

A review of the 'Local Offer' for Care Leavers:

Findings and implications for social work practice



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Executive Summary

The requirement for English Local Authorities (LAs) to publish a 'Local Offer' outlining services for care leavers was introduced in the Children & Social Work Act 2017. Since then, all LAs have produced and published their Local Offers in consultations with care leavers in their area. However, there has been limited research on the 'Local Offer', particularly since some early evaluations.

Our research looked at a diverse range of LA's Local Offers in order to identify trends and gaps in the current provision of services for care leavers across England. We also evaluated whether the Local Offers were meeting government guidelines in terms of being clear and accessible.

The findings we set out in this briefing demonstrate that:

- LAs are struggling to provide services that adequately address the big challenges currently facing care leavers, including mental ill health, homelessness and building support networks;
- More could be done to ensure that care leavers who move out of their LA area do not lose access to important services and provisions when they leave the area;
- LAs could be much clearer in their 'Local Offers' about what care leavers rights and entitlements are and what services and provisions are offered in addition to statutory requirements;
- There is huge variation in how LAs communicate the Local Offer, including in how detailed, accurate and accessible the Local Offer is;
- Many LAs do not provide the Local Offer in accessible formats and multiple languages, despite government guidance that requires this;
- Some LAs could reduce the use of technical or legalistic language in their Local Offer and find ways to communicate complex categories and entitlements more effectively; and,
- There are some emerging areas of good practice and innovative provision that could be adopted more widely.



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Introduction

The 'Local Offer' for care leavers was introduced in 2017 in England in order to provide young people leaving care with accessible information about all the services and support that are available to them through their Local Authority (LA). This includes services that are a statutory requirement and any additional, discretionary support the LA has chosen to provide. All LA's in England have a statutory responsibility to publish their 'Local Offer' under Section 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The intention of the Local Offer is to provide accessible and transparent information to care leavers on their rights and entitlements and help to standardise provision across LA's, avoiding a 'postcode lottery' in levels of provision¹.



Guidance for LA's on the 'Local Offer' is relatively brief and intentionally avoids being overly-prescriptive.² However, it does set out six key domains which should be covered in the Offer;

- health and well-being
- relationships
- education and training
- employment
- accommodation
- participation in society.

The guidance also stipulates some further key requirements:

- The offer should be accessible, easy to understand and easily available for care leavers.
- A clear distinction should be made between services that the LA is statutorily obliged to provide and those that the LA offers at its own discretion.
- Services offered by LA partner organisations exclusively for care leavers should be included in 'the offer', but more generic services offered by outside agencies should be linked to or signposted rather than included as part of the official offer.
- The Offer should be developed in consultation with care leavers.
- Whilst there is no requirement to review within any particular time-period, the guidance suggests Local Offers should be updated and reviewed every 2-3 years.

Since the requirement to produce a 'Local Offer' for care leavers was enshrined in law, very little research has emerged on the topic. This means we have very little understanding of how LAs are meeting their requirements to produce and publish a 'local offer' and if the guidance is being followed consistently. It is important to understand if and how the publication of 'local offers' improves the information available to care leavers on the support they can receive, especially as a recent Ofsted report found that a third of care leavers they surveyed did not know where they could get support from and many felt they did not know what their rights were.³ The publication of Local Offers for all LA's in England also gives us an opportunity to look across national provision for care

leavers and identify emerging trends and patterns in services, enabling us to identify gaps in support.

This briefing is based on research carried out about the 'Local Offer' for care leavers in early 2023. We conducted a scoping review of 20 published 'Local Offers' from a diverse range of English LAs. We analysed the sample of 20 Local Offers to understand what support is currently available and how that support was communicated to young people via the published information.

This report begins with a review of the literature on care leavers which outlines historic and ongoing concerns about poor outcomes for care experienced people. The literature review also considers significant and emerging issues in research with care leavers and points out the limited amount of research available on the Local Offer since its inception in 2017. Next, a detailed methodology is outlined, including methods for selecting the sample of 20 LA's. We present our findings in two sections. The first section outlines findings on the current support available to care leavers across the six 'domains' Local Offers are required to cover. In this section we also identify additional support that is not within those six domains; including support with finances and aspects of identity development. The second section of the findings explains our analysis of how Local Offers are communicated to care leavers in published online materials. We raise concerns about the variable quality of Local Offers, their accessibility and the language used to communicate offers.

