Participatory research with care leavers to explore their support experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

Authors

Anna Dadswell

School of Education and Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University

orcid.org/0000-0002-1568-202X

Dr Niamh O'Brien

School of Education and Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University

orcid.org/0000-0002-2738-8514

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has perpetuated the challenges faced by care leavers and increased the need for support. Online participatory research was conducted to explore care leavers' support experiences during the pandemic. A research team of 25 care leavers aged 16-25 and support workers from six local authorities across England identified priorities and developed an online questionnaire that was completed by 94 care leavers aged 17-26. The research team also participated in focus groups, reflected on findings, and agreed recommendations. The findings focused on four overarching themes: finances and practical issues, mental health, social connection, and support from services. The recommendations suggest that corporate parent services should provide information, offer equal opportunity to access support, facilitate connection for care leavers, and proactively reach out and ensure someone is always there for them. So that support is responsive to their needs, the continued participation of care leavers in decisions that affect them is paramount, along with commitment by the government and corporate parent services to listen and take action. By using a participatory approach that involved care leavers in the research process, this

research promotes their voices and strengthens the evidence for enhancing care leaver support during the pandemic and beyond.

Keywords

Care leavers, COVID-19 pandemic, leaving care services, online research, participatory research, support experiences

Teaser text

This research involved 25 care leavers across six English local authorities as part of a research team to explore care leavers' experiences of support during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research included an online questionnaire and focus groups reaching a total of 112 care leavers. The findings show:

- Many care leavers experienced uncertainty and insecurity with their finances; this was particularly concerning for those caring for children.
- For some, the pandemic made existing mental health problems worse; some care leavers did not receive adequate support from mental health services.
- The pandemic left care leavers feeling lonely and disconnected; technology was essential for staying connected.
- Support from leaving care services, especially personal advisors, social workers, charities, and involvement and participation teams, has been hugely appreciated by the care leavers; however, the same support was not available for everyone.

The recommendations from the research suggest that corporate parent services should support care leavers with information, access to practical support, and connecting with others, and proactively reach out and make sure someone is always there for them. Involving care leavers in the research process helped to promote their voices and provide evidence for enhancing care leaver support during the pandemic and beyond.

Introduction

Care leavers often face more challenges and disadvantages in their transition to adulthood than their non-care experienced peers (National Audit Office, 2015). Each year in England, around 4,419 young people leave care (ONS, 2000) and are legally entitled to support according to the Leaving Care Act (2000) in the transition to independent adulthood. These young people have the right to a personal advisor (PA) to act as a 'supportive presence' until the age of 25, as well as financial support to continue living with a foster family, furnish their first home, and attend university or engage in education, training, and/or employment (Loft et al., 2020). Local authorities (LAs) are responsible for delivering these entitlements, along with discretionary local offers. Additionally, several promises are set out in the Care Leavers Charter, including:

> "As well as information, advice, practical and financial help we will provide emotional support. We will make sure you do not have to fight for support you are entitled to… We will make it our responsibility to understand your needs. If we can't meet those needs we will try and help you find a service that can."

> (Department for Education, 2012, p.2)

Although the discourse is moving towards the term 'care experienced', which is used where the literature does so, the young people participating in this research referred to themselves as 'care leavers', which is therefore used throughout the rest of the article in line with the Care Leavers Charter.

The COVID-19 pandemic has perpetuated the challenges and disadvantages faced by care leavers and increased the need for support (Children's Commissioner, 2020; MCR Pathways, 2020). Become (2020), a national charity for care experienced young people, identified key concerns for care leavers during the pandemic. These included loneliness and mental health, as care leavers are more likely to live alone, have smaller social networks, and have existing mental health problems; financial

security, with care leavers more likely to have precarious employment and less likely to have family support to fall back on; and education, where concerns around social isolation and financial security are compounded for care leavers in higher education. However, in this time of increased need, the capacity of Leaving Care Services to respond has been impeded (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2020; Collins and Augsberger, 2021).

