



National Audit Office

Report

by the Comptroller
and Auditor General

Department for Education

Care leavers' transition to adulthood

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Department for Education

Care leavers' transition to adulthood

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Sir Amyas Morse KCB
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

13 July 2015

This report examines the support for and challenges facing care leavers, government policy and actions, and progress made in improving outcomes.

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Key facts

10,310

young people left care aged 16+ in 2013-14, up 50% since 2003-04

£265m

was spent by local authorities on services for care leavers in 2013-14

64%

of the 59 local authorities inspected by Ofsted had care leavers' services rated as requiring improvement or inadequate

- 18** age at which young people must leave local authority care
- 22** age at which 50% of young adults in the UK still lived with their parents in 2013
- 33%** of young people aged 16 or over that left care in 2013-14 did so before their 18th birthday
- 41%** of care leavers were not in education, employment or training in 2013-14 compared with 15% of all 19-year-olds
- 6%** of care leavers were in higher education in 2013-14 compared with around one-third of all 19-year-olds
- 93%** of care leavers were living in suitable accommodation in 2013-14
- 17%** of 19- to 21-year-old care leavers did not have their accommodation or activity reported by local authorities in 2013-14
- 8** government departments made commitments to care leavers in the 2013 Care Leaver Strategy
- £6,250** annual average spend on each of the estimated 42,000 care leavers aged 16–21

Summary

1 Every year around 10,000 16- to 18-year-olds leave foster or residential care in England. Children in care must leave local authority care by their 18th birthday. Local authorities must support care leavers until they are 21 years old (or 25 if they are in education or training). On leaving care, some young people return home to their families but many start to live independent lives. The government wants to ensure that care leavers get the same care and support that their peers would expect from a reasonable parent, such as help finding a job or setting up home. It also wants them to have the opportunities they need to move successfully to adulthood.

2 Central and local government both have a role in supporting care leavers. The Department for Education sets the overall framework for the delivery of support to care leavers. It gives statutory guidance to local authorities, collects information on care leavers and makes data and research on good practice publicly available. Other departments support housing, training, welfare and other needs. Support is mainly given by local authorities. They need to ensure that care leavers get comprehensive personal support to help them achieve their potential as they make their transition to adulthood. This support includes finding them somewhere suitable to live and supporting them into employment, education or training. Local authorities reported that they had spent £265 million on care leaver services in 2013-14.

3 The government recognises the quality of support for care leavers has been patchy and that their journey through life can be lonely, disrupted, unstable and troubled. Those leaving care may struggle to cope with the transition to adulthood. They may experience social exclusion, unemployment, health problems or end up in custody. Care leavers have had these problems for a long time.

4 In 2013 the government published the Care Leaver Strategy. This set out how it planned to improve support for care leavers, including in housing, health, employment and education, by co-ordinating the work of different departments. In the same year Ofsted began to inspect local authorities' services for care leavers and report on their quality.

Scope of this report

5 This report is the second in a series on children's services. It follows our report on children in care¹ and focuses on support for young people leaving care. The report examines:

- the challenges facing care leavers (Part One);
- support for care leavers (Part Two); and
- improving support for care leavers (Part Three).

Key findings

The challenges facing care leavers

6 **Young people in care have often had difficult lives and have to start living independently much earlier than their peers.** Of children in care, 62% are there because of abuse or neglect. This can have a significant and lasting impact on their mental health and emotional well-being. Only half of children in care have emotional health and behaviour that is considered normal and this has changed little in recent years. In 2013 in the UK, 50% of young people were still living with their parents at the age of 22; however, young people have to leave care by their 18th birthday and some move straight into independent living as soon as they leave care. In 2013-14, 33% of young people aged 16 or over that left care did so before their 18th birthday. Many care leavers feel they leave care too early (paragraphs 1.5, 1.6, 1.11 to 1.12, 2.17).

7 **Care leavers face many challenging social problems.** The data that the Department for Education collects on the current cohort of care leavers do not capture information on all aspects of their lives. However, research shows that young people who have had a background in care are more likely than their peers to have poor social outcomes in later life. For example, the most recent estimates are that:

- in 2010, 25% of those who were homeless had been in care at some point in their lives;
- in 2008, 49% of young men under the age of 21 who had come into contact with the criminal justice system had a care experience;
- in 2014, 22% of female care leavers became teenage parents; and
- in 2012, it was reported that looked-after children and care leavers were between four and five times more likely to self-harm in adulthood (paragraph 1.10).

8 With more young people over the age of 16 leaving care, the demand for support is increasing. In 2013-14, 10,310 young people aged over 16 left care, an increase of almost 50% since 2003-04. This increase is due to an increase in the care population as a whole; an increase in the number of older children coming into care; and 16- and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless and becoming looked-after. Local authorities have to support the increased population (paragraph 1.2 and Figures 1 and 2).

9 There is a significant gap between the educational and employment achievements of care leavers and other young people. In 2013-14, 41% of 19-year-old care leavers were not in education, employment or training (NEET) compared with 15% for all 19-year-olds. This is the highest proportion since 2001-02. In addition, 6% of care leavers were in higher education compared with one-third of all 19-year-olds (paragraphs 1.20, 1.21 and Figure 4).

10 Most care leavers aged 19–21 live in 'suitable' accommodation and almost half live independently. At 31 March 2014, 93% of care leavers were judged by their local authorities to be living in 'suitable' accommodation. The most common type of accommodation was independent living (47%). Although what is 'suitable' accommodation is clearly defined, the Department for Education found that in 2013-14 some local authorities had judged a small number of care leavers to be in 'suitable' accommodation when this seemed unlikely given the setting (paragraphs 1.14, 1.15 and Figure 3).

11 The cost of care leavers not moving into adulthood successfully is likely to be high to both them and the public, although there are no accurate data on this. The costs care leavers face, including problems such as mental health, unemployment and youth crime are likely to be high but are not quantified. The cost to young people of being NEET, for example, is estimated to be around £56,000 in public finance costs over the working lifetime of the young person. Based on these estimates, the lifetime cost of the current cohort of 19-year-old care leavers being NEET would be around £240 million, or £150 million more than if they had the same NEET rate as other 19-year-olds (paragraphs 1.22 and 1.23).

Support for care leavers

12 Successive governments have attempted to improve support for care leavers through changes to legislation over the past 15 years. The Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000) set out the key duties of local authorities for their care leavers. It made it clearer that young people should not leave care until they were ready and that the government expected most children to remain in care until the age of 18. The act also set out expectations for improved planning and personal support for care leavers. From 2008, the government has required local authorities to support care leavers up to the age of 25 if they remained in, or planned to return to, education and training. Yet care leavers do not always get the support they need. They do not feel properly involved in their care leaving plans or know what they are entitled to, such as support with education and training (paragraphs 2.3, 2.4 and 2.21).

13 The 2013 Care Leaver Strategy was a positive step by government. Eight government departments worked together on the strategy. The aim was to address some of the unintended consequences of policies that are not joined up, as well as to improve the inconsistent quality of services for care leavers. The departments committed to amending processes, issuing guidance and collecting information. In October 2014 the government reported it had met most of its commitments, although it is too early to say whether any of these actions have improved care leavers' lives. The government told us that there continue to be cross-government discussions on specific issues, although stakeholders we spoke to told us that they thought the strategy had stopped (paragraphs 2.6 to 2.8).

14 The Care Leaver Strategy was not set up as an effective programme. We looked at whether the strategy has the characteristics we expect from successful programmes. There was no strong evidence of government working in an integrated way; limited implementation capability; no regular reporting of progress or outcomes; and no evidence of a sustained effort to continuously improve (paragraphs 2.9 to 2.11 and Figures 6 and 7).

15 There is no reliable information to monitor the lives of care leavers over time. There are no official statistics on some aspects of care leavers' lives, such as whether they have timely access to health services, whether they feel they left care at the right time, or the extent to which they have poor social outcomes such as unemployment, homelessness, mental illness or criminal activity. The Department for Education does not collect data on care leavers after the age of 21 on their participation in employment, education and training, or where they live and whether this is suitable accommodation (paragraphs 1.13, 1.23 and 3.3).

16 Incentives could stimulate a greater focus on innovation and improve outcomes for care leavers. Most of the costs of young people not being in employment, education or training do not fall on local authorities. However, central government departments with a financial interest in the success of care leavers lack the ability to provide effective local support. Incentives, such as a 'payments by results' system, need to reward improvement in medium- and long-term outcomes for care leavers and encourage innovation. The Department for Education has used an outcome-based payment scheme in the past, the Youth Contract, to improve outcomes for vulnerable young people (paragraph 3.10).

17 Until 2013 there was no separate Ofsted judgement on whether local authorities' support for care leavers met expected standards. From 2013, under a new inspection framework, Ofsted has rated local authority support for care leavers against the Department for Education's standards for the first time. The Department for Education, Ofsted and local authorities all think the new inspection works to standards higher than previously existed (paragraphs 2.18, 2.19 and 2.22).

18 Ofsted inspections of care leaver services have found that two-thirds require improvement or are inadequate. So far, Ofsted has reported on care leaver services in 59 local authorities. By end-June 2015, only 34% of local authority services were judged 'good', with just one judged to be 'outstanding'. Common shortcomings included poor pathway planning and lack of support from personal advisers for care leavers. The Department for Education can intervene if a local authority is failing to deliver its services to an acceptable standard, for example where it is not meeting its statutory duties or after an unfavourable Ofsted inspection report. So far, the Department has not intervened in any local authority, solely on the basis of an inadequate judgement on the experiences and progress of care leavers (paragraphs 2.20 and 2.21).

19 The Department for Education introduced its Staying Put policy in 2014 to help care leavers stay in foster homes longer, although it is too early to assess its impact. Research and evidence highlight that where children in care are given longer to become independent like their peers, this improves their outcomes. Staying Put offers care leavers approaching 18 the security of knowing they can stay with foster carers until they are 21, if both wish. There are some issues with implementing the policy, including financial barriers to local authorities, strains on the market for foster carers and adverse financial consequences for foster carers engaged in Staying Put. So far, the Department has not assessed whether the new policy is meeting its objectives or its financial impact on local authorities (paragraphs 2.12 and 2.13).

20 Support for care leavers varies widely between local authorities but there is no relationship between how much they spend and the quality of their support. In 2013-14 local authorities spent on average £6,250 for each care leaver. This ranges from an estimated £300 to £20,000. The Department for Education cannot explain these differences and is concerned about the quality of the spending data that local authorities report. Our analysis shows there is minimal correlation between local authorities' reported spending on care leavers and the quantity and quality of their services. The Department has a role in supporting local accountability by improving transparency. But without accurate, complete and comparable data from local authorities on spending on care leavers, the Department cannot provide information to support benchmarking or value for money assessments (paragraph 2.23, 2.24 and Figures 11 and 12).

21 Some local authorities are not in touch with all their care leavers even though they are often vulnerable. Although care leavers often have no support network, in 2013-14 local authorities did not report information on where 17% of 19- to 21-year-old care leavers were living or whether they were in employment, education or training. Only 8 out of 151 local authorities reported that they knew where all their care leavers were living and whether they were participating in employment, education or training (paragraph 2.16 and Figure 9).

22 Although there are examples of good local practice, it is not developed or shared well enough nationally. Two examples of good practice are New Belongings, funded in part by the Department for Education, and the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum run by the charity Catch22. However, not all local authorities are involved: 30 participate in New Belongings and 78 in the Benchmarking Forum. There is no national forum that all local authorities and stakeholders, including voluntary organisations, can access (paragraphs 3.11 to 3.14).