We conclude that whilst the requirement to produce a Local Offer is a positive development, it is not reaching its full potential six years on from its introduction. Whilst many of the issues raised by our review suggest the need for greater action at a national level, there are important implications for practice. We encourage practitioners to get involved with the production, development and maintenance of Local Offers and provide recommendations for how Local Offers could be improved.

Literature review

There has been significant research over a number of decades about care leavers and how they can be best supported to leave LA care and transition to adulthood successfully. The impetus for this research has been poor outcomes for care leavers over many years. Research has identified that 'compressed and accelerated transitions'⁴ to adulthood for care leavers are a fundamental issue and that poor outcomes for care leavers across a number of life domains such as health, education and employment have been persistent. Services and support for care leavers has frequently been considered patchy and inconsistent, creating a 'postcode lottery' in terms of types and quality of support offered⁵.

A number of policy measures have been undertaken to try and address these issues. Access to Local Authority Support has gradually been extended so that care leavers can now receive some support up to the age of 25 if they are still in education, although levels of support are designed to taper off as the young person gets older and is presumed to become increasingly 'independent'. The 'Staying Put' policy provides for young people to stay with foster families post-18 if they can⁶. Compulsory 'Pathway plans' for care leavers should be co-produced by social workers (pre-18) and by 'personal advisors' (post-18) with young people in order to help them achieve their goals and ensure they receive the support they are entitled to⁷. Despite these developments, many care leavers still feel they leave care too early and feel underprepared for independence⁸. Concerns remain about heightened risks for care leavers who are more likely than their peers to be homeless, not in education or employment and have poor mental health⁹.

Recent research has not only highlighted the ongoing struggle to improve outcomes for care leavers but has increased our understanding of what matters most to care leavers themselves. This body of research has drawn attention to the importance of developing a sense of identity in the transition to adulthood¹⁰ and the ways in which the 'care leaver' label can be experienced as stigmatising; leading to

greater risk of behavioural issues and risk taking behaviours¹¹. Research has also begun to surface the importance of positive, consistent and secure relationships and social networks as a protective factor for young people leaving care¹², an insight that was also centred in the government's 2022 Independent Review of Children's Social Care, which suggests that the 'primary objective' of the care system should be to ensure that children in care and leaving care develop lifelong, loving relationships¹³.

In addition to this work, research is beginning to draw attention to the diversity of young people leaving care and their differing needs and experiences. One of the fastest growing groups of care leavers is 'Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People' (UASC)¹⁴. These are young people who arrived in the UK as children (under the age of 18) to seek asylum without the care of a parent or guardian and therefore become 'looked after children'¹⁵. Their needs and experiences when leaving care can be complicated by their immigration status and they face other challenges including increased risk of mental health problems, language barriers, cultural adjustments and racism and discrimination^{16,17}. Research has also considered the particular needs of disabled care leavers and those with special educational needs who are likely to be at even higher risk of becoming 'economically inactive' than their care-experienced peers¹⁸. There is still significant work to be done to



understand more thoroughly the diverse needs of care leavers who face different challenges dependent on their immigration status, race, disability or sexuality.

In 2016 the government set out a new strategy for care leavers, built around the principles of 'corporate parenting', setting out in detail what it meant for the LA to be a 'good parent' and emphasising that the responsibility for ensuring good support for care leavers extended beyond Children's Services Teams to the wider LA and wider society¹⁹. The 'Local Offer' for care leavers and the 'Care Leaver Covenant' were the two key elements of this strategy. The 'Care Leaver Covenant' allows private and public sector bodies (outside of the LA) to pledge support for care leavers by providing training and apprenticeships or discounted goods and services²⁰.

Since these policies were introduced in 2017, very limited attention has been paid to

researching and evaluating their implementation and impact, although many private and public sector organisations have publicised pledges to 'the care leaver covenant'. In terms of the 'Local Offer', an early assessment was conducted by the Catch-22 organisation in 2019, which set out to understand what areas of support were more-or-less common across LA's. Their findings, published when many LAs had recently published their first 'Local Offers' suggested that there was a great deal of variation in the support offered by different LAs, that improvements needed to be made in how accessible and available 'Local Offers' were to young people and that more work needed to be done to ensure that care leavers were aware of the offer²¹. A significant development has been Terry Galloway's work to create a website which allows care leavers to compare provision across LA's and access each LA's 'Local Offer' through one webpage.

Methodology

Our research set out to answer two key questions about the 'Local Offer'

- 1) What patterns, trends and gaps in service provision for care leavers can we identify by reviewing published Local Offers?
- 2) How are LA's communicating their Local Offers to care leavers?
Do they align with government requirements and guidance?
Are there areas where improvements can be made?

