



Employability of care-experienced young people

May 2026

About Action for Children

Action for Children protects and supports children, young people and families. Our vision is that every child and young person has a safe and happy childhood, and the foundations they need to thrive.

In 2024/25, we helped 551,400 children, young people and their families across the UK. We provide practical and emotional support through 342 services in local communities, in schools and online. We also campaign passionately and work closely with policymakers to ensure the voices of young people are heard, to influence policy decisions and bring lasting improvements to the lives of children and their families.

We have around 20 years of experience in delivering employability support to young people – many of whom are care-experienced. In 2024/25, we directly supported 1,380 young people, with 65% achieving a positive employment, education or training outcome.

Introduction

Around 1 in 8 (12.8%) young people aged 16-24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the UK.ⁱ Care-experienced young people and, in particular, care leavers, are over-represented in that statistic - often facing significant challenges securing and starting work. While official statistics on the number of NEET care-experienced young people in the UK are not available, we know that in England, 40% of *care leavers* aged 19-21 are NEETⁱⁱ, in Scotland 46% of *care leavers* aged 16-26 are NEETⁱⁱⁱ, and in Northern Ireland 29% of *care leavers* aged 19 are NEET^{iv}.¹² These statistics indicate the scale of disproportionality.

¹ Official care leaver NEET statistics for Wales have been unavailable since 2018/19.

² Care leaver NEET statistics for each nation are based only on those for whom data is available. Data is usually unavailable for the whole cohort. In Northern Ireland, for example, for this

A note on definitions

'Care-experienced people' and 'care leavers'

Someone who is 'care-experienced' has spent time in care at some point in their childhood and/or youth. It is not a legal definition.

By contrast, 'care leaver' is a legal definition that describes someone who was in care for a period of 13 weeks or more, spanning their 16th birthday. (In Scotland, however, there is no minimum duration required – anyone leaving care at 16 has care leaver status.)

Being a care leaver makes you eligible for support up to age 25 (26 in Scotland, and 21 in Northern Ireland unless in continued education) – such as that provided by a Personal Advisor - on leaving care. In England, Scotland and Wales support is provided by the young person's local authority, and in Northern Ireland by a Health and Social Care Trust.

While the number of care leavers is tracked annually in each nation, the number of care-experienced people is not.

Despite the vulnerability and disadvantage commonly associated with care, care leavers are often required to transition to independence and gain critical life-skills at an earlier age than the general population. That includes the skills necessary to seek, acquire, and retain employment in early adulthood.

National and local governments have sought to address this imbalance and mitigate the impact of care-experience on employment outcomes. This has included, for example, establishing statutory corporate parenting responsibilities to promote the life chances of children in care and care leavers, and launching a national 'Care Leaver Covenant' (England) to engage public, private and voluntary sector organisations in an expansion of employment opportunities and support for this cohort. At the local level, local authorities (Trusts in Northern Ireland) are required to set out the range of guidance and support available to their care leaver populations, including, for example, 'Personal Advisers', career 'Pathway Plans', and financial support for education, training and apprenticeships.

However, high NEET rates for this group have persisted. While many care-experienced people enter employment and progress in their careers, as a group they remain at greater risk of experiencing challenges seeking and starting work.

reporting year, data was missing for at least 68 of the 285 care leavers aged 19, and one Trust did not report due to Action Short of Strike.

There are long-term negative outcomes associated with being NEET in young adulthood - across health and wellbeing, employment and earnings.^v

Studies show that care-experienced young people themselves recognise the importance of work to their wellbeing. The 'Bright Spots' programme, developed by Coram Voice in partnership with the University of Oxford, is a research and service improvement tool that assesses the subjective wellbeing of children in care and care leavers.^{vi} The programme identified 'opportunities for learning and growth' as one of seven key drivers of wellbeing for this group, with participants telling researchers that education, training and work are vital for good wellbeing, and that it's therefore essential to overcome any access barriers.

There are also well-documented implications for the country's economy of having large numbers of young people out of work.^{vii}

With that in mind, and with NEET rates rising among the general population of young people in the UK³, the UK government commissioned Alan Milburn to lead an inquiry into 'Young People and Work'.^{viii} The review seeks to understand the drivers of the rise – including the impact of disability and health conditions, and childhood experiences. Care-experienced people, in particular care leavers, form a focus of the review, as a group at greater risk of being unemployed or economically inactive. Furthermore, they're often simultaneously affected by both disability and poor health, and adverse childhood experiences.