Conclusion

23 The poor life experiences of too many care leavers are a longstanding problem. Without well-targeted support their deep needs will not be met, with costly consequences both for the young people and for society. While there is a clear legal framework and an inspection regime in place, the system is not working effectively to deliver good outcomes for all care leavers. On the key measure of numbers in employment, education and training the situation has deteriorated since 2007-08.

24 Central government has, since 2013, renewed its interest in improving the life chances for care leavers through the Care Leaver Strategy and Staying Put. Ofsted's recent work now gives a clear picture of failings in local support and areas that should be addressed. Although it is too early to say how effective these initiatives could be, they both have implementation challenges and are not data-led with clear objectives. Stronger central and local leadership and co-ordination is urgently required to improve the life chances of future care leavers.

Recommendations

25 Part Three of this report expands on what might be done to improve the situation for care leavers and what is planned by government. Eight government departments were involved in the cross-government strategy for care leavers. Therefore the following recommendations are aimed at these departments.

26 The government should:

- a** build on its initial work to develop and implement a cross-government strategy to improve support for care leavers. Overall, there needs to be a more joined-up approach across government including on inspection of care leaver services;
- b** monitor the lives of care leavers to see if they are improving and to understand the impact of its initiatives. It should develop indicators to measure progress against its objectives for care leavers and collect data to get a better understanding of the social problems care leavers face, such as unemployment, homelessness, mental illness, domestic violence or criminal activity; and
- c** examine how it could use incentives such as payment by results to encourage innovation and joint working towards improving outcomes for care leavers.

27 Given its specific responsibilities for care leavers, the Department for Education should:

- d** use the data it collects from local authorities, Ofsted reports and other sources to help improve local services including developing clearer triggers for a range of intervention activities;
- e** in line with its role in supporting local accountability, work with the Department for Communities and Local Government and local authorities to secure reliable, comparable data on costs. It should use this alongside existing performance indicators to develop ways of assessing value for money that are useful both for local authorities and central government; and
- f** work with others to develop and share good practice, including creating a central store. It should ensure it evaluates its initiatives, including New Belongings, and makes the findings widely available.

Part One

Challenges facing care leavers

1.1 This part of the report examines:

- the rising demand for support for care leavers;
- care leavers' lives;
- where care leavers live and what they do; and
- the long-term public costs of care leavers not getting the right support.

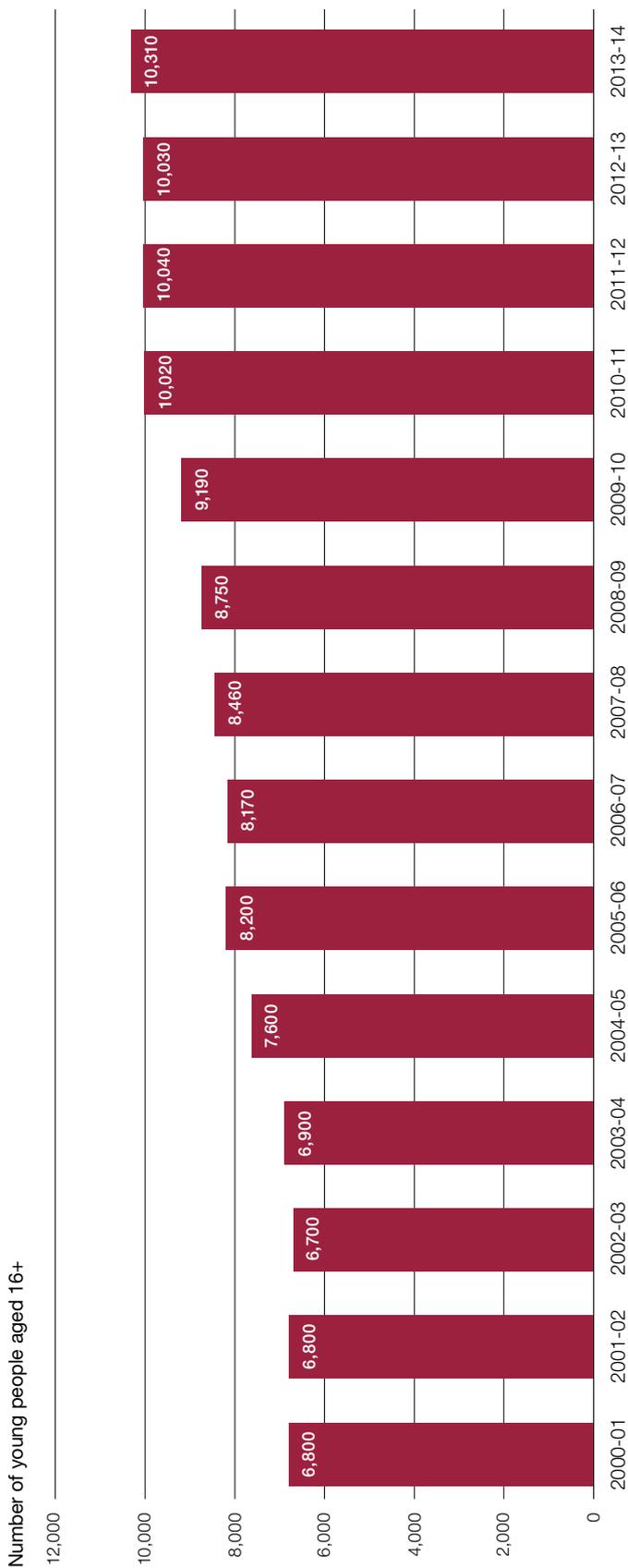
Rising demand for support

1.2 In 2013-14, 10,310 young people aged over 16 left care. This number has increased by almost 50% in the past 10 years, from 6,900 in 2003-04 (**Figure 1**). The reasons include:

- an increase in the care population as a whole (68,840 on 31 March 2014);
- an increase in children aged 16 or over starting to be looked after. In the year ending 31 March 2014, 4,510 children entered care. This was an increase of 22% from 2013 (**Figure 2** on page 14); and
- 16- and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless and becoming looked-after. Recent legal rulings and government guidance have stressed that homeless 16- and 17-year-olds should generally be looked after.

At the end of March 2014, 1 in 75 of all 19-year-olds was a care leaver.

Figure 1
 Young people aged 16 or over leaving care
 The number leaving care after their 16th birthday has increased by almost 50% in the past 10 years



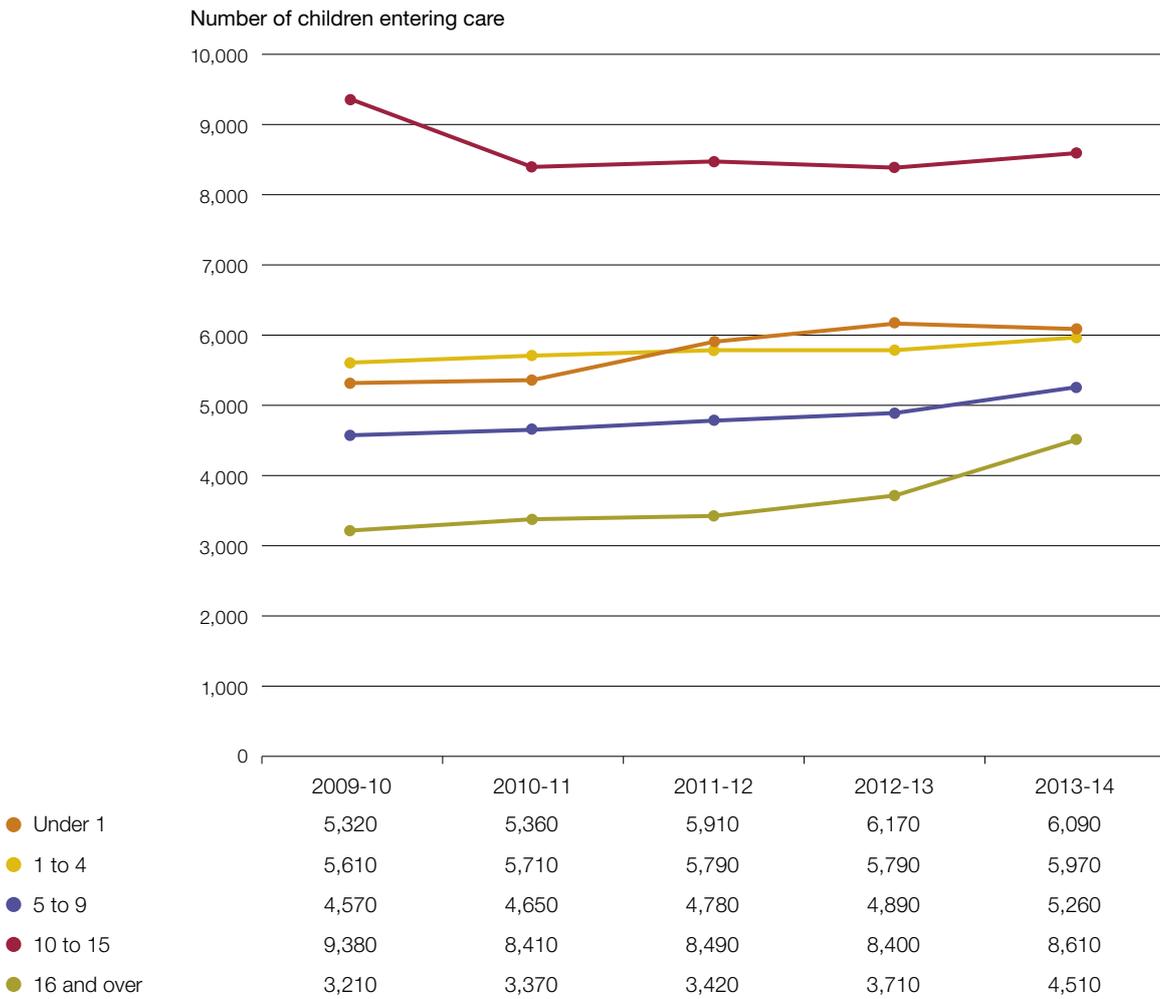
Note

1 Not all of these children satisfy the eligibility criterion for care leaver services (that is, that a child is looked after for a total of at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday including some time after their 16th birthday).

Source: Department for Education, *Statistical First Releases on children looked after by local authorities, 2004–2014*, Table D1

Figure 2
Children entering care by age (2009-10 to 2013-14)

The number of children entering care aged 16 or over has increased in recent years



Source: Department for Education, *Statistical First Release 36/2014*, September 2014

1.3 Those who come into the care system when they are older are more likely to go into residential care, and to be in care because of family problems or their own behaviour (rather than needing protection from abuse and neglect). For the year ended 31 March 2014, 35% of young people leaving care aged 16 or above, had 5 or more different placements in the care system. This indicates that the placements struggled to meet their behavioural or mental health needs. Local authorities also have a duty to provide care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. Because of the circumstances they have faced, they also often have complex needs.

1.4 Demand for care leaver services varies across England. For example, Kent has more than 1,000 care leavers aged 19 to 21 compared with fewer than 100 in other areas of England, while 14 of the 20 local authorities with the highest densities of care leavers are in London.