In examining the impact of policy changes on Leaving Care Services during the pandemic, Collins and Augsberger (2021) reported that LAs were required to continue meeting statutory duties and the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson stated that nobody should have to leave care during this time. PAs were expected to keep in touch with care leavers through technology, assess their needs to prioritise the most vulnerable, and conduct in-person visits where necessary. Government funding was available to provide care leavers with access to technology and discretionary payments to cover basic amenities. In their research with representatives from 15 LAs, Baginsky and Manthorpe (2020) found that Leaving Care Services were acutely aware of particular vulnerabilities around social isolation leading to distress and anxiety. Most reported staying in touch with the majority of their care leavers through their PAs and WhatsApp or other online platforms. However, government funding for technology was not enough to meet the need and some young people did not have any technology access. Furthermore, with remote contact PAs found it difficult to deliver the intensive support that many care leavers required.

Due to the need for rapid research during the pandemic to inform policy and practice, compounded by the various restrictions that meant most research was conducted online, the majority of existing literature is based on surveys that have been designed by adults to capture what they believe to be important. However, in their recent recommendations for reviewing the care system, Coram Voice, who provide advocacy for care experienced young people, suggested:

> "The state, as their parent, often does not fully know what matters to the children and
> young people it cares for. Official statistics used to monitor the care system provide only a

partial picture of children in care and care leavers' lives by focusing on objective measures and adult assessments of how children and young people are doing… This does not tell us what being in care [and leaving care] is like for children and young people."

Coram Voice (2020a, p.2)

In their online survey co-produced with care experienced young people, Coram Voice (2020b) found that during the pandemic 23 per cent of care leavers had low wellbeing and 37 per cent did not feel safe or settled where they lived. Other concerns exacerbated by the pandemic included feeling lonely, experiencing anxiety, struggling financially, not having access to a smart phone or the internet, and not having a trusted person or good friend. They reiterated that it has never been more important to listen to the views of care experienced young people.

Co-produced or participatory research involves young people in the research process to varying extents from design to dissemination so that findings better reflect the priorities and experiences of the young people themselves (O'Brien and Dadswell, 2020; Percy-Smith, 2015; Sevelius et al., 2020). The pandemic has presented many challenges to conducting participatory research, with many projects moving online. Sevelius et al. (2020) noted that these challenges are even greater when working with marginalised groups, with issues around technology, safety, and reimbursing participants. Nonetheless, they stated that finding ways of working creatively with participants during this crisis is critical. Accordingly, the current research took a participatory approach working online with care leavers and their support workers from six LAs across England to explore their support experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

This research was part of a wider project funded by the Department for Education that explored how social services supported children, young people, and families during the pandemic, across six LAs: Cornwall, Essex, Hertfordshire, Medway, South Tyneside, and Stockport. Researchers from Anglia

Ruskin University (ARU) worked with Essex County Council (ECC) to ensure the voices of care experienced young people, specifically care leavers, were heard within the wider project. Ethical approval was granted by ARU Education and Social Care School Research Ethics Panel; everyone involved in the research received a participant information sheet and consented to participate. The research took a participatory approach involving a research team of 25 care leavers aged 16-25 from across the LAs, along with their support workers and facilitated by two ARU researchers. The research team met online over nine research sessions from December 2020 to May 2021 to identify priorities, develop an online questionnaire, participate in focus groups, reflect on findings, agree recommendations, and develop resources from the research. Care leavers and support workers met virtually in LA breakout rooms before and after each session to ensure the young people were happy with how the research was progressing and address any issues or concerns.