This briefing sits alongside our response to Milburn's Call for Evidence (January 2026). It seeks to inform and influence the debate on youth employability, and ongoing work in national and local governments, and business, to expand opportunities for care-experienced people, and boost support.

Our new research offers valuable up-to-date insight on these issues. While there is a growing body of evidence on the drivers of high NEET rates for care-experienced people, and on the poor outcomes associated with them, less is known about the views and perspectives of care-experienced people themselves on this crucial moment in their lives.

Our findings support existing evidence that many young people – irrespective of background or circumstance - struggle with their entry to the labour market in early adulthood, when they try to find and start their first job. There is a certain universality of experience across a range of activities and issues – such as writing your first CV,

³ There are currently nearly one million NEET young people aged 16-24 (approximately 1 in 8) across the UK. The number has risen by over 200,000 since 2022 (DWP, 2025).

preparing for your first job interview, handling yourself in your first work environment, and problem-solving when challenges arise.

However, care-experienced people – in particular care leavers – are at a significant disadvantage compared to the general population when securing and starting employment, on a range of measures. We explore some of these in this briefing, and set out some policy solutions, and suggested areas of future research, to tackle them.

Our recommendations are set out in more detail throughout the briefing.

In summary, we would like to see the following actions taken by national and local governments, employers, and employment support providers.

To tackle practical barriers to labour market entry:

- Pay care leavers the over-25 rate of the **Universal Credit** standard allowance.
- Apply **benefit sanctions** to care leavers only as a last resort.
- Establish a national **Council Tax** exemption for care leavers in England, up to age 25.
- Ensure **Local Offers** for Care Leavers in England always include support targeting practical barriers to work commonly experienced by this group – for example, free or subsidised public transport, and financial support to acquire driving licences, devices, and essential work clothing.
- Commission **further study** of both the scope and scale of practical barriers care-experienced young people face in seeking and entering employment – including how they often interact with, and compound, one another.

To support wellbeing:

- Ensure **Personal Advisors** always have sufficient time and resource to build meaningful relationships with care leavers, and provide emotional support in the transition to independence and employment.
- Ensure **Personal Advisors** are knowledgeable about, and able to signpost to, employers who offer specialist support for care-experienced people.
- Ensure every **Jobcentre Plus care leaver ‘Single Point of Contact’** takes a proactive approach to the provision and coordination of support.
- Ensure proactive steps are taken to create **supportive work environments** for care-experienced employees.

To boost soft-skills:

- Embed **soft-skills and confidence-building activities** into employment support offers, and make them a key focus of youth employment work coaches in Youth Hubs.
- Develop an **apprenticeship unit** focused on soft-skills, to help prepare care-experienced people for employment.

Our research

In 2025, funded by the Building Happier Futures element of the John Lewis Partnership Foundation^{ix}, we carried out a poll of care-experienced people on employability issues.

We commissioned Savanta to run a survey, with fieldwork taking place February-March 2026. They reached 1451 care-experienced people under-45 - including 196 care leavers – across the UK.

We compared responses with a control group of 414 under-45s from the general population.

We aimed to test several hypotheses, including on the scope and scale of ‘practical barriers’ to entering employment; the prevalence and impact of mental health conditions on seeking and starting work; and the relative importance of so-called ‘soft skills’ to employability.

The polling builds on findings from John Lewis Partnership-funded user research with care-experienced people, undertaken by Action for Children in 2023/24 as part of work to develop and test a new digital employability service.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 11 care-experienced young people aged 18-25 from across the UK, to investigate views on barriers and enablers to securing, maintaining, and progressing in work.

John Lewis Partnership’s Building Happier Futures programme

In 2022, the John Lewis Partnership launched the Building Happier Futures programme. It aims to harness the talents of care-experienced people, fundraise for investment in the care-experienced community, and influence societal change. It includes a tailored employability programme for care-experienced people, which is in place at all the locations it operates in across the UK.

Action for Children is very grateful to the John Lewis Partnership Foundation for funding this work.