Care leavers' lives

1.5 Many young people are taken into care because they suffered abuse or neglect. This can have a long-lasting impact on their mental health and emotional well-being, which persists when they leave care. In 2014:

- 62% of children in care were there because of abuse or neglect; and
- 50% of children in care had emotional and behavioural health that was considered normal, 13% borderline, and 37% a cause for concern. There has been very little change in the emotional and behavioural health of looked-after children over the past 3 years.²

1.6 From our interviews with care leavers and other surveys of young people, ongoing mental health and emotional well-being are important issues. Some young people felt past trauma had affected their ability to form relationships. Others felt they had not been prepared emotionally to live alone and struggled to cope with loneliness and not being with family and friends. Often they did not have anyone to speak to in the evenings, weekends or Christmas if no one from their local authority was available. As care leavers told us:

“... there’s been all these fractured parts of myself that I have had to reconnect with ... but if that had happened when I was leaving care at 18, perhaps I’d have had a chance then to have had a family, had a relationship.”

“I was actually kind of sad one day, because I tried to call [his personal adviser] on the weekend. And I couldn’t reach her and I was, ‘Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm’. Because, you know, there was no one else to talk to.”

² Department for Education, *Statistical First Release – Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England*, 31 March 2014.

1.7 Local authorities we spoke to all highlighted issues about care leavers' access to mental health care services. Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provide services to young people up to their 18th birthday. But local authorities told us that access to these services can be difficult for care leavers and when care leavers move from children's to adult services there can be a "cliff edge" as they may not reach the diagnostic threshold for access to adult services. There were examples of practice to address these issues. For example:

- Telford and Wrekin Council is commissioning mental health services for young people with less severe issues so that work with young people begins earlier.
- Derbyshire County Council has an arrangement where if a young person starts a mental health programme they will be allowed to complete it, even if they turn 18 during the treatment.
- Oldham Council has removed the traditional 'miss three appointments and you are struck off' rule. This has improved care leavers' access to services.

1.8 However, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council told us of significant funding changes affecting CAMHS, including a £500,000 reduction from the Council, to meet local budgetary pressures. A number of recent reports from the Department of Health and four All Party Parliamentary Groups have also raised concerns about the prevalence of poor emotional and mental health among children and young people and the capacity of services to meet their needs.³

"I was telling my social worker time and time again like, I'm not okay ... and she was just kind of like ... oh ... you've been to CAMHS. Things got so bad, I ended up in A&E ... she actually realised how bad it was and even then she didn't really say anything apart from, you know ... stop doing that, you know, that's bad."

1.9 Research has shown that quantitative outcome measures are rarely used to assess the effectiveness of mental health service interventions for anyone, including care leavers, contrary to best medical practice.⁴ Some professionals believe it is difficult to make a link between treatment and outcomes. Instead, research relies on the views and opinions of professionals and young people.

³ Department of Health, NHS England, *Future in mind – Promoting, protecting and improving our children and young people's mental health and wellbeing*, 2015 and *What can we do to help children and young people to develop good mental health and emotional well-being in the face of life's challenges*, 2015.

⁴ E. Lamont et al., *Provision of mental health services for care leavers: transition to adult services*, Local Government Association/National Foundation for Educational Research, 2009.

Damaging social problems

1.10 The data that the Department for Education collects on the current cohort of care leavers do not capture information on all aspects of their lives. However, research has shown that young people who have had a background in care were more likely to have children at a young age, become homeless or end up in custody. Although there is no comprehensive or recent data, some estimates are that:

- in 2010, 25% of those who were homeless had been in care at some point in their lives;⁵
- in 2008, 49% of young men under the age of 21 who had come into contact with the criminal justice system had a care experience;⁶
- in 2014, 22% of female care leavers become teenage parents;⁷ and
- in 2012, the Department of Health reported that looked-after children and care leavers were between four and five times more likely to self-harm in adulthood.⁸

Leaving care at the age of 18 or under

1.11 In 2013 in the UK, 50% of young people were still living with their parents at the age of 22.⁹ Young people must leave local authority care by the age of 18, although if they want to – and are able to – they can stay with their foster family until they are 21.¹⁰ However, of young people leaving care aged 16 or over in 2013-14:

- 33% were aged under 18, compared with 32% in 2012-13 and 38% in 2009-10; and
- 16% returned home to live with parents or relatives, although this varied by age – 54% of 16-year-olds, 33% of 17-year-olds and 3% of 18-year-olds.

The proportion of young people staying in care until 18 varied by local authority, from 100% in one authority to 32% in another.

5 K Reeve with E Batty, *The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England*, Crisis, May 2011. Hidden homelessness is defined as 'non-statutory homeless people living outside mainstream housing provision, including people squatting, staying with friends or relatives, or sleeping rough'.

6 Centre for Social Justice, *Couldn't care less*, September 2008.

7 Centre for Social Justice, *Finding Their Feet, Equipping care leavers to reach their potential*, January 2015 – Freedom of Information requests by Centre for Social Justice [sent 11 November 2014]. 103 local authorities responded, 93 were able to give data.

8 Department of Health, *Preventing suicide in England. A cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives*, September 2012.

9 Office for National Statistics, *Young adults living with their parents, 2013*, January 2014.

10 Young people may remain looked-after until 21. In practice, this is a small number and tends to be young persons with severe physical or mental disabilities.

1.12 Leaving care and living independently at 18 or younger can be a challenge. Care leavers usually lack the family and support networks available to most teenagers. Local authorities are responsible for preparing young people for leaving care in a number of ways. This can include practical help such as teaching them to cook and manage money; help to get driving licences and passports; and financial help, including the leaving care grant. The government has advised local authorities that the grant should be at least £2,000 (paragraph 2.7).

Where care leavers live and what they do

1.13 The Department for Education collects annual data from local authorities on care leavers' participation in employment, education and training; and where they live and whether this is suitable accommodation. Until 2013, it only collected data on 19-year-olds but since 2014 has collected data on 19-, 20- and 21-year-olds. Local authorities reported on 83% of these care leavers in 2013-14. The Department plans to collect further data on 17- to 18-year-olds over the next 2 years.

Accommodation

1.14 Legislation requires local authorities to accommodate all care leavers aged 16 and 17. The accommodation needs of care leavers aged 18 or over are assessed under homelessness legislation. Local authorities record where care leavers live on or around their 19th, 20th and 21st birthdays. In 2013-14, the most common type of accommodation was independent living (47%) (**Figure 3**). In addition, 16% of care leavers were recorded as being in 'other accommodation'. There were another 4,570 young people on whom local authorities had no information, or who had died after leaving care.

1.15 At 31 March 2014, for those care leavers aged 19 to 21 with whom the local authority was in touch, 93% were judged by their local authorities to be living in 'suitable' accommodation. Suitable accommodation for care leavers should "provide safe, secure and affordable provision for young people".¹¹ Yet, in 2013-14, the Department for Education found that some local authorities had judged a small number of care leavers to be in suitable accommodation when this seemed unlikely given the setting. Examples included where the residence was unknown or where a child was in custody.¹²

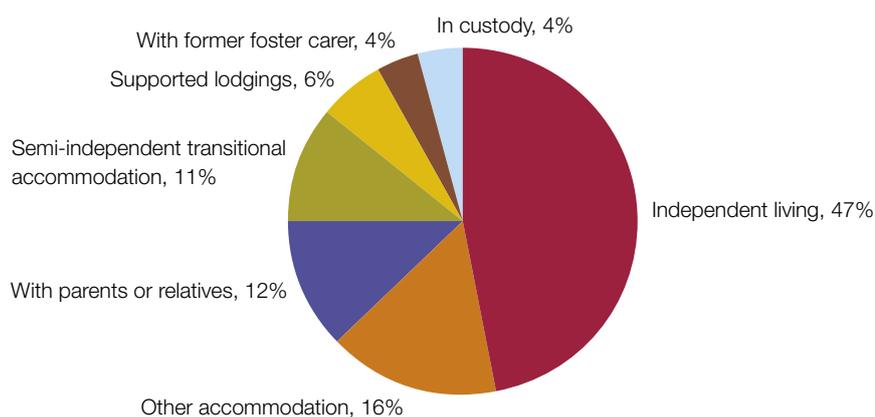
¹¹ Regulation 9(2) of the Care Leavers (England) Regulations, 2010.

¹² Department for Education, *Children looked after by local authorities in England: Guide to the SSDA903 collection 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015*, October 2014.

Figure 3

Care leavers' accommodation, 2013-14

The majority of care leavers lived independently or with parents or relatives

**Notes**

- 1 Where a care leaver lives is recorded for a single day on or around their 19th, 20th and 21st birthday.
- 2 Percentages are based on 22,650 care leavers aged 19–21, and exclude the 4,570 care leavers on whom local authorities have no information or who died after leaving care.
- 3 'Other accommodation' includes community homes, ordinary lodgings, foyers, emergency accommodation, bed and breakfast and other accommodation, as well as care leavers who have gone abroad, have been deported, are homeless or whose residence is not known.

Source: Department for Education, *Statistical First Release 36/2014*, September 2014

1.16 County councils must rely on district councils for housing, despite the county having the statutory responsibility to ensure that care leavers do not become homeless. By contrast, in a single-tier authority, one council is responsible for both care leavers and housing. The time taken to secure accommodation following a local authority's acceptance of the main homelessness duty varies across the country and this is typically due to the supply and demand for housing. For example, in Kent care leavers nominated for district council housing can wait up to 2 years for social housing tenancies. Care leavers often experience problems in accessing and keeping a tenancy. We found examples of how local authorities are working to address these problems. The Royal Borough of Greenwich has a single gateway for housing support services and gives priority to care leavers on its housing list. The London Borough of Havering told us it is looking closely at how its housing department acts before and after a tenancy is awarded so it can spot the early warning signs of potential tenancy break-down.

1.17 Care leavers and stakeholders told us about cases where young people were encouraged to declare themselves homeless or claim benefits so they can access and afford housing. Care leavers said:

“There was one other thing they were going to do which was make me basically homeless but still living at home so that they could get me a place [to live] ... you're not actually homeless ... like you don't live on the streets or anything, you stay at home.”

“... benefit life is not ... productive at all ... it puts people on dependency and it just gives you already the stigma that you're just come out of care, you've gone onto benefits. You need to find a different way to ... support young people without them having to sign on.”

1.18 There are no data on how long young people could be living in unsuitable accommodation. The most recent evidence is from 2006. This found that 33% of care leavers were homeless at some point between 6 and 24 months after leaving care.¹³ Statutory guidance says bed and breakfast accommodation should only be used in an emergency for 16- and 17-year-olds, and for no more than 2 working days. In 2013-14, in questions to local authorities about all care leavers, Barnardo's found that:

- 73% of local authorities had placed care leavers in bed and breakfast accommodation;
- 51% of local authorities had placed care leavers in bed and breakfast for 28 days or longer; and
- 46% of local authorities had used bed and breakfast for repeat placements (putting a care leaver in a bed and breakfast on more than one occasion) during the year.¹⁴

¹³ M Stein, Research Review: Young people leaving care, *Children and Family Social Work*, 2006, pp 273–9.

¹⁴ Barnardo's. Available at: www.barnardos.org.uk/news/Barnardos_goes_undercover_to_investigate_accommodation_of_children_leaving_care/latest-news.htm?ref=98637

Education, employment and training

Attainment

1.19 There is a significant and longstanding gap between the educational achievement of young people in care and care leavers, and their peers. In 2014 around 12% of looked-after children achieved 5 or more A*-C GCSE grades or equivalent, including English and mathematics. This compared with 52% of their peers. However, 68% of looked-after children eligible to sit GCSEs had a special educational need and attainment for those with a special educational need is lower.