Phase one: Deciding priorities and developing questions

Before beginning phase one, support workers shared and discussed an information sheet with care leavers interested in joining the research team. In the first meeting consent was received verbally from each young person in LA breakout rooms and recorded by the ARU researchers. The research then began with introductions to each other and to the research, before discussing priority areas for each LA during the pandemic, based on the care leavers' own experiences. The research team learned about types of data, data collection methods, and different types of questions. Statements and vignettes were used to provoke discussion and the co-researchers participated verbally, through the chat function, and through interactive tools such as Poll Everywhere. They also had opportunities to discuss the research and methods in the LA breakout rooms. This laid the foundation for developing questions for other care leavers about experiences of support during the pandemic, based on the priority areas. The ARU researchers collated the questions into a draft questionnaire, which was further developed by the research team to ensure it was relevant, engaging, and accessible for care leavers.

Phase two: Questionnaire and focus groups

All care leavers across the six LAs were invited to participate in the questionnaire by their support workers; participation was voluntary, and consent was given through a tick box at the start of the online questionnaire. No other criteria were applied to the sample population. Ninety-four care leavers aged 17-26 responded to the questionnaire, with a range of 7 from the LA with least engagement and 27 from the LA with greatest engagement. Of these, 66 were female, 22 were male, and four identified as other or did not disclose. A third of respondents were looking after children during the pandemic. Qualitative questions asked respondents to share any support they had received from Leaving Care Services, or what would have been helpful, with regards to concerns such as finances, accommodation, mental wellbeing, staying connected, and looking after children.

Everyone from the research team was invited to participate in online focus groups to share their experiences. Questions were adapted from the questionnaire and discussions were facilitated by ARU researchers. Eighteen care leavers took part: twelve female, six male. They gave additional verbal consent before the focus groups took place. These young people had dual roles as peer researchers and as participants which gave a sense of authenticity to the collated data. These dual roles also informed data analysis as the ARU researchers were equipped with more in-depth knowledge which helped to interpret the questionnaire qualitative response.

Phase three: Data analysis and recommendations

ARU researchers conducted an initial thematic analysis on the data using the priority areas identified by the research team as overarching themes. Through an iterative process of discussions, amendments, and feedback, the research team and ARU researchers reflected on initial findings, discussed and agreed eight recommendations from the research, and decided on a number of resources for dissemination. Having worked together over several months, the young people were confident in giving their feedback. However, they were not particularly interested in the content of the findings; this was everyday life for them. Instead, they were concerned about how the findings

would be shared and what action would come from them. The final recommendation therefore asked those responsible for supporting care leavers to make a promise based on the findings setting out the action they intend to take to enhance support for care leavers.

Phase four: Developing and disseminating resources

The development of resources was led by ARU researchers and ECC, with input from the research team. In particular, care leavers wanted a formal report (O'Brien and Dadswell, 2021) that conveyed the detail of the research, but they also wanted something more personal to share the key messages. Various resources were developed, including a film with the voices of the research team sharing the key messages and quotes from the findings. Care leavers from the research team also participated in a conference for the wider project, including leading breakout room discussions.

Findings

The qualitative findings from the questionnaire and focus groups are presented under four overarching themes: finances and practical issues, mental health, social connection, and support from services.

<u>Finances and practical issues</u>

Impact on finances

The pandemic has had an impact on finances for many care leavers, with job losses or job insecurity, zero-hour contracts, and the insufficiency of the furlough scheme:

> "I work a zero-hour contract, and especially after Christmas when we had the other
>
> lockdown, we weren't getting any customers so we weren't getting any hours." (Female, 22)

Those who were without work and not on furlough relied on universal credit, however there were frustrations with this system. For example, one young person had to wait five weeks for support after losing her job:

"Living on £200 for five weeks is hard when you have rent and bills and food and everything to pay for." (Female, 18)

In such uncertain times, financial support from family, local charities, and Leaving Care Services was hugely appreciated:

"My social worker helped me complete the universal credit forms and made sure I was confident and able to take the calls." (Female, 18)

Support with finances included food parcels/vouchers and accessing food banks, free travel passes, help with rent or arrears, reductions in council tax, the furlough scheme, receiving a bursary, and support with budgeting or making claims:

"The furlough and food voucher schemes helped me try to relax… I was very worried… The schemes gave me stability." (Female, 17)

Some care leavers reported that they did not need support and felt financially stable, especially if they were able to continue working. One care leaver had saved money by not travelling and staying home. Another shared how they managed without support:

"I'm really reliant on [my partner's] wage. He is an agency worker, he was on furlough but the agency weren't giving him 80%. I'm quite good at budgeting so I managed to sort it out and we're living quite comfortably now." (Female, 20)

However, there were also various suggestions on how care leavers could be better supported:

"I feel [Leaving Care Services] could have done more to help as there was no work available during the pandemic and almost a year on there's still no opportunities." (Female, 22)

"I believe that there should of been some sort of food parcel during isolation periods… But to be told you're not entitled to have anything… I believe I was let down." (Female, 23)

Caring for children

Caring for children during the pandemic was particularly demanding. Support included help from friends, food and children's activity packs from charities, and children being able to continue attending school or nursery:

> *"My nurse and [the Children in Care Council] were able to get my daughter back into nursery… I was really struggling with two toddlers at home. This allowed me 3 hours a day to have a bit more chill time."* (Female, 22)

> *"Everyone rang up to ask how me and my son was coping couldn't be more grateful for you guys you've been an amazing support to me."* (Female, 24)

However, some did not get the support they needed:

> *"I've found it really difficult … I've got a disabled child and a lot of the support I was supposed to get has all been put in hold… it was just me and two small children at home all day long with no one to talk to and not even being able to go for a walk really really contributed to the mental health problems I'm having now… I've got no support at all."* (Female, 24)

Although some said that they did not need support, others suggested what would have been helpful, demonstrating that professionals did not always have a true picture of their circumstances. This included general practical support around finances and food, help to get a place at nursery, and simply ideas on how to keep children busy. Additionally, one care leaver said that any support would have been helpful:

> *"I would have found this very helpful and maybe my son wouldn't have been removed."* (Female, 24)

Mental health

Exacerbating mental health problems

The pandemic and associated restrictions had a detrimental impact on the mental health of many care leavers in our research. The negative influence of broadcasted news contributed to this, and some care leavers were worried about themselves or their family contracting the virus, or how they would cope:

> "There were times when it wasn't as bad and there were times when it was unbearable… there was a lot of stuff on social media that wasn't helping and then of course I ended up going into hospital for a week. So it was very much up and down and again I suffer from mental health even before the virus existed." (Male, 22)

As the last quote suggests, some care leavers already experienced mental health problems and shared how these had been exacerbated by the pandemic:

> "For me it had a negative impact on my mental health. I struggled quite badly with mental health before… I finally got on track and then lockdown hit so I went back to how I was before." (Female, 23)

> "I do have ADHD but I came off my medication… I'm not very good at concentrating so being in lockdown it's got a lot harder. And I think it's made my anxiety worse." (Female, 23)

Support with mental health

Some care leavers received support with mental health from Leaving Care Services and particularly PAs and social workers – who were considered hugely important – as well as other professionals, local charities, family, and friends:

> "My PA definitely played a massive part, always able to ring her up, if I had a down day, I was able to ring her and just say I'm feeling a bit shit... it definitely helped." (Male, 21)

> "My PA has been very supportive with helping me speak to someone regarding lockdown and my mental health and I couldn't thank him enough for him going above and beyond to make sure that I am happy." (Male, 19)

Continued support for those with existing mental health problems was also appreciated, though some suggested therapy over the phone is not as helpful as face-to-face. However, other care leavers received inadequate support with their mental health, which did not meet their needs:

> *"I rang the health visiting hub … the most amount of support they could give me in terms of my mental health when I was struggling so much with my children was to speak to the doctors and get medication. That wasn't the support I was looking for. I was looking to talk to and explain the problem that I'm having with my children. For someone to actually just sit there and listen and say "right, we might be able to help you in this way or that way", rather than "you have to go get medication"."* (Female, 24)

> *"Anything. There was no support whatsoever when it came to my mental health, despite reaching out for it."* (Female, 18)

Although some felt they did not need support, others did not know where to access support:

> *"I did not reach out because I did not know who to reach out to so it would have been helpful to know."* (Female, 23)

One care leaver suggested that PAs should have mental health training so they can address the barriers to accessing support that care leavers often face. Many care leavers also engaged in activities that helped them to support their own mental health, such as walks and exercise, playing games, arts and crafts, and mindfulness.