Analysis and recommendations

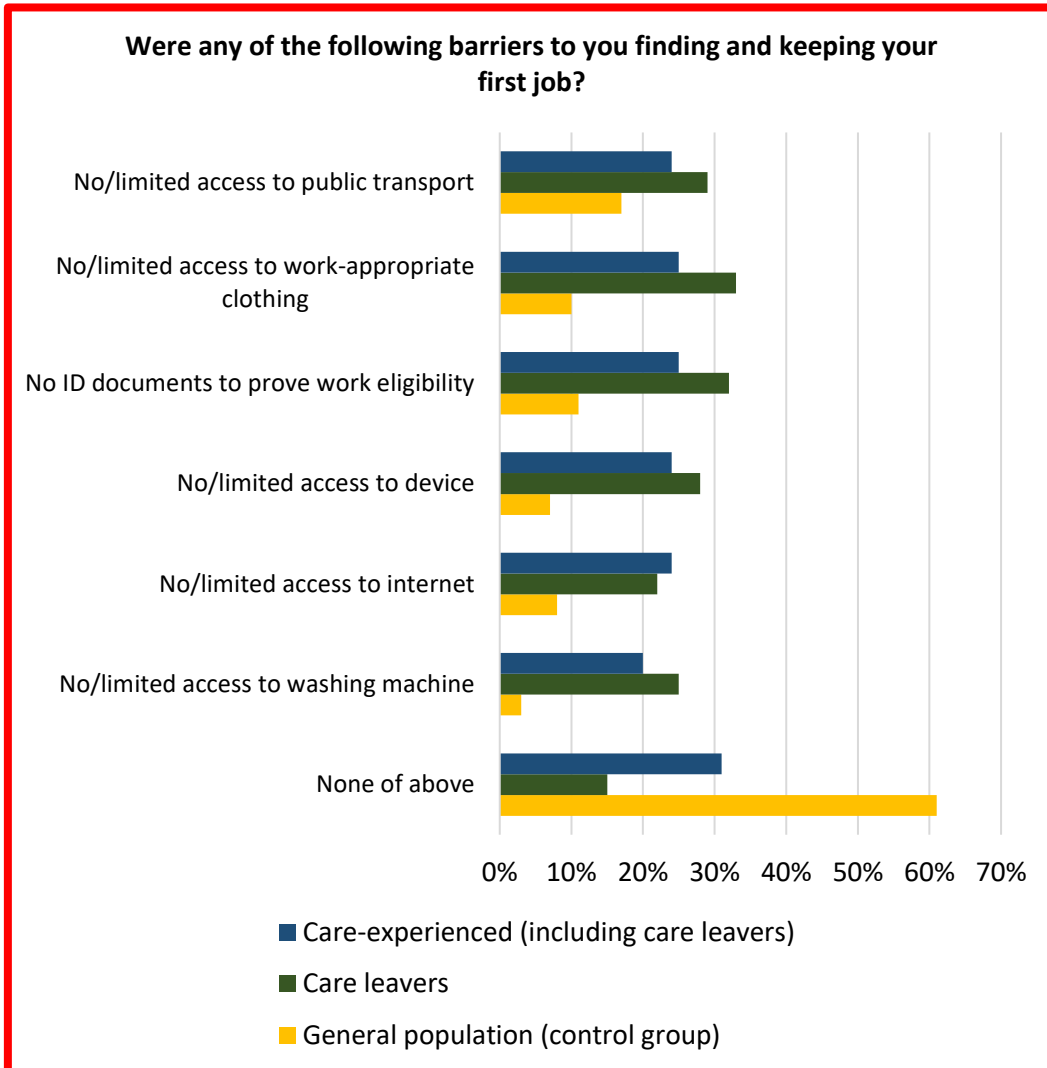
In analysing our polling results and conducting thematic analysis of our user research, we identified the following headline themes, which are explored more fully below.

- **Practical barriers:** Care-experienced people faced a range of practical barriers to labour market entry – with many struggling to access ‘job search essentials’.
- **Poor mental health:** Poor mental health negatively affected the job search, and start of employment, for many care leavers – to a significant extent.
- **Soft-skills:** Care-experienced people regarded training in ‘soft-skills’ as the most necessary form of support for care-experienced young people currently entering the job market – with many having felt underconfident they had the soft-skills required for their first working environments.

Practical barriers: Care-experienced people faced a range of practical barriers to labour market entry – with many struggling to access ‘job search essentials’.