Participation in education, employment and training

1.20 In 2013-14, 41% of care leavers aged 19 were not in education, employment or training (NEET) compared with 15% of all 19-year-olds. This is the highest proportion since 2001-02. Among 19- to 21-year-olds the NEET rate was 46% (**Figure 4** overleaf). In addition, 6% of care leavers aged 19 were in higher education in 2013-14, compared with one-third of their peers.¹⁵

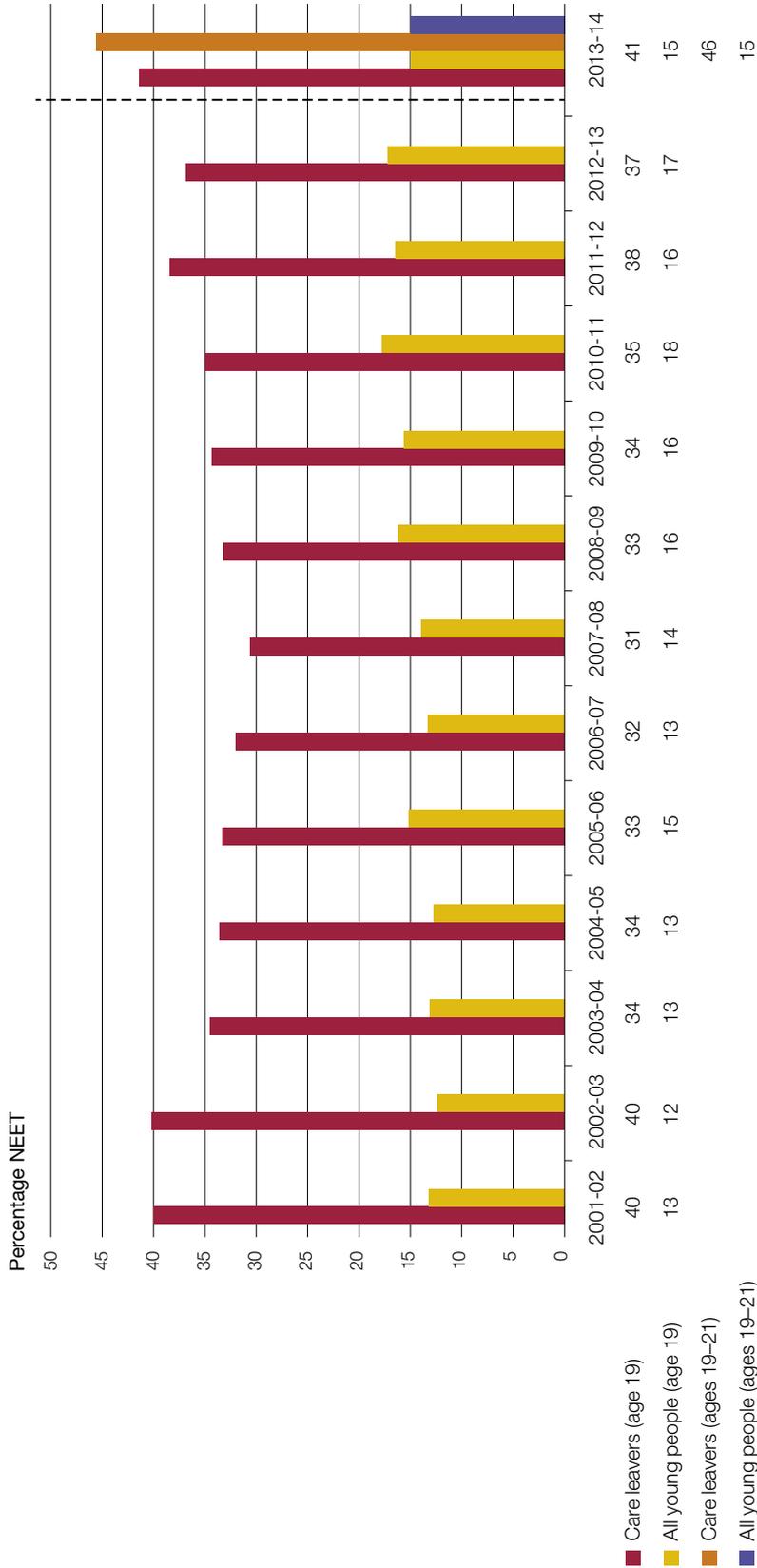
1.21 Given some of the difficulties care leavers face early in their lives, including experiencing many placements when in care or not attending school, achieving qualifications may take them longer than their peers.¹⁶ The government recognises this to an extent by supporting those who want to return to education after 21. However, it does not measure the achievements of care leavers beyond the age of 21. Many local authorities we spoke to offer apprenticeships to their care leavers, including Kent County Council, Royal Borough of Greenwich and Derbyshire County Council.

¹⁵ Department for Education, *Children looked after in England, including adoption*, National Table F1 and Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, *Participation rates in higher education: academic years 2006 and 2007 to 2012 and 2013 (provisional)*, Table 2.

¹⁶ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Children in care*, Session 2014-15, HC 787, National Audit Office, November 2014.

Figure 4
Proportion of care leavers who were NEET (2001-02 to 2013-14)

In 2013-14, 41% of care leavers aged 19 were NEET, higher than any other year since 2001-02



Notes

- 1 In 2013-14, percentages are based on 22,640 care leavers aged 19-21 and exclude the 17% of 19- to 21-year-olds on whom local authorities had no information.
- 2 Due to a change in the definition of the cohort of care leavers for whom information is collected, the NEET rate for care leavers in 2013-14 is not fully comparable to previous years (Appendix 2, paragraph 6). The new definition means that a proportion of those who started their last period of care aged 16 or 17 are included, but would not have been included in the previous definition. The composition of a care leaver cohort, including the age when they enter care, can influence the overall NEET rate, so the Department conducted further analysis to explore this impact. Excluding those who started their last period of care at age 16 or 17 reduces the NEET rate for 19-year-olds in 2013-14 from 41% to 39%, as the NEET rate of those who started their last period of care at 16 or 17 is relatively high.

Source: Department for Education Statistical First Releases on children looked after by local authorities, 2004-14, Table F1 and Department for Education, *Statistical First Release 8/2015*, February 2015

Long-term cost of insufficient support

1.22 The public cost of care leavers not moving into adulthood successfully is likely to be high, although there are no accurate or comprehensive data. The costs care leavers face, including problems such as mental health, unemployment and youth crime are likely to be high but are not quantified. The cost to a young person of being NEET, for example, is estimated to be around £56,000 in public finance costs over the working lifetime of the young person.¹⁷ Based on these estimates, the lifetime cost of the current cohort of 19-year-old care leavers being NEET could be around £237 million, or £150 million more than if they had the same NEET rate as other 19-year-olds.

1.23 Although early intervention is largely paid for by local government, many parts of government benefit financially from it, for example the police and the Department for Work & Pensions. Local authorities we spoke to told us it is increasingly hard to maintain spending on early intervention work. For Oldham Council, child sexual exploitation is increasing the demands on, and resources required by, after-care services.

¹⁷ B Coles, C Godfrey et al., *Estimating the life-time cost of NEET*, July 2010.

Part Two

Support for care leavers

2.1 The multiple personal and social challenges facing young people as they move from being looked-after children to adulthood were outlined in Part One. This part of the report examines different elements of the system for supporting care leavers. The main participants and responsibilities are shown in **Figure 5**. The sections below cover:

- central government support for care leavers;
- local authority support; and
- the costs of support and how these relate to quality.

How central government supports care leavers

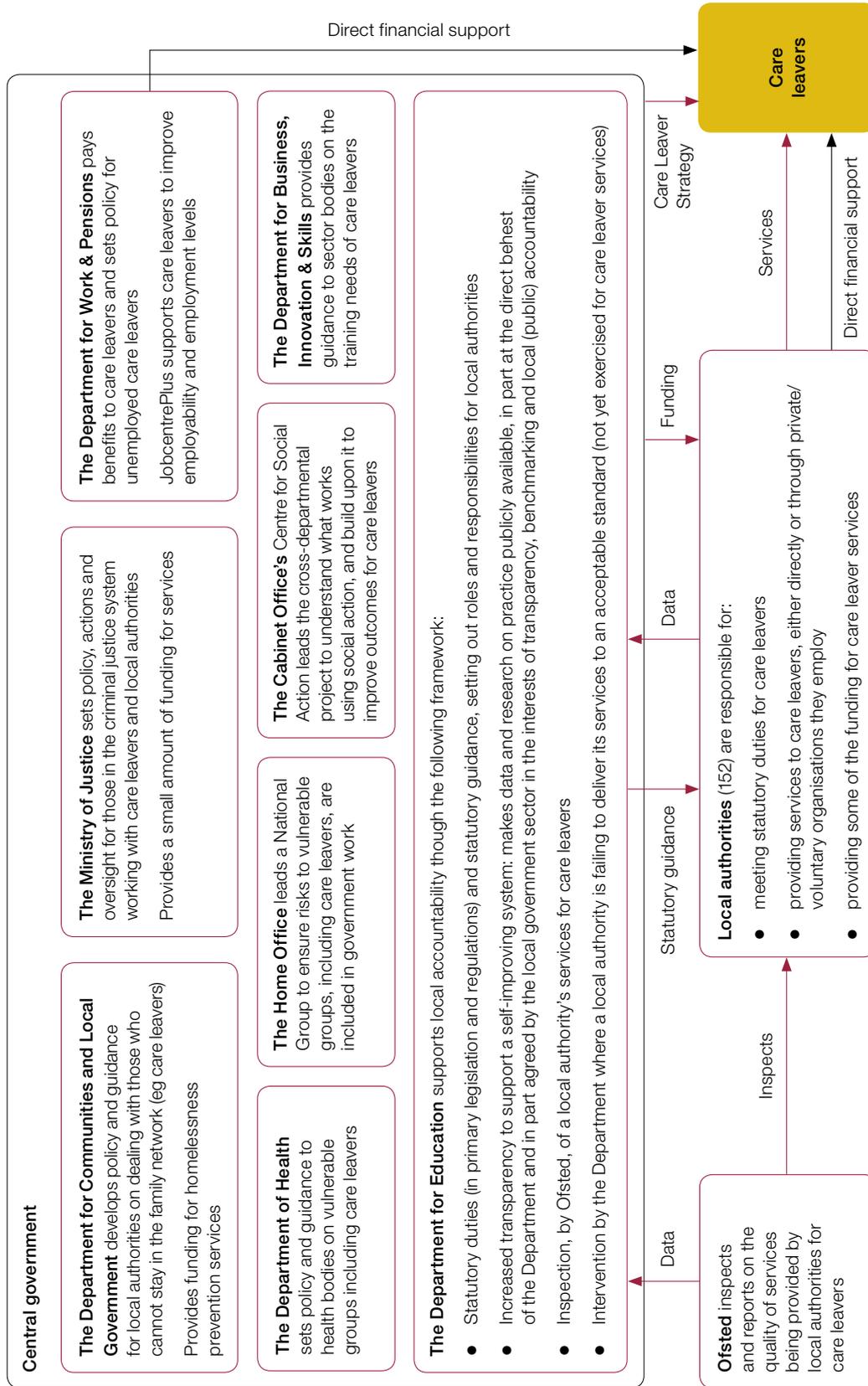
2.2 The government's objective is to ensure that care leavers receive the same level of care and support that their peers would expect from a reasonable parent, such as finding a job or setting up home, and have opportunities that help them move successfully into adulthood.¹⁸

2.3 In 2000, the government introduced The Children (Leaving Care) Act, intended to improve the life chances of care leavers through:

- delaying their discharge from care until they were prepared and ready to leave, with the expectation that most children would remain in care until the age of 18;
- improving assessment, preparation and planning for leaving care (through pathway plans);
- giving better personal support to young people leaving care (through personal advisers); and
- improving financial arrangements for care leavers.