In order to answer these questions we reviewed a sample of 20 Local Offers from across the UK. In order to ensure that we looked across a full range of different LA's we created a 'sampling frame' to make sure our selected sample of 20 was as representative as possible of LAs in England. We began by selecting 50 LAs at random. We then gathered the following information on each of the 50 LAs;

- Local Authority type
- Geographical Area
- Numbers of Children in Care
- Ethnic diversity of children in care
- Numbers and percentage of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care
- Ofsted Rating

We then selected the final 20 LAs for the sample in order to ensure that there was balance in the sample based on all these factors. For instance, we ensured that there were equal numbers of LA's rated by Ofsted as Outstanding, Good and Requires Improvement. We ensured that we included an equal number of LAs that had high, medium and low percentages of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in their care. We ensured that the review included LAs from all geographical areas of the LA and all LA types.

Once we had our final sample of 20 LA's, we accessed each of their published Local Offers online. First, we used 'thematic analysis' to look for trends and patterns in

service provision across the 'six domains' that the offer is required to cover. Secondly, we looked for themes and trends in provision offered that did not fall under the six required domains. Finally, we looked at themes in how the Local Offer was communicated, including the accessibility of the published offer, the language used within the 'Offer' and how LAs presented and formatted the information.

Being able to look across the information outlined in the publicly available 'Local Offers' gives us an important 'snapshot' of what services and support for care leavers looks like across England at the current time. However, this method does have limitations. Not all 'Local Offers' are comprehensive and up-to-date so it is possible that some LA provisions have changed. It's also important to note that the methods we have used here do not give us the views of care leavers themselves on either the provisions in the Local Offers or the ways in which they are presented and made accessible. Further research is required to understand more about what care leavers think about the 'Local Offers' that have been produced across England and whether they think that the Offers provide useful, accessible and comprehensive information.



Findings

Patterns and Trends in Service Provision

Our review shows that there is still a great deal of variety in the support provided by LAs, despite the government's aspiration that the Care Leaver Offer would help to standardise support and spread good practice between LAs. There are some examples of positive developments that are emerging across England, but it is unclear whether the adoption of these emerging practices is as a result of the 'Local Offer' or wider campaigning. Strikingly, many of the services and provision set out in Local Offers are not specifically for care leavers and there appears to be a severe lack of specialist services in most LAs, likely due to significant funding constraints. In this section we identify key trends and patterns in provision across the six required domains of the 'Local Offer' as well as identifying areas of provision outside of these domains which were included in 'Local Offers'.

Health and well-being

Specific services for health and wellbeing were generally lacking from Local Offers although some LAs have used the publication of the Local Offer to give general advice on health and well-being to care leavers and many signpost to some generic local services. Most of the 'Local Offers' did set out care leaver entitlements to a 'health passport' (access to their medical information) and the availability of a 'Looked After Children's Nurse' (LAC Nurse). However, most Local Offers did not make clear which care leavers were entitled to access the LAC nurse (e.g. which categories and age ranges) or how young people could contact or access the LAC nurse. Access to information about the provision for 'LAC' nurses is important as care leavers have specific health needs, often related to their life experiences, which can lead to poor health outcomes²². The LAC nurse provides a direct and specialised service for a 'hard to reach' group who may struggle (even more than the general population) to access health services²³. In addition, research in this area demonstrates that the availability and



accessibility of a LAC nurse is valued by care leavers because of the consistency that a designated health care professional can provide, as well as their ability to provide a relationship-based nursing service²⁴.

Some LAs provide significant signposting to local mental health services, but it was not always clear who these services were for or if there were any referral mechanisms available through the LA. A small number of LAs provided no signposting or details of local mental health services at all. There is clearly a lack of specialist services available for care leavers mental health needs. One in eight young people in England experience mental ill health and the prevalence is even higher for care experienced children^{25,26}. We also know that care experienced young people face multiple barriers to accessing mainstream mental health systems²⁷. The lack of specialist support for mental health



and well-being is therefore particularly concerning. However, one LA offered care leavers financial support to access private mental health services and counselling, a potentially positive way forward in a context where public mental health services are very over stretched²⁸, although details on the criteria for receiving this support were not detailed in the offer.

Accommodation

There was variation in the scope and quality of information provided about accommodation options but most LAs did set out the range of options available to care leavers including the 'Staying Put' scheme. Most LAs also made clear the availability of 'setting up home allowances' which the LA are obliged to provide for care leavers setting up their first home independently. However, most of the Local Offers we reviewed had

not updated the information to reflect an uprating of this allowance from April 2023.