We asked our polling respondents whether they encountered practical barriers to finding and keeping their first jobs. We presented them with a defined list of example barriers, which were chosen based on anecdotal insight from Action for Children’s employability service practitioners.

Respondents were given the option to report that they didn’t experience any of the suggested barriers.



These findings indicate that while a portion of the general population experienced some of these barriers, care-experienced people— in particular, care leavers - were much more likely to.

The general population were almost twice as likely to report that they had not been affected by any of the barriers, than those who were care-experienced (61% and 31%, respectively). Only 15% of care leavers had not experienced any of the barriers.

The top three practical barriers for care-experienced and care leaver respondents were: having no or limited access to public transport to attend job interviews and start work; having no or limited access to work-appropriate clothing for job interviews and starting work; and having no identification documents (such as passport or driving licence) to prove eligibility to work.

Our polling further investigated two of these barriers, as examples, to better understand the nature of the access issues – identification documents (ID), and public transport.

In both cases, cost was highlighted as the primary driver.

Of those who reported ID access issues, when asked what the reasons for this were, 60% of care-experienced people said that they were too expensive, in contrast with 40% of the general population.

Action for Children employability service practitioners have reported this issue arising in their day-to-day interactions with young care-experienced people seeking employment.

Similarly, of those who reported public transport access issues, when asked what the reasons for this were, 59% of care-experienced people said it was unaffordable, in contrast with 35% of the general population.

Relatedly, we have heard anecdotally from care-experienced young people that affordability of driving licences and driving lessons are a further travel-related practical barrier to employment for some. This issue relates to, firstly, driving licences being listed as a candidate requirement for certain jobs, and to, secondly, a need to drive in the absence of local public transport options.

Looking beyond IDs and public transport to the wider set of barriers (for which we do not have data on the reasons behind the access issues) it seems likely that affordability issues are at play. The findings suggest that financial difficulties – and in some cases poverty – are a significant part of the reason why care-experienced people commonly face practical barriers to entering employment.

Relatedly, housing issues are likely to be playing a key role in these findings. In our qualitative user research, care-experienced people commonly reported housing instability as a barrier to feeling prepared to begin their job search.

Recommendations on benefits and Council Tax

- Pay care leavers the over-25 rate of the Universal Credit standard allowance.

This is essential to ensuring that care leavers are adequately supported with their daily living costs, including those associated with finding and starting work. This change in Universal Credit would reflect the fact that they are required to transition to independence at a younger age than the general population – and frequently do so without a familial financial ‘safety net’.

As part of this change, the Department for Work and Pensions, Jobcentre Plus and local authorities should make clear to care leavers how starting work affects benefit entitlements.

- Ensure that benefit sanctions are used only as a last resort for care leavers.

This is essential to ensuring that care leavers receive their full assessed benefits entitlements. We have previously called for guidance to be clear that benefit sanctions should only be used as a last resort, and not for minor, one-off infractions – such as a missed appointment – but rather only for a prolonged, repeated pattern of non-engagement. It must be recognised that care leavers can often face challenges in attending appointments – with practical barriers (such as housing instability, poor mental health, and inaccessibility of public transport) often playing a role, alongside the often under-developed organisational skills associated with this age group as a whole.

- Introduce a national exemption from Council Tax for care leavers in England, up to age 25.

This is essential to ensuring that housing costs are reduced for care leavers. Scotland and Wales have national policies exempting care leavers from paying Council Tax. However, in England this is discretionary and, though many offer an exemption, this could be strengthened through a national policy.

(Council Tax does not apply in Northern Ireland).

Recommendation on Local Offer for Care Leavers in England

- Local authorities in England should ensure that their Local Offers include support targeting practical barriers to work commonly experienced by this group – for example, free or subsidised public transport, and financial support to acquire driving licences, devices, and essential work clothing.

Recommendation on further research

- Further study is needed of both the scope and scale of practical barriers care-experienced young people face in seeking and entering employment – including how they can often interact with, and compound, each other. The role of poverty – including housing - should be central to this. The research should be co-produced with care-experienced people.

Poor mental health: Poor mental health negatively affected the job search, and start of employment, for many care leavers – to a significant extent.

Our polling supports existing evidence that mental ill-health can be an obstacle to entering employment for care leavers.^x

In our polling, care leavers were over twice as likely as the general population to report having a diagnosed mental health condition when entering the labour market. 41% of care leavers reported a condition, compared to 15% of the general population.