¹⁸ Department for Education, *The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 3: planning transition to adulthood for care leavers*. Revision date: January 2015.

Figure 5
The system for supporting care leavers



Source: Adapted from HM Government, *Care Leaver Strategy*, October 2013; Department for Education, *Business Plan 2013-15*, May 2013; Department for Education, *Accountability System Statement*, January 2015; Department for Education, *Care Leavers' Charter*, October 2012; Department for Education, *Policy Statement*, February 2013.

2.4 In 2008, the government required local authorities to provide personal advisers to care leavers up to the age of 25 if they remain in, or plan to return to, education and training. It also introduced a duty for them to pay a higher education bursary of at least £2,000 to care leavers.

2.5 Within central government:

- the Department for Education sets the statutory framework and provides guidance to local authorities, collects information on care leavers and makes data and research on good practice publicly available. The Department supports innovation through its Innovation Programme and provides national funding for other initiatives to support care leavers. The Department can intervene if a local authority is failing to deliver its services to an acceptable standard;
- the Department for Communities and Local Government provides the majority of funding for care leaver services, which is not ring-fenced. Other government departments, including the Departments of Health, and Work & Pensions, provide some funding too. They also collect information and set policy and guidance that can impact on care leavers' lives, such as on eligibility for benefits; access to health services; and access to housing; and
- Ofsted inspects local authority services for care leavers against a framework underpinned by the regulations and standards set by the Department for Education.

Care Leaver Strategy

2.6 In October 2013 the government published the Care Leaver Strategy. This brought together the work of 8 government departments (the Departments for Education, Health, Communities and Local Government, Work & Pensions, Business, Innovation & Skills; Cabinet Office; Ministry of Justice; and the Home Office). It aimed to address some of the unintended consequences of policies that were not joined up and the inconsistent access that care leavers have to local services. The actions were mostly around amending processes, issuing guidance and collecting information.

2.7 It is too early to say whether the strategy has changed long-term outcomes for care leavers. However, in October 2014, the government reported it had met most of its commitments. Examples included:

- The Department for Work & Pensions had added a 'care leaver' marker to its information on benefit claimants from October 2013. This meant that care leavers could be identified and given extra support in looking for work and the effectiveness of the Department's support could be tracked and evaluated. By October 2014 it had identified 3,162 care leavers, although it has not analysed these data.
- The Department for Communities and Local Government had published revised statutory guidance to local authorities on access to social housing so care leavers who had been placed out of area could return to their home area.
- The Ministry of Justice had published guidance to staff in probation and prison services to support better identification of care leavers. It also appointed a care leavers' champion.
- The Department for Education had amended guidance to encourage local authorities to give care leavers at least £2,000 as a 'setting up home' allowance. It had also begun to collect data on care leavers aged 20 and 21 in addition to the data it collects on care leavers at age 19.

2.8 As well as reporting progress in October 2014, the government also made some further commitments to support care leavers, some of which are now being implemented. For example:

- Since November 2014, the Ministry of Justice has collected information to identify care leavers in custody, so that they can be signposted to the support available to them, including the support they are entitled to from their local authority.
- The Department for Education plans to start collecting data on the circumstances of care leavers who turn 17 or 18 in the year ending 31 March 2016.
- The Department of Communities and Local Government and Cabinet Office are providing £15 million for a 'payment by results' scheme. This aims to help the most vulnerable homeless 18- to 25-year-olds, including some care leavers, to access accommodation, education and training. Seven organisations received funding in January 2015.

2.9 We have found from our previous work that for a joined-up approach to be successful, there needs to be:

- **commitment to work in an integrated way**, which is likely to be reflected in a shared vision and objectives, effective leadership and staffing and incentives for integrated working;
- **implementation capability** including clear responsibilities and accountability arrangements and communication and knowledge-sharing;
- **sustained effort to continuously improve** including a commitment to maintain the resulting improvements; and
- **good monitoring information** to evaluate impacts.¹⁹

2.10 However, the strategy was not set up as an effective programme of co-ordinated work to identify and target specific problems. In line with good practice for successful cross-government working, our analysis of the strategy is set out in **Figure 6**.

Figure 6
How the Care Leaver Strategy compares with good practice

What good looks like	Care Leaver Strategy
Commitment to work in an integrated way	<p>Although the departments had a shared vision for care leavers, there were no clear government objectives.</p> <p>There was no clear leadership of the strategy or committed staff resources from each of the departments.</p>
Implementation capability	<p>Individual departmental policy responsibilities were relatively clear.</p> <p>Local authorities provide the majority of services to care leavers, but were not consulted and did not participate in developing the strategy.</p> <p>It is not clear how the strategy is governed or how individual departments are held accountable for delivering their parts of the strategy.</p> <p>It is not clear how knowledge is shared across departments.</p>
Sustained effort to continuously improve	<p>Data are not available on all aspects of care leavers' lives to monitor the impacts of the strategy.</p> <p>Local authorities were largely unaware of the strategy or its impact.</p> <p>Stakeholders told us that in their view the strategy had stopped after October 2014.</p>

Source: National Audit Office

¹⁹ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Integration across government*, Session 2012-13, HC 1041, National Audit Office, March 2013.

2.11 Progress and future commitments made by departments, although useful, have so far been mostly about inputs, such as producing guidance, rather than improving outcomes for care leavers. Although the government specified some impacts in the original strategy, it did not set out how it intended to measure its progress (**Figure 7** overleaf).

Staying Put

2.12 The Department for Education introduced Staying Put in 2014. Staying Put offers care leavers approaching 18 the security of knowing they can stay with their former foster carers until they are 21 if they and their foster carers agree. Research and evidence highlight that when young people are given longer to become independent, like other young people, this improves their outcomes.²⁰ Staying Put does not apply to residential care. The Department has committed £44.6 million of funding to Staying Put from 2014-15 to 2016-17. This comprises £7.4 million in 2014-15; £14.8 million in 2015-16; and £22.4 million in 2016-17 across 152 local authorities.

2.13 Although it is too early to say whether Staying Put will improve care leavers' lives in the long term, local authorities told us they welcomed Staying Put as a means of smoothing the transition from care to post-care living. However, they also described the barriers to implementing the policy. These included the costs to local authorities, strains on the market for foster carers and adverse financial consequences for foster carers. For example, foster carers can receive around £500 a week to care for a child under the age of 18. But at the age of 18 and above, under Staying Put arrangements, this payment can be £150 a week, a 70% reduction. So far, the Department has not assessed whether the new policy is meeting its objectives or its financial impact on local authorities. The Department told us that about one-quarter of 18-year-olds were staying put, in line with its assumptions.

Local authority support

2.14 The fundamental challenge for local authorities is that once young people leave care as adults, however unready they may be, they move outside the authority's direct control. Local authorities can offer oversight and support but cannot impose it. This usually accompanies a transfer in responsibilities within authorities from children's services to leaving care or even to adult social services. Within local government:

- Local authorities are responsible for ensuring that funding for care leavers' services is spent with regularity and propriety and that value for money is achieved. They provide services to care leavers either directly or by commissioning private or voluntary organisations. They are responsible for meeting statutory duties and also provide some funding for care leaver services.
- Local authorities provide information to the Department for Education about their care leavers at age 19, 20 and 21 and the total amount they spend each year on services for care leavers. In 2014, local authorities reported there were 27,220 care leavers aged 19, 20 or 21 and that they had spent £265 million on services for care leavers in 2013-14.

20 Department for Education, *Staying Put: arrangements for care leavers aged 18 years and above*, May 2013.

Figure 7
Intended impacts of the Care Leaver Strategy

Education	Employment	Health	Housing	Financial support	Justice	Ongoing support
Government's intended impacts						
All care leavers remain in education and undertake training and activities aimed at improving employability	Further reduction in care leavers who are NEET, through improved support by mainstream and specialist services	Care leavers have timely access to mainstream and specialist health services which meet their physical and mental health needs	Care leavers live in safe and suitable accommodation that meets their individual needs	Care leavers receive financial support and guidance from their local authority and benefits agency so that they are able to manage their income and reduce the risks of falling into debt	Programmes to reduce crime and the risk of young people being exploited specifically address the needs of care leavers	Care leavers receive high-quality ongoing support from their local authorities so that they do not feel lonely and isolated
Care leavers experience improved access to further and higher education and better support while at college/university	Improved understanding of how effective Jobcentre Plus support is in driving care leaver employment outcomes and identifying further improvements in service delivery		Programmes to reduce homelessness address the specific needs of care leavers	An increase in care leavers attending further and higher education		Care leavers leave care at a time when they are ready

Can the impact be measured?

Yes ● **In part** ● **No** ●

How the impact can be measured

The Departments for Education, and Business, Innovation & Skills have data on NEETs and participation in higher and further education	The Department for Work & Pensions has introduced an identifier for care leavers in data	No data on care leavers' access to services	Local authorities measure whether accommodation is suitable but not that it meets needs	No data on debt management. Departments for Education, and Business, Innovation & Skills have data on NEETs and participation	The Ministry of Justice has introduced an identifier for care leavers in data on those in custody	No comprehensive data on user experience
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Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Government, *Care Leaver Strategy*, October 2013

2.15 The Department for Education has set clear standards for care leaver services through the statutory guidance it has issued to local authorities since 2000. This includes the need for care leavers to have a pathway plan and personal adviser (**Figure 8**).

2.16 Unless local authorities are in touch with their care leavers they cannot be sure that they are safe and receiving the services they are entitled to. Statutory guidance sets out clearly that personal advisers must have regular face-to-face contact with every care leaver they support. There was a marked decline in the proportion of care leavers with whom local authorities were not in touch from 2001-02 to 2005-06 (**Figure 9** overleaf). The Department attributes this change to the introduction of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (paragraph 2.3). In 2013-14, local authorities did not report information about where 11% of their 19-year-old care leavers were living or whether they were participating in employment, education or training, compared with 8% in 2012-13. Only 8 out of 151 local authorities reported information on all their care leavers.

