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 2. Education, training and skills (<https://www.gov.uk/education>)
 3. Further and higher education, skills and vocational training (<https://www.gov.uk/education/further-and-higher-education-skills-and-vocational-training>)
 4. Running a further or higher education institution (<https://www.gov.uk/education/running-a-further-or-higher-education-institution>)
 5. Principles to guide HE providers on improving care leavers access and participation in HE (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/principles-to-guide-he-providers-on-improving-care-leavers-access-and-participation-in-he>)
- Department for Education (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>)

Policy paper

Principles to guide higher education providers on improving care leavers access and participation in HE

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Contents

- Why this group needs additional support
- Support from providers
- What should be addressed in the offer to care leavers?
- The most selective and largest providers
- Information for care leavers on HE providers' websites

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Though estimates vary, we know that the participation rate for care leavers in higher education (HE) is considerably lower than it's for other socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Despite the efforts made by HE providers and local authorities, the participation rate has not improved over the last 10 years, and we also know that care leavers are significantly less likely to complete their degrees than other students.

Why this group needs additional support

Two thirds of children enter care as a result of abuse and neglect. They often experience instability during their time in care, in particular where foster placements break down. This often results in disruptions to their education and poor emotional health and well-being. And they then face the challenges of living independently without the emotional and financial support from parents that their peers enjoy.

Care leavers are some of the most vulnerable young people in society and often have to make the transition from care to independence without the support from parents and wider support networks that other young people rely on. HE providers should think about how they can fill this gap by providing appropriate help and assistance.

The government is committed to improving their outcomes and has produced this note for HE providers on how they can:

- help increase the number of students in care who apply to and access higher education
- ensure that care leavers who go in to HE are given the support they need to succeed

While local authorities are the primary corporate parent to care leavers, the government believes that wider civil society, including HE providers, have a role to play in supporting care leavers. We're therefore asking HE providers to use the information below to consider where their support offer to care leavers could be improved, building on what is already in place, so that it's based on good practice from across the sector.

As part of its drive to galvanise the support that wider civil society can provide to support care leavers, the government has launched the Care Leaver Covenant (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/care-leaver-covenant--2>), which asks organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors, including HE providers, to commit to help care leavers successfully transition from care to independence, by setting out clearly what support they can offer.

The government has appointed Spectra First to work with organisations to develop their bespoke offer for care leavers. A number of HE providers have already signed the Covenant and published their offers on Spectra First's website (<https://mycovenant.org.uk/featured-signatories/>). We strongly encourage all other HE providers to contact Spectra, who can support you in developing your offer, with a view to signing the Covenant.

Example The University of Winchester was an early signatory of the Covenant, and also hosts the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) (<http://nnecl.org/>). Winchester was one of the first universities to tailor access and outreach to looked-after children, offering taster lectures/workshops, and visits to other universities. They provide a package of support for those who enrol at the university, including 365 day housing, a designated Student Advisor, and a student 'buddy' who can help them settle in, together with a scholarship (worth up to £6000).

Support from providers

We know that there is already some exceptional work happening in the HE sector to provide additional support for care leavers. But we want this to become the norm rather than the exception.

We expect that HE providers' commitment to care leavers is communicated from the senior leadership down. We want to see cultures that welcome care leavers and help them reach their potential from the start to the end of their HE journeys. Providers should ensure there are sufficient opportunities for care leavers to identify and access support at any point in the student lifecycle.

Providers also have an important role to play in terms of evidence and evaluation and we strongly encourage those providers who are more advanced in their work and evaluation to share good practice with other providers. We would like to see all providers consulting care leavers currently studying at their institution to ask their views about the support they have received and how it could be improved.

What should be addressed in the offer to care leavers?

Outreach and local authority relationships

Engagement with looked after children should be a key feature of outreach work and should begin at as early an age as possible. This involves working with local authorities, virtual school heads and schools in order to encourage more care leavers into higher education.

Examples of the actions that HE providers could take include:

- incorporating care leavers as a priority group in admissions policies, we particularly encourage the use of contextual admissions for this group, so that their often disrupted education and other challenges can be taken in to account
- encouraging children in care to recognise that higher education is an option for them, and to support them in understanding their options and application, including through special open days targeted at foster carers, staff in children's homes and the children they look after
- supporting attainment raising through study support programmes such as homework clubs and summer schools

Example An example of a holistic programme that prepares and supports children in care to apply for HE is the 'First Star' academies programme at St Mary's University, Twickenham (<https://www.firststaruk.org/>).

Accommodation support

Securing and sustaining suitable accommodation is a significant challenge for care leavers. HE providers should seek to provide priority access and continuous 365 days a year accommodation, preferably subsidised by the institution.