Our research investigated the extent to which care leavers themselves perceived that mental ill-health affected their labour market entry.

Of the care leavers who reported a condition, 90% said that it affected their ability to look for, and keep, their first job – either ‘a bit’, or ‘a lot’.

Taken together with our findings on ‘practical barriers’, a picture begins to emerge of a group of young people often facing multiple disadvantages in their transition to employment. Many care leavers lack vital familial support at this key moment in their lives – while transitioning out of care to independent living. Added to that, while searching for and starting work – to provide the income they need to thrive – they are

sometimes simultaneously seeking to overcome practical barriers, and managing their mental health.

Our user research interviewees commonly described this time in their lives as chaotic, stressful and frustrating – suggesting poor wellbeing. These feelings were often seen to relate to a complex landscape of employment information and support, which some felt was difficult to understand and navigate.

Our qualitative findings also highlight how mental ill-health and poor wellbeing can both affect, and be affected by, experiences of seeking and starting work.

Interviewees said that needing to ‘settle’ for a job that they were not interested in had negatively affected their wellbeing; some settled due to a lack of awareness of available options and an absence of support, while others due to a financial need to find employment quickly. They felt that this led to a lack of optimism about their future careers, which negatively affected their mental health.

Other young people we spoke to as part of our user research emphasised the impact on wellbeing of having a poor work-life balance in their first jobs, with some having underestimated the effect of working long hours for the first time, and of overcommitting themselves to working overtime.

Interviewees were clear that, when starting work, the attitudes and actions of their employers had played a key role in determining the extent to which they had good wellbeing, and felt confident. Many felt that the key components of a supportive employer were a flexible approach to working arrangements, and sensitivity to individual circumstances of employees - these were seen to help them build trust in those they worked for. They also highlighted the effectiveness of mentor arrangements with colleagues – for ‘check-ins’ – in boosting wellbeing and job satisfaction. Many young people we spoke to felt that, with those elements in place, work can have a very positive impact on their wellbeing, with several highlighting the benefits of structure and routine, stability, a sense of purpose, self-reliance, social connections, and achievement.

Recommendations on supporting care-experienced job-seekers and employees

- Local authorities should ensure that Personal Advisors have sufficient time and resource to build meaningful relationships with care leavers, and that clear expectations are set around the provision of emotional support in the transition to independence and employment. (Responsibility for Personal Advisors sits with Health and Care Trusts in Northern Ireland).
- Local authorities should ensure that Personal Advisors are knowledgeable about, and able to signpost to, employers who offer specialist support for care-experienced people - such as employability programmes, and tailored recruitment and onboarding processes.
- The Department for Work and Pensions should ensure that every Jobcentre Plus care leaver 'Single Point of Contact' (care leaver lead) takes a proactive approach to the provision and coordination of support for this group. They should enable a seamless transition from care to independence for Jobcentre Plus users, and reduce the risk of stress and poor wellbeing commonly associated with this period. (In Northern Ireland, Jobs and Benefits Offices handle employment services and benefits).
- Employers should take proactive steps to create supportive work environments for care-experienced employees. This should include at a minimum the offer of flexible working arrangements; confidential counselling support through an employee assistance programme; and an open culture where concerns can be shared and discussed sensitively, on a regular basis – including any issues with work-life balance. Employers should also take steps to develop tailored recruitment and onboarding policies for care-experienced people.

Soft-skills: Care-experienced people regarded training in 'soft-skills' as the most necessary form of support for care-experienced young people currently entering the job market – with many having felt underconfident they had the soft-skills required for their first working environments.

'Soft-skills' are a range of traits and behaviours required for work^{xi}. Employers frequently look for evidence of these skills in recruitment processes. They are widely

recognised as being critical for succeeding at work, alongside the skills specifically required of the role.

We asked our polling respondents how confident they felt in their ability to do the following, when starting their first jobs:

- Adapt to the work environment.
- Understand the expectations of you as an employee.
- Work as part of a team.
- Communicate well with colleagues.
- Solve problems at work.
- Manage your own time at work, such as meeting deadlines.