Social connection

Lonely and disconnected

The impact of the pandemic on feeling connected was of particular concern for many care leavers. This is evident as some felt they did not have friends or family to connect with before the pandemic:

> *"Well I don't really have family or friends to keep in contact with."* (Female, 20)

> *"I moved into my own flat in February 2020 when I was 17, and for somebody who doesn't have any family or anything like that and as somebody who constantly throws themselves into their work and that it-it's been pretty difficult… I've been pretty lonely."* (Female, 18)

As the last quote suggests, not being able to work or working from home also led to care leavers feeling disconnected, as well as other COVID-19 restrictions such as the tier system and support bubbles:

> *"I normally see my Mum over holidays. I saw her briefly in August, but cannot go there for Christmas. I was seeing friends daily in college, that stopped... I live in a rural area and only have one friend nearby who I can see socially outside."* (Female, 17)

> *"When it comes to being lonely and isolated, personally I'm away from home at University so I have a support network back home and can keep in contact with them… but at one point they were tier 1 but we were tier 3… To begin with I was working so I had a work bubble but then we were furloughed so that bubble has gone, almost like the bubble has gotten smaller and smaller."* (Male, 21)

Some care leavers talked about how difficult the pandemic has made it to connect and felt that there was not much that could be done to help them feel connected:

> *"I felt quite disconnected from my family, particularly right now because my sister and my little sister have both tested positive for Covid and my niece as well, so I can't even join my bubble anymore. And I live alone so it's quite lonely… I call my family quite a lot but it's just that human connection that you'd rather have."* (Female, 23)

> *"I just think it's made you seem more alone when you can't actually just put your coat on and go see someone… It just dragged me down quite a lot."* (Female, 23)

Meanwhile, others were able to connect through support bubbles, which were seen as hugely important:

"Thankfully I had both my parents… my dad took me shopping every two weeks and then I saw my mum as much as possible, because we kind of formed… a sort of mental health bubble… if we needed to talk there was someone there… when I am on my own it's quiet, it's difficult. But when I'm out with my dad or my friends I'm a lot more happier." (Male, 22)

"Making the most of the people that I made a bubble with. Making a point of going over there at least twice a week… [my friend] enables me to sit down take a break, focus on my youngest for a while. I couldn't have done this without her. She's been such a good support to me. I couldn't thank her enough." (Female, 24)

Support with feeling connected

Support with feeling connected included getting access to the internet or being given a laptop, though many pointed out this was not the same as connecting in person:

"Technology is a massive plus. During the pandemic, because at least with my family we facetime all the time… it's not as good as actually being there but it has helped in staying connected at least." (Male, 18)

Care leavers also appreciated the support they received with staying connected from Leaving Care Services:

"I wouldn't say I necessarily felt lonely because I knew someone was always there – like I could always pick up the phone." (Female, 23)

"My social worker texting and calling me." (Female, 24)

There were however suggestions on how to improve support to stay connected:

"Just more check-ins, more online fun activities." (Female, 26)

"More calls and more meets ups so people can feel like they have support and so they don't feel rubbish and alone." (Female, 20)

Furthermore, some participants felt that care leavers should be allowed to have in person meetings with specific people to address feelings of loneliness and disconnection:

> *"Not being able to see anyone at all no family or nothing was terrible… everyone has suffered mentally throughout this pandemic so people who already struggled found it very difficult and felt the impact of the isolation ten times more…. If I'd have still had even just a 10 minute walk or face-to-face catch-up with my social worker or someone important I rely on it would have made the world of difference."* (Female, 18)

Support from services

Examples of best practice

Leaving Care Services, along with other services, supported many care leavers during the pandemic. For the most part this was a positive experience:

> *"I don't think they could have offered much more than they did. We had a group chat. Arranging to go for walks (2 metres) always talking on the group chat to make sure everyone's okay. My PA calling me and other people contacting me and there was always someone you could contact."* (Female, unknown)

The support from PAs and social workers in terms of staying in touch and facilitating financial or practical support was highlighted by many:

> *"My social worker was very good, she facetimed me every week, then down to every two weeks but all I had to do was text her or call her and she got things sorted, like my bus pass which she sorted really quickly."* (Female, 17)

> *"My key worker has always been amazing and continued to speak to me every week even when I wouldn't answer or text back she would always message me and give me positive words to think about."* (Female, 18)

Similarly, some care leavers did not need support but felt it was available if they had needed it:

"I didn't need help with anything else, but I honestly have faith that my PA would have gone out of their way to help me more if I needed it." (Male, 21)

Charities and involvement and participation teams who support care leavers were also highlighted as being particularly supportive by staying in touch and facilitating WhatsApp groups and meet-ups for care leavers:

"Involvement Team have been amazing always putting in effort to make sure all their young people were okay I think they are amazing I had a mental breakdown during this and they was checking I was okay and get the right help." (Female, 25)

"The Zoom meetings with the [Leaving and After Care] team have been quite helpful being able to connect. And Children in Care Council WhatsApp group and just listening, watching, reading but not feeling forced to but still connecting with everyone in a sense." (Female, 24)

Need for better support

Despite numerous examples of good practice, some care leavers did not receive any support and others shared negative experiences of support during the pandemic. For example, some found it difficult to access support especially when their PAs were off work for long periods of time and they did not have anyone else to contact:

"Absolute nightmare... I was trying to get in touch for two weeks and couldn't get in touch with anyone. [Involvement worker] got someone to phone us back. The woman on the phone said [my] PA had left the job and I hadn't been informed, and the new PA hadn't introduced herself. She did eventually contact us… but up until that point I'd had nothing. There was no one even on the end of the phone not even in the general office... that was a difficult position, but before the lockdown, leaving care, the services have been amazing, I've never had a problem before." (Female, 20)

"Classic struggle to get hold of them, when you get hold of them there's not always a great answer… I haven't been in a position where I'm really vulnerable but it just makes me think if I was vulnerable there's not a lot of support out there." (Male, 19)

Some of the support offered had been impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions, for example appointments moving online and support not being appropriate in the circumstances:

"I was given some vouchers for a free bus pass. This was helpful but also unhelpful as I was unable to use them." (Male, 21)

"It would have been helpful to not be signed off, right in the middle of a pandemic." (Female, 23)

Based on their experiences, care leavers made suggestions about how to enhance support from Leaving Care Services, which demonstrated that the same support was not available to everyone:

"I think having a sort of food bank or delivery service might have helped as sometimes I wouldn't have much money and the shop near me is expensive." (Female, 18)

"Understand that when a non-care leaver is financially struggling they can often rely on family to help out whilst they are in bad circumstances. Care leavers often DO NOT have this level of support." (Female, 22)

Further suggestions centred around knowing what support was available and having someone to check-in on them and to talk to when they needed:

"Ensuring that [young people] are being checked-up on, all it needs to be is a text. It makes the world of difference to [care leavers] to know that the LA actually care about them." (Female, 23)

"Social care as always did nothing to facilitate help… it wouldn't have killed them to try to contact first... It shouldn't take someone to reach crisis to seek help." (Pangender, 21)

They also suggested that Leaving Care Services should be proactive about offering support:

> *"Stay in touch and not leave it until it's crisis point and it's really bad when people are on the edge… it's just a cycle where they let everyone get to breaking point. You want to feel a tiny bit important. It's like "You're currently not our priority… can you call another time", which is understandable but it feels like every time… they're always busy."* (Female, 18)

> *"To support care experienced people through the pandemic would require social care to actively seek out and ask what we need, it would also require funding that is never there."* (Pangender, 21)

In addition to support from services, care leavers also acknowledged many others who supported them through the pandemic; the support from friends and family was highly valued.

