greater responsibility for their role in corporate parenting by responding to the needs of children in care and those who have left care.
   - Adult services, care leaving services and CAMHS must work together to engage in early planning and guarantee continued access to services beyond 18.
   - Local authorities must provide the most vulnerable children and young people with therapeutic care placements that actively develop emotional wellbeing; address psychological trauma, and help them develop resilient and positive relationships.

2. **The good corporate parent must prioritise the emotional and mental health of children in its care.**
   - The Government should protect the care leaving status of young people who return home 16+ and allow them to return to the system up to 21 if arrangements with family break down.
   - The Government should give young people and their families a stronger entitlement to support when they return home from care and they should always be made aware of this entitlement.

3. **The good corporate parent must look after the whole child and always keep them safe, including when young people return home.**
   - Local authorities must improve early planning and assessment, involving family members where appropriate to prepare young people 16+ to return home and ensure decisions are appropriate and supported and;
   - Use Family Group conferencing and mediation to support this process where a young person is likely to have regular contact with family members or return home after care.
   - The Government should introduce an entitlement for young people to remain in residential care until the age of 21.
   - National and local government should give priority to securing flexible, supported accommodation arrangements for the most vulnerable young people not in foster care.

4. **The good corporate parent must not give up when young people’s lives are at their most complex and challenging.**
   - The Department for Education must set out how Staying Put arrangements meet the needs of the most vulnerable young people and ensure placements are financed and supported.
   - As the person embodying the good corporate parent, the Secretary of State for Education must demand annual progress reports from all Government Departments on the Care Leavers Strategy.
Appendix 1

Young people involved in the research.

Age Range 17-25 years
Number of Care Leavers 28
Number of young people edge of care 3
Wales 13
England 18
Male 14
Female 17
Young Parents 9
Learning disability /significant health condition 6
Significant offending history (e.g. prison sentence or care as an alternative to custody) 5
Significant current substance misuse 4
Unaccompanied young person or refugees / asylum issues 3
Significant mental health issues 10
Experienced Homelessness and/or placed in B and B 11
Left Care Early (16/17) 9

Endnotes
15. Department for Education (2014) Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England (including adoption and care leavers), as at 31 March 2014 (Statistical First Release 30/09/2014) London: Department of Education. For 2014 new data on 20 and 21 year olds is collected. The 2014 category ‘no information’ includes young people with whom the local authority are not in touch, young people who refused contact and young people who no longer require services. Information on activity and accommodation may have been provided by a third party.


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Action for Children supports and protects the young and vulnerable as they grow up. We make their lives better: now, tomorrow and every day.

All children shown have been helped by Action for Children.

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