Figure 8

What local authorities must provide to care leavers

... a personal adviser

- develops pathway plans with care leavers to support their needs and help them prepare for independent living
- gives advice and support, and helps care leavers to get services they need
- provides support to age 21, or up to age 25 if young person returns to education and training

... a pathway plan

- written with young person, after assessing needs, around their 16th birthday
- to be reviewed at least every 6 months or reviewed whenever the care leaver asks

... a place to live

- somewhere suitable to live taking into account their needs and wishes
- council must review it after 28 days – and at least every 3 months after that
- personal adviser must visit within a week, and at least every 2 months after that
- local authorities must pay to house 16- and 17-year-olds
- young people in settled foster placements can 'stay put' until 21

... financial and other support

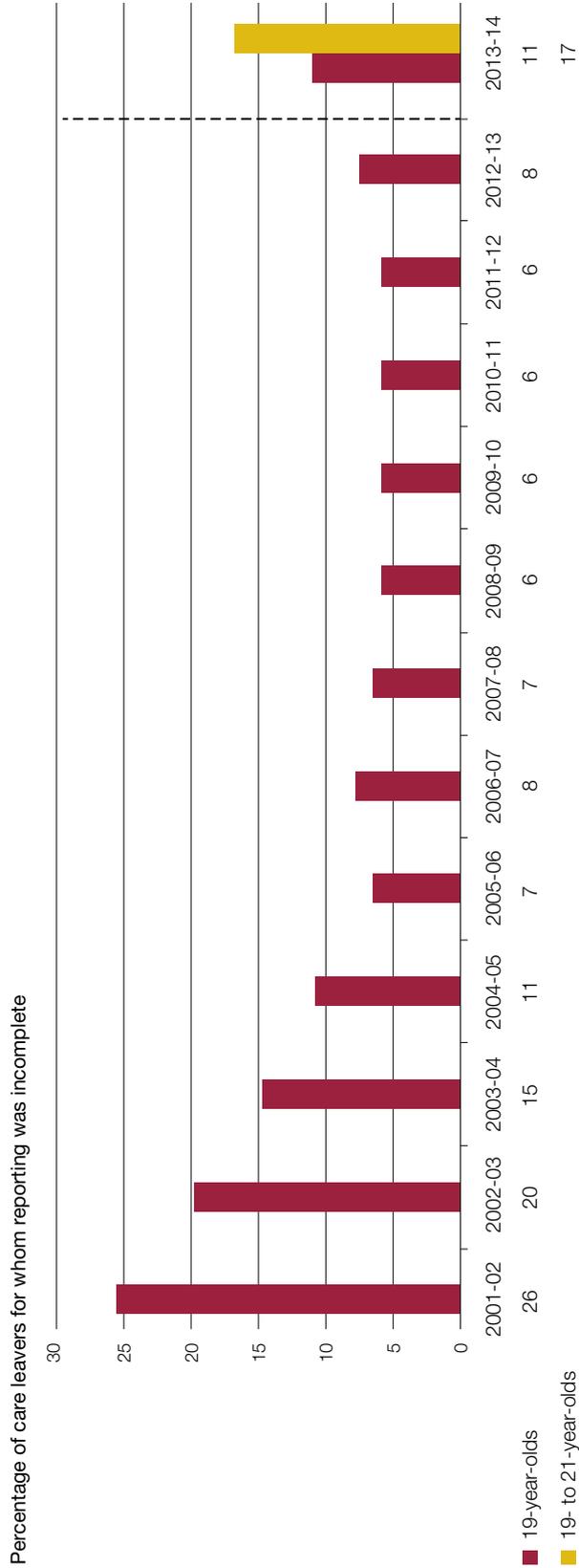
- local authorities must pay eligible care leavers:
 - £2,000 higher Education Bursary for university, or higher education
 - £1,200 bursary if they stay in full-time education
 - setting up home allowances (known as 'leaving care grants'). The amount varies: the Department for Education encourages them to pay £2,000
- support into education, training, or employment

Source: Department for Education and legislation about care leavers – 1989, 2000, 2008 and 2014

Figure 9

Care leavers about whom local authorities reported no or incomplete information

In 2013-14, local authorities reported no information on the accommodation or activity of 11% of their 19-year-old care leavers. This figure rises to 17% among 19- to 21-year-olds



Notes

- 1 Published data for 2013-14 included 20- and 21-year-olds, in addition to a larger cohort of 19-year-olds (see Appendix Two, paragraph 6).
- 2 Percentages are based on 27,220 care leavers aged 19-21 in 2013-14.

Source: Department for Education, Statistical First Releases on children looked after by local authorities, 2004-2014, Table F1

2.17 Our interviews with young people and other research found that care leavers did not always feel they had been prepared to live independently, although this depended on the local authority that looked after them. Telford and Wrekin Council take a 'stage not age' approach. This means young people progress when they are ready, rather than at fixed age points. It told us that its personal advisers are allocated to children in care and care leavers from age 15 to 25 and that most of its care leavers engaged with their personal advisers. Across councils, the leaving care grant can vary significantly and can often be below the £2,000 the government recommends (paragraph 2.7). Care leavers also told us about issues with their plans to live independently:

"I didn't know what it (my pathway plan) was for, what it was, what was the purpose except for 'Oh, this is a booklet we have to go through, we have to do together, we have to complete' or something. But I didn't really have an understanding as to the purpose."

"(I did not know) basic things, like knowing how to pay bills. Knowing that you have to pay council tax."

Ofsted's inspection of local authorities

2.18 For assurance that the system of support is working effectively, services need to be inspected against standards and good practice. Until 2013, although Ofsted inspected care leaver services, there was no separate Ofsted judgement on whether the support provided by local authorities met the obligations of the 2000 Act and subsequent legislation and guidance.

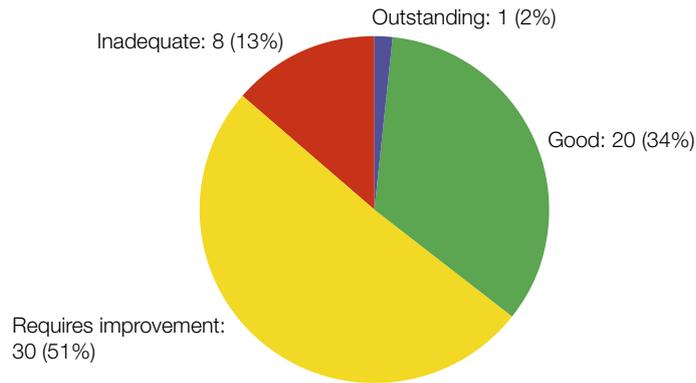
2.19 Since November 2013 Ofsted inspections of local authorities' children's services have included a specific judgement on how well they support care leavers. The Department for Education worked with Ofsted to revise the inspection framework. Ofsted's inspection criteria do not consider cost-effectiveness or value for money.

2.20 So far, Ofsted has reported on care leaver services in 59 local authorities. By end-June 2015, 34% of local authorities' services were judged good, with one – Trafford – judged to be outstanding. Two-thirds were either inadequate or requiring improvement (**Figure 10** overleaf). The Department for Education has not intervened in any local authority, solely on the basis of an inadequate judgement on the experiences and progress of care leavers.

Figure 10

Ofsted ratings of care leaver services (November 2013 to end-June 2015)

Of the 59 local authorities whose services have been inspected so far, two-thirds (64%) are judged as either inadequate or requiring improvement



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Ofsted reports on local authorities' children's services

2.21 Particular issues raised in Ofsted reports, and also by care leavers we spoke to, included:

- poor pathway planning – at the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham the plan templates and processes had been changed as a result of Ofsted's comments to make them more user-friendly and more outcome-oriented. Bath and North-East Somerset has developed a pathway plan format based on one from another local authority that Ofsted had judged as good;
- care leavers not receiving a 'health passport' or their health history – they also struggle to get the local authority to give them identity documents such as passports or material about their personal history, for example photographs;
- lack of personal support, sometimes because of changes in staff and high case loads;
- local authorities not always making care leavers aware of what they are entitled to; and
- some local authorities losing touch with a large number of their care leavers. To rate a local authority as outstanding, Ofsted expects them to stay in touch with all care leavers.

2.22 Ofsted told us that the current single inspection framework would be completed in 2017. It has started to consult with stakeholders as part of its planning for inspections of local authority children's services after 2017. A change of framework or judgement would make it more difficult to assess the rate of progress in improving care leaver services. This is a concern given that most have been rated as requiring improvement or inadequate. Local authorities and other stakeholders told us that the new inspection judgement on care leaver services was a positive step. It had increased transparency on the quality of services and encouraged local authorities to carry out their own self-assessments.

Costs of supporting care leavers

2.23 The Department for Education collects data on the costs of care leavers but, despite wide variation in local authorities' reported spending, it is not clear what influences the cost of care. In 2013-14 local authorities' spending varied widely, from an estimated annual average spend of £300 to £20,000 per care leaver. The national average spend on each care leaver is £6,250.²¹ The Department cannot explain these differences and has concerns about the quality of the spending data reported by local authorities as there is a lack of consensus among local authorities on how to cost services and complete their spending returns.

2.24 Our own analysis shows there is no clear correlation between local authorities' spending on care leavers and the quantity and quality of their services (**Figure 11** and **Figure 12** overleaf). The Department has a role in supporting local accountability by improving transparency.²² However, without accurate, complete and comparable data about the cost of services provided for care leavers, it cannot provide information to support benchmarking or assess value for money.

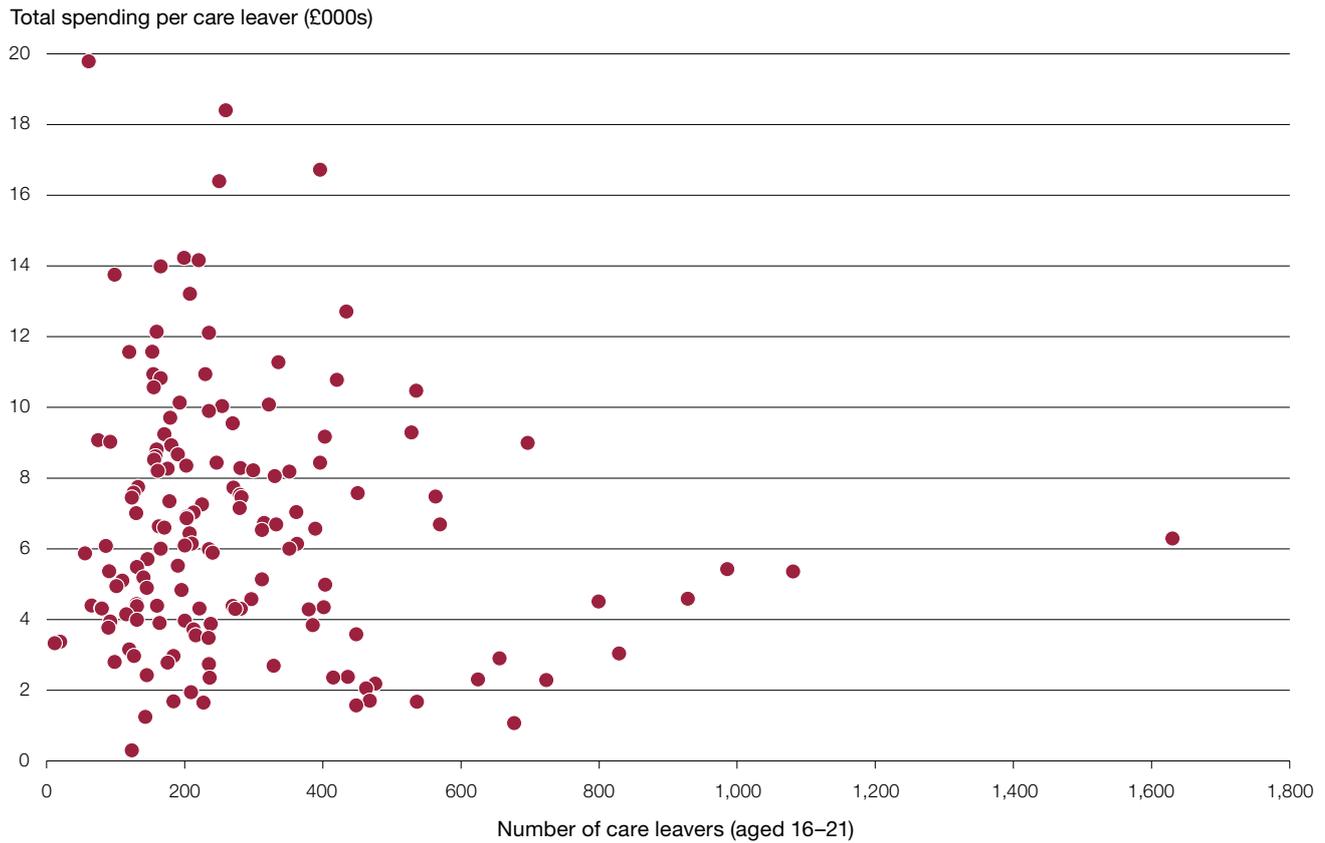
²¹ Based on our estimate of 42,000 care leavers aged 16–21.