When care leavers have to move accommodation, HE providers should consider whether they can provide financial support to meet the costs of moving their belongings to their new home.

Example A number of HE providers also support schemes where the provider acts as guarantor to care leavers seeking private rented accommodation, when they move out of halls of residence. You can find out more about the scheme on The University of York's website (<https://www.york.ac.uk/students/accommodation/accom-help/guarantee-scheme/>).

Financial support

Care leavers do not normally have access to financial support from parents and so rely on financial support provided by their local authority. This has implications throughout the student lifecycle. Some HE providers deliver a starter pack that provides basic items, such as towels, bedding and other essentials that any young person requires when they first arrive at university.

Example On arrival The University of Nottingham provides care leaver students with a welcome 'goodie bag', then helps them move into their accommodation, and provides someone to accompany them on their first supermarket shop. Care Leavers are entitled to a £1,000 a year bursary in addition to their local authority bursary, and may also qualify for the university's core bursary of £2,000.

HE providers may also provide bursaries to help with:

- the costs of accommodation, associated study costs, such as laptops, software and books
- costs associated with graduation, such as paying for hire of gowns and photographs
- access to social and sporting activities to support inclusion and a quality student experience

HE providers may also want to consider how to structure financial support flexibly, so that it enables recipients to manage their money effectively throughout the year. Where possible financial support should be accompanied by support with budgeting, so that care leaver students are able to manage their finances as effectively as possible.

Designated member of staff

HE providers should identify at least one designated member of staff to support care leavers. The individual should understand the barriers and challenges that care leavers face, including mental health. We would expect the designated officer to be able to direct care leavers to appropriate support, if they can't directly provide it, and to be an advocate for them throughout their time in HE.

The role could involve:

- acting as the first point of contact
- providing pre-application help
- providing pastoral and emotional support to care leaver students as needed, particularly in the period when they're settling in
- signposting students to financial, academic support and further health services, as appropriate
- building and maintaining relationships with local authority care leaving teams and virtual school heads, National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) (<http://navsh.org.uk/>)

We expect a designated member of staff would be in touch with the care leaver before they arrive and meet them on their first day, to ensure they have a good first experience and know there is support available to them.

Offer on website

Care leavers often say that they find it difficult to find information on the support available to them on provider websites. HE providers should therefore give clear information on their website, that is easy to navigate, and sets out the their offer to care leavers. We have given advice on what information HE providers should include on their website for care leavers. HE providers should consider where care leaver advice and guidance is on the website and if it's user friendly. The IMO hub (<https://imohub.org.uk/>) site that provides a voice for teenagers in care and for care leavers can help. It would also be useful to share this information with bodies who advise care leavers, such as Propel (<https://propel.org.uk/UK/>).

Support networks

Loneliness and isolation are among the biggest problems reported by care leavers. Encouragement and facilitation of support networks for care leavers within the institution is therefore critical to retention. Many HE providers offer a 'buddy system', where care leavers in their second or third years become mentors to care leavers in their first year. Also, when a student has identified themselves as a care leaver, some providers offer to add the student to social media groups specifically for care leavers, before they begin their studies. This encourages care leavers to develop their own networks and support each other.

Careers advice

It's important that care leavers have access to high quality careers advice and guidance, tailored to their particular needs. Examples of good practice are where the provider has used its links with the wider community to find work experience, placements and internships. This support should also continue after graduation.

The most selective and largest providers

We particularly encourage the most selective providers to use contextual admissions in the case of applications from care leavers, so that their often disrupted education and personal challenges can be taken in to account. We would expect the support offer from HE providers to be proportionate to the size of the provider and their resources. In addition to the points listed above, we would ask that the most selective providers and those who have the greatest income from higher fees to go the furthest in terms of their support.

That could include:

- provision of suitable, free accommodation for the full length of the course, including holidays, or an equivalent bursary covering the cost of private accommodation
- a bursary of a sufficient amount to cover associated study and student experience costs

Information for care leavers on HE providers' websites

It's important that the web page for care leavers is not overloaded with detail, and that it makes absolutely clear the key elements of the support offered.

Use links where further details are required.

There should be a link to the provider's care leavers web page from their home page.

Include details of additional support for care leavers, by:

- specifying the accommodation offer
- detailing any bursaries
- specify support services

Set out eligibility criteria, and encourage care leavers to contact you if they're unsure. Encourage care leavers to identify themselves on their UCAS form.

Include testimonials from care leavers. These should be from former or current care leaver students, ideally 3 examples, covering different types of course, both male and female, and at least 2 ethnic groups.

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