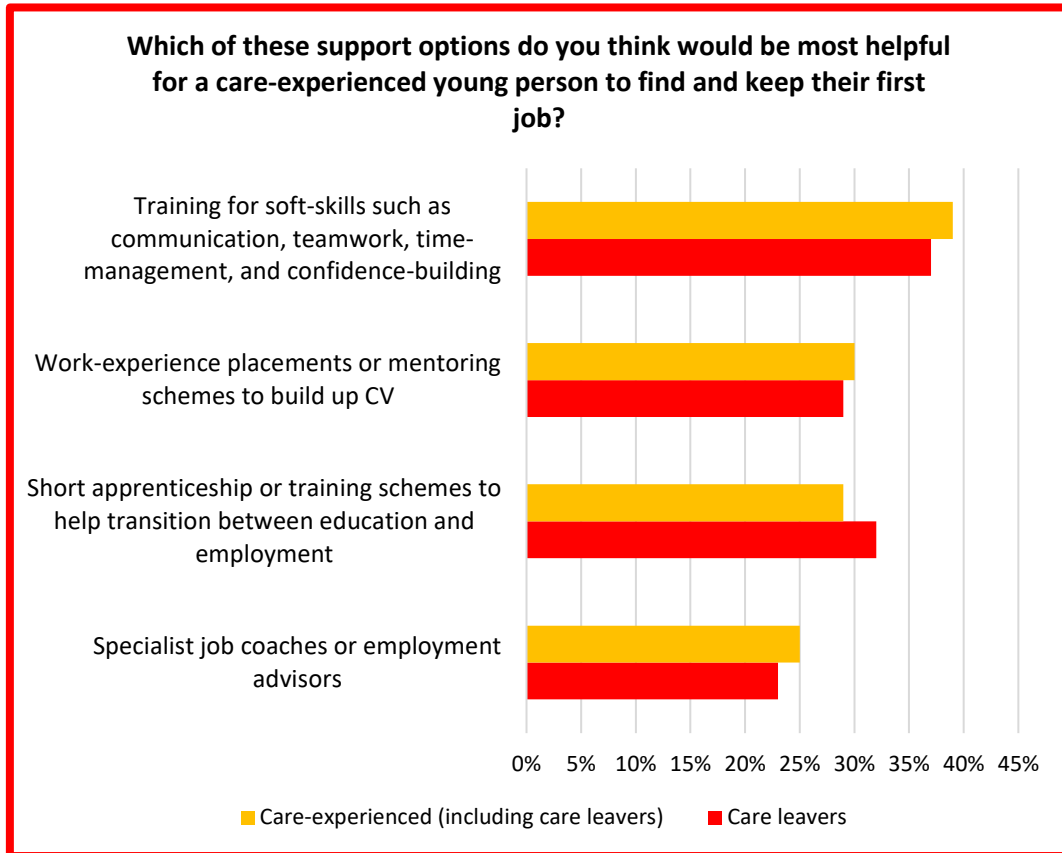
Our findings support existing evidence that young people taking their first steps into the job market commonly lack confidence in these ‘soft-skills’.^{xii} A significant proportion of our general population control group reported low confidence in these skills, illustrating the universal nature of these concerns.

Among the care-experienced respondents, care leavers in particular reported relatively low levels of confidence in their soft-skills on seeking and starting their first jobs. Across the six areas of soft-skills listed above, between 40 and 46% of care leavers felt only ‘somewhat confident’, or ‘not confident’.

This supports findings from our user research with care-experienced young people, which highlighted - in particular - low levels of resilience to manage the knock-backs associated with being rejected by employers after application or interview. Some also reported having struggled with their wellbeing and motivation if they didn’t hear back from employers after applying for roles. These findings suggest a need for support to develop greater emotional regulation and adaptability – vital soft-skills for the world of work.

Returning to our polling findings, it is perhaps unsurprising that when asked to consider the most helpful types of support for care-experienced young people currently entering the labour market, care-experienced respondents ranked soft-skills and confidence-building highest.

In the below table we compare responses on soft-skills with responses on more traditional, practical forms of employment support.



Our polling findings support insight from Action for Children employability service practitioners, that care-experienced people often need support to build soft-skills, as well as more traditional, practical employability support (such as CV workshops). It is that support - for the development of soft-skills and wider confidence-building - which is often missing from existing employability support offers.