²² Department for Education, *Accountability System Statement for Education and Children's Services*, January 2015.

Figure 11

Reported spending on each care leaver compared to number of care leavers by local authority (2013-14)

There is a wide range of reported spending on each care leaver



Notes

- 1 Each point is one local authority. Only the Isles of Scilly is excluded as it has no care leavers.
- 2 Spending on each care leaver is the figure reported by each local authority to the Department for Education for leaving care support service functions under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, divided by the estimated number of care leavers aged 16 to 21.

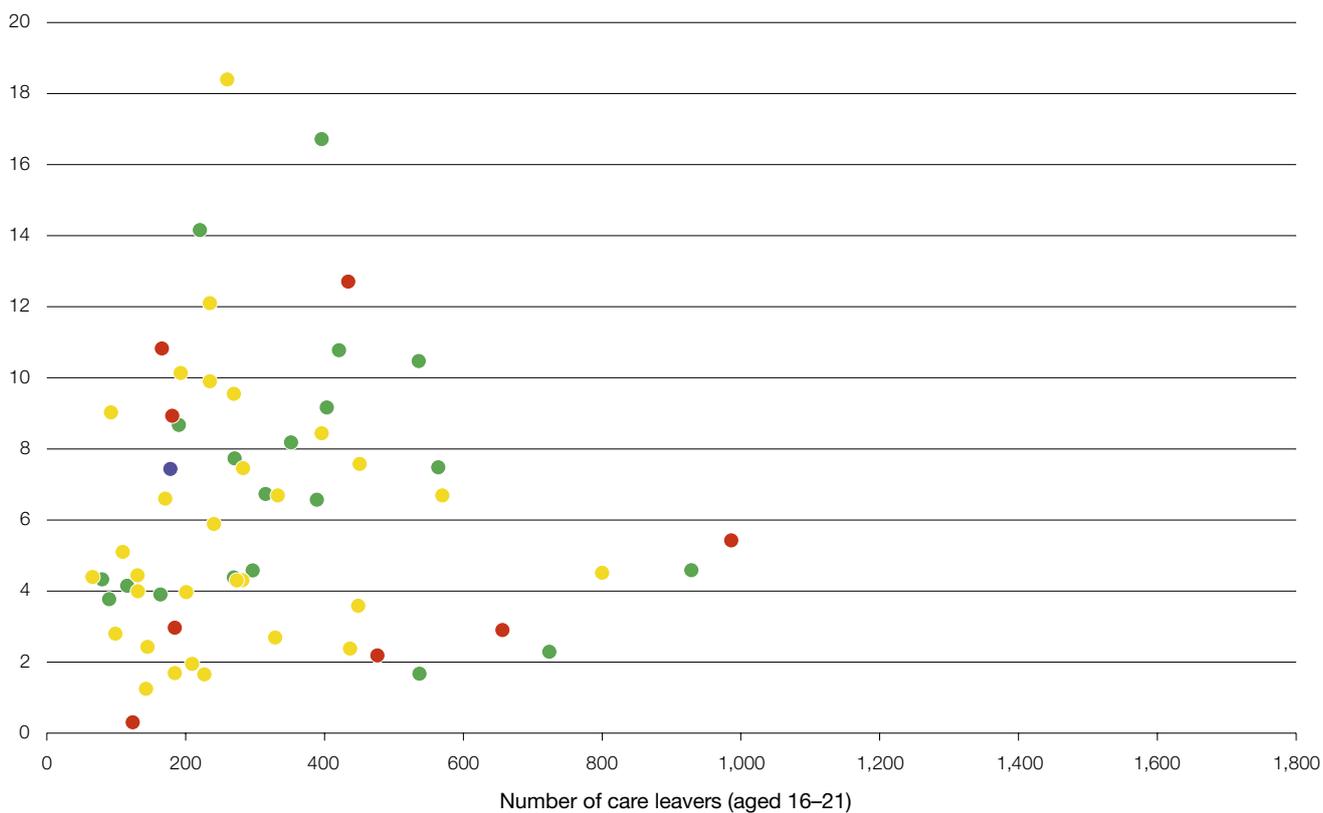
Source: National Audit Office analysis of local authority Section 251 returns (outturn 2013-14) on spending on care leavers and our estimate of the number of care leavers from Department for Education data

Figure 12

Reported spending on each care leaver compared to Ofsted rating of quality of service by local authority (2013-14)

There is no correlation between reported spending and Ofsted's rating of quality

Total spending per care leaver (£000s)



- Inadequate
- Requires improvement
- Good
- Outstanding

Notes

- 1 This analysis covers all 59 local authorities inspected by Ofsted under its new inspection regime between November 2013 and end-June 2015.
- 2 Spending on each care leaver is the figure reported by each local authority to the Department for Education for leaving care support service functions under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, divided by the estimated number of care leavers aged 16 to 21.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of local authority Section 251 returns (outturn 2013-14) on spending on care leavers, and our estimate of the number of care leavers from Department of Education data and Ofsted's single inspection framework judgements on care leaver services

Part Three

Improving support for care leavers

3.1 The problems with providing effective support to care leavers are well known and have been set out in Parts One and Two. Support services have been poor and outcomes have been poor or deteriorating. Central and local government know this and are trying to improve the situation. However, it is unlikely that there is a single intervention or change that will make a difference on its own. This Part of the report expands on several areas where, collectively, effective change is possible and examines:

- how cross-government working is co-ordinated and led;
- the information to track the lives of care leavers over time;
- how information on care leavers is used; and
- understanding which interventions are most effective and improve outcomes.

Cross-government working could be more effective if it was vigorously co-ordinated and led

3.2 Introducing a Care Leaver Strategy was a positive step but without sustained implementation a strategy is ineffective. As set out in paragraph 2.9, a successful joined-up government approach that leads to improved outcomes must have:

- **commitment to work in an integrated way**, reflected in a shared vision and objectives, effective leadership and staffing and incentives for integrated working;
- **implementation capability** including setting out responsibilities and accountability arrangements and communication and knowledge-sharing;
- **sustained effort to continuously improve** including a commitment to maintain the resulting improvements; and
- **good monitoring information** to evaluate impacts.²³

Overall, there needs to be a more joined-up approach across government including on inspecting care leaver services. For example, there is no joint inspection of care leaver services involving Ofsted and HMI Probation.

²³ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Integration across government*, Session 2012-13, HC 1041, National Audit Office, March 2013.

Without reliable information to track the lives of care leavers over time, decision-making about care leavers will be poor

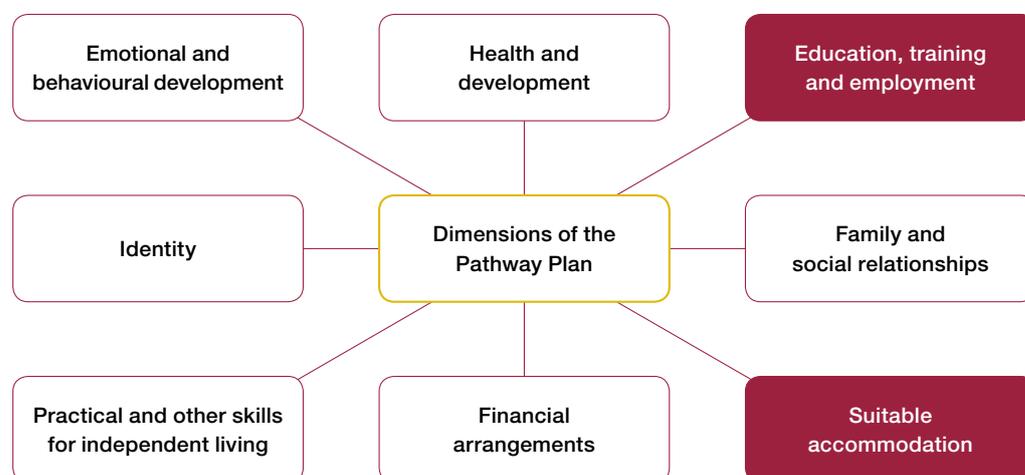
3.3 The government could helpfully measure progress against its stated vision for care leavers. It does not have information to measure progress against all of its objectives for care leavers as set out in the 2013 Care Leaver Strategy (Figure 7). For example, it has no information on whether care leavers have timely access to mental health services or feel that they left care at the right time. Guidance from the Department for Education says every care leaver should have a pathway plan covering 8 dimensions of need, to ease the transition to adult life (**Figure 13**). However, the Department has no data to measure progress on 6 out of 8 of these. It only collects data on care leavers' education, training and employment, and accommodation.

3.4 Care leavers may not want to be identified when using public services, as some see this status as a stigma. The Ministry of Justice, for example, is trying to offer care leavers incentives to disclose this by helping them access their entitlements (paragraph 2.8).

Figure 13

The 8 dimensions covered by a care leaver's pathway plan

The government only collects data to measure progress on 2 areas – education, training and employment; and accommodation



Source: Department for Education, *The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations – Volume 3: planning transition to adulthood for care leavers*, January 2015

3.5 Central government could do more to listen to care leavers and hear their suggestions for improving services. Although ministers meet with small numbers of care leavers, young people do not feel that their voice is always heard. The Office of the Children's Commissioner collects the views of children in care through its Care Monitor survey, which can offer valuable perspectives on the experiences of children in care and care leavers and some local authorities and voluntary organisations also collect feedback. For example, Derbyshire County Council's care leavers are involved in service specifications and appointing staff. They are also on an assessment panel for organisations tendering to provide emotional well-being services.

3.6 There is no comprehensive official set of statistics on care leavers' experience of social problems such as homelessness, mental illness, domestic violence or being in custody. Research shows these are more likely to be issues for care leavers than for their peers. The government does not systematically collect other relevant data, for example about how many care leavers commit suicide, have avoidable hospital admissions, or have children early. Derbyshire County Council collates data on teenage pregnancy and parenthood for both mothers and fathers.

Information is of limited value unless it is used to inform decisions on support for care leavers

3.7 Although there is much good statutory guidance available, Ofsted has found the quality of support for care leavers to be inconsistent. To address this issue the government could do more to act on data it collects from local authorities and on the back of unfavourable Ofsted inspection reports. It could consider how to intervene where data shows that local authorities are not meeting their statutory duties. For example, some local authorities are failing to keep in touch with care leavers to assure themselves that they are safe and receiving the services they are entitled to.

3.8 The Department for Education could also do more to share and promote the information it collects. It produces statistical first releases, performance tables and has the local authority interactive tool. In 2012 it published a care leaver data pack. All aim to help local authorities compare their performance with that of others, but local authorities that we spoke to had low awareness of these sources of information. However, those who had used the data pack, including voluntary sector organisations, had found it helpful. Some local authorities had used voluntary sector services, not only to benchmark performance but also to share new practice.