Discussion

The findings give an insight into the support experiences from the perspective of care leavers across six LAs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences of care leavers in our research resonate with several recent reports.

Many care leavers in our research experienced uncertainty and insecurity with their finances during the pandemic. Become (2020) also raised concerns about the impact of COVID-19 leaving care leavers unable to pay for basic amenities and pushing them into debt, rent arrears, and potential homelessness. Although some care leavers in our research received practical support, this was not available to everyone; the consequences of inadequate support were particularly detrimental for those caring for children. Similarly, Roberts et al. (2020) reported that sick pay when self-isolating was not enough to cover rent and some care leavers were frustrated by the lack of practical support with food and bills. This was particularly worrying for those who had children to feed, and concerns about children's welfare caused additional stress.

Our research showed that mental health problems experienced by care leavers have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and some did not have the support that they needed from mental health services. Indeed, Become (2020) estimated that almost half of care leavers were already experiencing mental health problems, and the pandemic and social distancing in particular is having a negative impact on wellbeing. This was reflected in the MCR Pathways (2020) survey of 1,347 young people with experience or on the edge of the care system in Scotland. They found 66.8 per cent were feeling stressed, low, and anxious. In our research, many care leavers hugely appreciated support from PAs and social workers, along with family, friends, and charities.

Feeling lonely and disconnected from others was of particular concern for care leavers in our research. This resonates with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS, 2020) survey of 230 care experienced young people in England and Wales. They found that during lockdown, four in five care leavers felt lonelier and more anxious, one in five care leavers did not have the technology to stay in touch with others, two in five care leavers had less contact with their PA, and one in ten care leavers had no contact with their PA. Access to the internet and technology was identified as essential in our research, but care leavers also appreciated when Leaving Care Services proactively reached out and facilitated online or face-to-face meet-ups.

Furthermore, although the support received from Leaving Care Services, particularly PAs and social workers as well as charities and involvement and participation teams, was hugely appreciated by the care leavers in our research, the same support was not available for everyone. Participants suggested that every care leaver should have someone to check-in on them and to talk to when they needed. This aligns with Roberts et al. (2020), whose research highlighted the importance of honest communication about the support that can be offered, who would be available for support on a day-to-day basis and emergencies, and the support available through multi-agency working.

With the additional constraints of the pandemic, relationships with PAs, social workers and other professionals were crucial to many of the young people in our study, particularly for those without

family and friend's support. Social work research has focused on the importance of relationships with key practitioners as being central to the wellbeing of care experienced young people including care leavers, yet shortcomings in practice are evidenced (Ridley et al., 2013; Adley and Jupp Kina, 2017). In their work exploring the role of emotional support to care leavers, Adley and Jupp Kina (2017) suggested that despite the changes in legislative and guidance frameworks surrounding social work practice with care leavers, research continues to highlight the lack of attention paid to sources of emotional support for this group. Research conducted during the pandemic showed that in some cases the workloads of social workers and other professionals reduced due to less travel and meeting young people online rather than face-to-face (Roberts et al., 2021). Consistent with other research around social work practice (Cook and Zschomler, 2020; Roberts et al., 2020), our research showed that although many young people welcomed this approach of regular contact, most preferred face-to-face contact. Notwithstanding this, lessons can be learned for social work practice going forward about improving relationships with care leavers and across the children and families sector through different forms of regular consistent meaningful contact rather than constantly face-to-face, with an emphasis on the promotion of relationships building and the time needed to build these.