Some positive trends in supporting care leavers with housing and accommodation were evident. A number of LAs offered council tax exemptions for care leavers of various rates and up to various ages, although very few LA's offered support with council tax charges for young people who moved out of the LA area, meaning anyone who moves out of the area cannot access that benefit. Similarly, a number of LAs offered their care leavers priority for social housing, but again, their access to this provision was often dependent on them remaining in the same local area after leaving care. The government has recently begun to recognise the issues with care leavers who move out of area accessing provisions under the Local Offer and intends to introduce legislation to remove the 'local connection' requirement for care leavers that move out of area. However, more could be done, particularly in terms of housing and accommodation, to ensure that care leavers who move out of an LA are not disadvantaged or lose crucial access to care leaver provisions.

An area where there was limited mention of support was homelessness. Very few LAs listed any specialist support or advice on homelessness although some did provide signposting to generic services. Only one LA was identified as taking specific action on care leaver homelessness by ensuring that care leavers could not be categorised as 'intentionally homeless' without discussion with the 'Looked After Children' team. Homelessness is a significant issue for care experienced people. Government statistics show that 26% of the homeless population has spent time in care and a third of care leavers become homeless within two years of leaving care^{29, 30}. Government guidance already makes clear that LAs should avoid categorising care leavers as 'intentionally homeless' for both ethical and practical reasons³¹. Given the current issues with homelessness that a disproportionately high number of care experienced young people face, this is a key area where provision of services and information should be urgently improved.

Education, Employment and Training

The majority of specific support in this area is structured around financial support for care leavers in further and higher education. For the majority of LAs this was an area of strength in terms of care leaver support. Whilst details and amounts of financial support did vary, there was consistent financial support across the majority of authorities which frequently included; bursaries for care leavers attending university, apprenticeship bursaries, travel to work/education funds, interview clothing funds, course material funds and vacation accommodation for university students. Most Local Offers also outline financial 'gifts' to celebrate achievements, such as a 'graduation gift'. Whilst support for further and higher education is good across LAs, there is little information on support for postgraduate study. A damaging culture of 'low aspirations' for care leavers has been critiqued for a number of years³², and the Local Offer has an opportunity to demonstrate high aspirations, by setting out support for postgraduate study.

There was less specific support for care leavers on a less academic route, although there was an emergent trend towards offering guaranteed interviews for council jobs and ring-fenced council apprenticeships. Whilst only a minority of LAs currently stated these provisions, others noted that similar initiatives were in development in their area, suggesting this type of action may be a growing positive trend.

Relationships

Provision to support 'relationships' was the least developed area of Local Offers for most LAs. Many did not provide a specific section of their offer on this topic and others provided vague and brief advice on maintaining positive relationships. This is surprising given that research has highlighted the crucial role of relationships and social support systems for improving care leavers outcomes^{33,34}. Recent government policy and reviews have also strongly emphasised the role of supportive and loving relationships. Indeed, the government's

strategy for care leavers sets out a 'mission' to ensure "every care-experienced child and young person will feel they have strong, loving relationships in place" by 2027³⁵.

The government is investing in mentoring, befriending and 'independent visiting' in order to achieve their goals. Our review of 'Local Offers' shows that some LAs do have some of these provisions already, but they are not yet widespread and some studies have shown that just 3.5% of children in care have been matched with an 'independent visitor' and that children from minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to be matched³⁶. More frequently, support is stated as being available to keep in touch with or maintain relationships with family members or 'important' people but further information on this was rarely given. A small number of LA's specifically stated they offered support to access 'Red Cross' family tracing for migrant young people separated from their families.

Some LA's provided signposting to services which could help with healthy relationships, including child sexual exploitation and domestic violence services. Where services were signposted in this way the emphasis was on providing details to these kinds of 'crisis' services rather than on the promotion and development of positive social networks and social activity. Local Offers could be improved and align more coherently with the direction of current policy by paying greater attention to developing and promoting services and provision that focus on relationships. As well as attending to family and peer relationships, the young person's relationship with professionals would also be a useful focus. For example, one LA pledged within the Local Offer to maintain the same social worker for young people throughout their journey of leaving care (wherever possible).