3.9 The government could streamline how it collects data from local authorities on care leavers so that they only provide data once to central government. For example, the Royal Borough of Greenwich told us that there was a lot of overlap between data it provides to the Department for Education and to Ofsted.

Central and local government need a better understanding of which interventions are most cost-effective and lead to better outcomes

3.10 Most costs of young people not being in employment, education or training do not fall on local authorities. However, central government departments with a financial interest in the success of care leavers lack the ability to provide effective local support. Incentives, such as a 'payment by results' system, need to reward improvement in medium- and long-term outcomes for care leavers and encourage innovation. For example, the Department for Education's Youth Contract supported hard-to-reach 16- and 17-year-olds, including those who were, or had been, in care. An evaluation found the Youth Contract had helped some of these young people to participate in education or training for 5 out of 6 months.²⁴ Our recent report found that outcome-based payment schemes can encourage innovation by specifying 'what' needs to be achieved rather than 'how', and by giving greater freedom to providers and encouraging innovation in delivery.²⁵

3.11 There is, however, no single repository for good practice in supporting care leavers, although examples of good practice are being developed and shared. The sharing of this good practice can be fragmented at a national level and not all local authorities may be involved. Two examples of the development of good practice are New Belongings, which was funded by a small project grant from the Department for Education and delivered by the Care Leavers' Foundation, and the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum.

- **New Belongings** – was set up to examine how local authorities could create fully integrated services which care leavers could access easily. It encouraged care leavers to become part of, and 'belong' to, their communities. Initially, the project ran from May 2013 to October 2014. In March 2015, the Department announced 21 new local authorities were joining the project. An evaluation of the project found that in local authorities taking part it had led to:
 - better accommodation choices for care leavers;
 - improved documentation to support pathway planning;
 - more opportunities for care leavers through employment and apprenticeship schemes; and
 - more care leavers getting what they were entitled to.

But we found that not all local authorities and other stakeholders were aware of the project or the good practice it was identifying.

²⁴ Comptroller and Auditor General, *16- to 18-year-old participation in education and training*, Session 2014-15, HC 624, National Audit Office, March 2013.

²⁵ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Outcome-based payment schemes: government's use of payment by results*, Session 2015-16, HC 86, National Audit Office, June 2015.

- **The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum** is run by Catch22. It provides its 78 local authority members with opportunities to network and learn from each other. It also supports and promotes the voice of young people. The Forum has demonstrated the benefits of working together to share good practice as 50% of member authorities achieved 'good' in their Ofsted inspections compared with 19% of non-member authorities.²⁶

3.12 We found examples of helpful practice in the local authorities we visited, although not all of this practice is shared nationally. Examples included:

- offering apprenticeships and work experience in councils (Kent County Council and Royal Borough of Greenwich);
- one-stop-shops providing integrated support (for example, health services, careers advice, personal advice, youth offending teams, financial and housing support all under one roof, in the Royal Borough of Greenwich and Oldham Council); and
- using care leavers to train staff and councillors on working with care leavers (Royal Borough of Greenwich).

3.13 There are examples of sharing practice regionally, for example Telford and Wrekin Council is a member of the West Midlands Commissioning Network; and Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council and Oldham Council are members of a North-West network. But there is no national forum in England that all local authorities or other stakeholders have access to. In Scotland, an organisation called the Centre for Excellence for Looked-After Children in Scotland (CELSIS) identifies, develops and shares good practice, including for care leavers. It encourages local authorities and other corporate parenting agencies to adopt this practice.

3.14 We found some, but few, examples of other government departments identifying and sharing good practice. For example, the Ministry of Justice is looking across prisons at how best to help care leavers in custody access entitlements from their local authorities. We heard mixed reports from stakeholders about how effectively local authorities support young people who are in or leaving custody and may be entitled to care leaver services.

Appendix One

Our audit approach

1 This study focuses on the support given to young people leaving care. It examines:

- the challenges facing care leavers (Part One);
- support for care leavers (Part Two); and
- improving support for care leavers (Part Three).

2 We applied an analytical framework with evaluative criteria to determine whether there is an effective system in place for supporting care leavers. We sought evidence of a framework for overseeing and co-ordinating care leaver services and support, and whether performance data were available. We also analysed whether good practice was being disseminated and whether there was evidence of improved outcomes for young people leaving care.

3 Our audit approach is summarised in **Figure 14** overleaf. Our evidence base is described in Appendix Two.

Figure 14

Our audit approach

The objective of government

To ensure that care leavers are given the same level of care and support that their peers would expect from a reasonable parent and that they are provided with the opportunities and chances needed to help them move successfully into adulthood.

How this will be achieved

The Department for Education provides statutory guidance to local authorities, collects information on care leavers and makes data and research on good practice publicly available. Other government departments provide some funding, collect information and set policy and guidance which can impact on care leavers' lives. Local authorities deliver services for care leavers and Ofsted inspects these against a framework underpinned by the regulations and standards set by the Department.

Our study

We examined the support for and challenges facing care leavers, government policy and actions, and progress made in improving outcomes.

Our evaluative criteria

There is a framework for overseeing and co-ordinating delivery

There is access to information and analysis of how the system is performing

Good practice is known, shared and followed up

Outcomes for care leavers are improving

Our evidence
(see Appendix Two for details)

- We interviewed officials at the Department for Education and 9 other government departments and agencies.
- We consulted with stakeholder groups and academics.
- We examined 10 case studies to understand how local authorities meet their statutory duties on the provision of services for care leavers. We also consulted with 4 other local authorities.
- We reviewed Ofsted inspection reports of care leaver services.
- We analysed statistical data on cost variations at a local level.
- We reviewed existing literature on care leaver services and outcomes.
- We ran 2 focus groups and 7 interviews with care leavers.
- We analysed the Department's statistical data on care leavers and outcomes.
- We drew on existing National Audit Office evidence.

Our conclusions

The poor life experiences of too many care leavers are a longstanding problem. Without well-targeted support their deep needs will not be met, with costly consequences both for the young people and for society. While there is a clear legal framework and an inspection regime in place, the system is not working effectively to deliver good outcomes for all care leavers. On the key measure of numbers in employment, education and training the situation has deteriorated since 2007-08.

Central government has, since 2013, renewed its interest in improving the life chances for care leavers through the Care Leaver Strategy and Staying Put. Ofsted's recent work now gives a clear picture of failings in local support and areas that should be addressed. Although it is too early to say how effective these initiatives could be, they both have implementation challenges and are not data-led with clear objectives. Stronger central and local leadership and co-ordination is urgently required to improve the life chances of future care leavers.

Appendix Two

Our evidence base

1 We reached our conclusion on the support available to young people leaving care following our analysis of the data we collected. Our fieldwork took place between March and May 2015.

2 We applied an evaluative framework to consider an optimal system for supporting young people transitioning from care to adulthood. Our audit approach is outlined in Appendix One.

3 We examined whether the support that should be available to care leavers was explained clearly, and whether a framework for overseeing and co-ordinating services for care leavers was in place:

- We **reviewed statutory guidance** issued to local authorities by the Department for Education.
- We **reviewed published policy documents and guidance, evaluations, academic research and other published research** on the support available to care leavers including the *Care Leaver Strategy* and the *One Year On* progress update.
- We **interviewed officials from the Department for Education and 9 other government departments and agencies**. We asked about their objectives and responsibilities towards care leavers, their use of data, and whether they share good practice. We also asked, where applicable, about their progress against objectives in the *Care Leaver Strategy* and the *One Year On progress update*. The 9 departments/agencies were:
 - Cabinet Office;
 - Department for Business, Innovation & Skills;
 - Department for Communities and Local Government;
 - Department for Work & Pensions;
 - Department of Health;
 - Home Office;
 - Ministry of Justice;
 - Office of the Children's Commissioner; and
 - Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

4 We examined the challenges facing care leavers and the information and analysis available on how the system is working:

- We **interviewed stakeholders and academics** to understand the challenges within the system. They included:
 - The Association of Directors of Children's Services – the then-president and its Health, Care and Additional Needs Policy Committee;
 - Dr Claire Baker, independent consultant;
 - Barnardo's;
 - Care Leavers' Association;
 - Children's Services Development Group;
 - Coram Voice;
 - The Local Government Association;
 - National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers;
 - National Children's Bureau;
 - John Short, Leaving Care Training and Consultancy;
 - Professor Mike Stein, University of York; and
 - The Who Cares? Trust.
- We **reviewed existing literature**, including the work of the Education Select Committee and the National Foundation for Educational Research.
- We **analysed Ofsted inspection reports of care leaver services** and interviewed Ofsted officials to better understand the inspection framework for care leaver services.²⁷

²⁷ By end-June 2015 Ofsted had reported on care leaver services in 59 local authorities.

- We carried out **descriptive analysis of financial data from local authorities' Section 251²⁸ and SSSA903²⁹ returns**, calculating our own estimate of the number of care leavers, to look at local authority spend by the number of care leavers and Ofsted rating of service quality. The number of care leavers (aged 16 to 21) is our estimate, based on Department for Education data. The number of care leavers aged 19 to 21 is known, but the number of care leavers aged 16 to 18 is estimated from numbers of children ceasing to be looked after in the current and previous years. In this estimate, we do not account for the eligibility criterion for care leaver services (that is, that a child is looked after for a total of at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday including some time after their 16th birthday).

5 We examined the sharing of good practice:

- We examined **10 case studies** to explore how local authorities met their legal duties for care leavers.³⁰ Case studies varied by the type of local authority and were selected factoring in published figures on:
 - the percentage of care leavers in touch with the local authority;
 - the percentage of care leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET); and
 - the percentage of care leavers in suitable accommodation on 31 March 2014.
- At each local authority we explored its:
 - provision of services for care leavers;
 - view on the clarity of roles and responsibilities for delivery and oversight of care leaver services;
 - use of information; and
 - methods for sharing good practice.
- We also **spoke to 4 additional local authorities** about their care leaver provision. These were: Bath and North-East Somerset District Council, North Yorkshire County Council, the London Borough of Havering and the London Borough of Richmond.

28 Section 251 returns are a requirement of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. Local authorities must submit statements about their planned and actual expenditure on children's social care. Local authorities submit their statements to the Secretary of State for Education.

29 Data on care leavers in England are collected through annual returns from local authorities, known as the SSSA903 return. Data are collected about care leavers' personal characteristics, activity and accommodation.

30 We visited London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, Cambridgeshire County Council, Derbyshire County Council, Royal Borough of Greenwich, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Kent County Council, Middlesbrough Council, Oldham Council, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council, and Telford and Wrekin Council.

6 We investigated whether outcomes for care leavers are improving and what more the government could do:

- We carried out **descriptive analysis** to understand government's progress in improving care leavers' outcomes, including the number of care leavers who are NEET and their educational attainment. The definition of the care leaver cohort changed in 2013-14.
 - Before it was 'all children now aged 19-years-old who were looked after on 1 April 2010 then aged 16-years-old.'
 - Since 2013-14, it has been 'all children aged 19, 20 and 21 looked after for a total of at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday including some time after their 16th birthday'.
- We ran **2 focus groups** and **7 semi-structured interviews** with care leavers to hear their experiences of leaving care. These were hosted by the Care Leavers' Association, Barnardo's and the Who Cares? Trust.
- We **drew on our previous work**, including the *Children in Care* and *Integration across government* reports to draw out the pre-requisites for successful joined-up working.

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