It should also be noted that the timing and sequencing of different types of employment support matters. Care-experienced young people we spoke to for our user research emphasised the importance of matching the type of support offered to the stage the young person is at in their journey towards work. A failure to do so was commonly thought to make the support feel irrelevant, and like a 'tick-box' exercise.

Relatedly, the care-experienced young people we spoke to during our user research recognised the role of past work-experience in confidence-building and developing a sense of preparedness for beginning their careers. This may be reflected in our polling findings too, with care-experienced respondents having ranked work-experience placements as the second most helpful form of support for those currently seeking their first jobs.

Recommendations on employment support for soft-skills

- Employment support providers across the country should ensure that soft-skills and confidence-building activities are embedded into their programmes. Soft-skills training should be regarded as a necessary foundational step towards becoming ready for work – alongside more traditional, practical support (such as CV workshops and job interview preparation). Furthermore, the Department for Work and Pensions should ensure that soft-skills development is a key focus of youth employment work coaches in Youth Hubs, as they spread across the country.
- The Government should develop a short apprenticeship unit or module focused on the soft-skills required at work, to help prepare care-experienced people for employment. Employers offering this should be able to draw down funding from the Growth and Skills Levy.

Conclusion

Our research offers up-to-date insight on the experiences and perspectives of care-experienced people about a pivotal moment in their lives – transitioning to independence, and moving into employment.

Key themes that emerged were the need for greater support to: overcome practical barriers to finding and starting work; manage mental health needs; and boost soft-skills.

Affordability issues were apparent in our findings on practical barriers, indicating a critical need for enhanced financial assistance to ensure that ‘job search essentials’ - such as public transport and ID documents – are accessible to all.

Secondly, our research shows that mental ill-health can have a very significant impact on the experience of searching for and starting work, for those affected. Our findings point to the need for support – in particular from local authorities and employers – that is sensitive to individual circumstances, and helps to build trust.

Lastly, our findings suggest that soft-skills should be a key focus of future employability initiatives for care-experienced young people. In particular, attention should be paid to the sequencing of employment support - to ensure that this group builds necessary foundational soft-skills and confidence, ahead of participation in more ‘practical’ work preparation activities.

Taken together, our findings illustrate the multiple disadvantages many care-experienced young people face in transitioning to adulthood and beginning their careers. We would like to see national and local government, employers, and employment support providers, act on our recommendations - to boost support, and ensure that all young people have positive experiences, and achieve good outcomes, in transitioning to employment.

***For more information on anything discussed in this briefing, please contact:
Jessica Ford, Senior Policy Advisor (Children's Social Care)
jessica.ford@actionforchildren.org.uk***

ⁱ Office for National Statistics, 2025, 'Young people not in education, employment or training', available at: [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\), UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

ⁱⁱ Department for Education, 2025, 'Children looked after in England including adoptions', available at: [Release home - Children looked after in England including adoptions - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Scottish Government, 2026, 'Children's Social Work Statistics: Looked after Children 2024/25', available at: [Children's Social Work Statistics: Looked After Children - 2024-25 - gov.scot](#)

^{iv} Department of Health, 2026, 'Northern Ireland Care Leavers 2024/25', available at: [Northern Ireland care leavers 2024/25 | Department of Health](#)

^v The Health Foundation, 2026, 'Why are a growing number of young people who are NEET reporting work-limiting health conditions?', available at: [Why are a growing number of young people who are NEET reporting work-limiting health conditions? - The Health Foundation](#)

^{vi} Coram Voice, 'About the Bright Spots Programme', available at: [About the Bright Spots Programme - Coram Voice](#)

^{vii} PwC, 2025, 'Youth Employment Index', available at: [Youth Employment Index 2025 - PwC UK](#)

^{viii} Department for Work and Pensions, 'Young People and Work: Call for Evidence', available at: [Young People and Work Report: Call for Evidence - GOV.UK](#)

^{ix} John Lewis Partnership, 'Building Happier Futures', available at: [Building Happier Futures – John Lewis Partnership](#)

^x University of Oxford and University of York, 2023, 'Care leavers' transition into the labour market in England', available at: [Care leavers' transition into the labour market in England - Nuffield Foundation](#)

^{xi} National Careers Service, available at: [Develop your soft skills | National Careers Service](#)

^{xii} CIPD, 2024, 'Changing face of the youth labour market', available at: [Half of employers believe young people are not 'job ready', CIPD research finds](#)