By using a participatory approach, the care leavers involved in the current research were able to reflect on the findings to develop recommendations to those responsible for supporting care leavers:

1. To provide clear and up-to-date information on the range of support available and proactively share this with all care leavers.

2. To ensure all care leavers have the same opportunities to access practical, financial, and emotional support that responds to their particular needs and circumstances.

3. To provide additional support to care leavers with children, including allowing them to attend nursery or school if needed.

4. To make the provision of basic technology mandatory to enable care leavers to stay connected online and engage with education, employment, and services.

5. To facilitate connection with others through technology, face-to-face where appropriate, and helping care leavers to establish support bubbles.

6. To proactively reach out to care leavers and make sure they consistently have someone to talk to.

7. To promote participatory approaches in research with care leavers to ensure their voices are heard in decisions that affect them.

8. To make a promise setting out the action they intend to take to enhance the support for care leavers during the pandemic and beyond.

These recommendations align with those from Become (2020), who called for increased contact between care leavers and PAs, the provision of internet access and equipment, and delivery of consistent advice, information, and support; as well as those from Coram Voice (2020a), who suggested that the care system should:

> "Develop services that care leavers can trust to be there for them when they need them and support staff to be caring, available and actively engage care leavers, so they:
>
> • Have consistent leaving care workers/personal advisers whom they trust.
>
> • Know who their workers are and can easily get in touch with them."

> Coram Voice (2020a, p.7)

Our research and recommendations also support the top tips for PAs and Leaving Care Services developed by Coram Voice (2020b). These include checking on young people more regularly and knowing current needs and circumstances; making sure young people know where to turn to for support including services and networks of family and friends; establishing contingency plans and emergency financial and practical support if needed; and using technology to engage and have fun with care leavers virtually.

Moreover, our recommendations align with the Care Leavers Charter (Department for Education, 2012) and are presented as the start of a conversation with corporate parent services about how they can enhance support for care leavers. Importantly, the research team stressed that this support should be in place all the time and not just during the pandemic, but the pandemic has been an opportunity to highlight the support experiences of care leavers. Corporate parent services need to provide information, offer equal opportunity to access support, facilitate connection for care leavers, and proactively reach out to let them know someone is always there for them. To ensure support is responsive to their needs, the continued participation of care leavers in decisions that affect them is paramount, along with a commitment by the government and corporate parent services to listen and take action to better support care leavers during the pandemic and beyond.

Despite taking a participatory approach, a limitation of the research is that the broad focus on support experiences and the methods of data collection had been predetermined by the ARU researchers and ECC. Ideally this would have been decided as part of the participatory process with the research team, however this was not possible due to the need for the research to be conducted within a tight timeframe during the pandemic. Aside from this, the research team were responsible for developing and disseminating the research. They commented on how important it felt for them to be involved, not only for the purpose of the research but also to feel connected to others during the pandemic and share their experiences across different LAs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings and recommendations support those from recent reports and align with the Care Leavers Charter (Department for Education, 2012). However, the research addressed a gap in the literature by providing an insight into the support experiences of care leavers during the pandemic from their own perspectives. Overall young people were happy with the support they received from PAs, social workers, and other professionals, but some fell through the gaps and reflected that the onus needs to be placed on Leaving Care Services to consistently and proactively

offer support. At times care leavers might refuse support but they need to know someone is there should they need it, a finding supported by research from Adley and Jupp Kina (2017). Our research also highlights new ways of working with young people remotely that emerged due to the pandemic and can be used going forward in tangent with face-to-face provisions, to nourish relationship development between care leavers and their social workers as well as other professionals. Furthermore, this support needs to be available to all care leavers in all LAs. Finally, our research has shown that using a participatory approach that involved care leavers in the research process promotes their voices and strengthens the evidence base for enhancing support for care leavers during the pandemic and beyond.

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