Participation

The domain of 'participation' was an area of strength for many LAs. The majority of LAs had detailed information on how care leavers could get involved with influencing policy and practice on leaving care via forums and advisory boards. The requirement for Local Offers to be produced

in consultation with young people may be a key driving force in these developments, underlining the positive influence that statutory requirements can have.

Many LAs also provided good information and support for care leavers on political participation, by supporting care leavers access identity documents that will allow them to vote.

The development and success of the 'care leaver covenant' also allows LAs to detail ways in which care leavers can participate more broadly in society, for example through discounted access to leisure activities.

Areas outside the six domains

Many LAs have developed a Local Offer which goes beyond the sections outlined in the statutory guidance. Most Local Offers give specific information on finances and money which include entitlements for care leavers specifically as well as information on more generic money issues including Universal Credit, Student Finance and Junior ISA's. This is really positive as a recent Ofsted report highlights how important finance and money concerns are for young people leaving care³⁷.

Some 'Local Offers' also recognise the importance of identity development for young people leaving care during the transition to adulthood. Some LAs included a specific section of their Local Offer on this topic. There were some positive developments, including links to external services and groups for LGBTQ+ young people. However, there was a widespread lack of attention to the specific needs of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, even in LAs with higher levels of ethnic diversity. Acknowledgement of any specific needs for minority ethnic young people was almost entirely absent, with only one LA linking to any specialist BAME service (specialist counselling for BAME and migrant young people). Whilst research on the experience of minority ethnic care leavers is very limited, we do know that minority ethnic care leavers are likely to experience additional hardships as a result of their ethnic identities and have specific cultural needs

that must be taken into account³⁸. However, this is very rarely reflected in the provisions outlined in 'Local Offers'.

Similarly, there is little attention to any provision for care leavers with a disability or special educational needs, although there are separate requirements to produce 'Local Offers' for children with disabilities. Only two LAs did state that they had a separate or enhanced offer for disabled care leavers or care leavers with Special Educational Needs (SEN). However, the remaining LAs did not acknowledge the potentially more complex transitional needs or the specific rights of entitlements of this group of care leavers.

A few LAs have specific sections or advice for UASC. In the main, these sections functioned as a mechanism to explain the vast array of provisions that UASC were not/ may not be entitled to rather than to outline any specific provision of support for UASC. Only one LA detailed discretionary support that they could provide to UASC who had 'no recourse to public funds' due to their immigration status. In some cases, the overall tone of the sections for UASC differed significantly from the rest of the offer. Some LAs used the Local Offer publication offer to warn UASC of the potential for them to be detained and deported.

How LAs communicate their 'local offer'

In this section we address the question of how LAs are communicating their Local Offer to care leavers and whether they are fulfilling their statutory requirements to ensure the offer is accessible. The ways in which Local Offers are presented and how comprehensive the information is varied greatly between Local Authorities. The longest published offer we reviewed was a 35 page colour document whilst the shortest was a one page bullet point list. Most 'Local Offers' fell somewhere between these extremes. Some LAs had invested in engaging and well-maintained webpages. Some were helpfully broken down into different portals for different sections. Others offered only short downloadable pdf documents offering very slight information and no links.

Across the majority of LAs it was not clear when the published offer was last updated. Of the few offers that were dated, the most recently updated was 2022. A high number of the offers reviewed contained broken web links and a small number contained incomplete information (e.g. incomplete sentences). This brings into question the accuracy of the information and the usefulness of incomplete or out of date information for care leavers seeking to understand their rights and entitlements.

Accessibility

In the majority of Local Offers reviewed there were clear issues with accessibility. Only one of the LAs stated they provided the Offer online in multiple languages. In the vast majority of cases, there was no mention that the Offer was available in other languages. This was the case even in LAs which had been identified as having high numbers of migrant children and ethnic minority children leaving care. None of the LAs reviewed gave a clear indication that the Offer was available in any accessible formats for those with any special educational needs such as sight impairments. Many LAs are evidently not meeting the fundamental requirements of the 'Local Offer' set out in government guidance in terms of accessibility.

On a fundamental level, some of the Local Offers could be difficult to locate online. Some links to the Offer were broken or were not locatable via a Google search. Some LAs have chosen to use different titles for their 'Local Offer' (such as 'guide for care leavers' etc) which may also make it more difficult to locate via an internet search. Terry Galloway's 'care leaver offer' webpage collates all the Local Offers in England and provides weblinks to local offers, alongside a checklist of the provisions each Local Offer contains. This is a valuable resource for young people which goes a long way to ensuring that Local Offers are more available for care leavers to find. However, without this resource, many of the Offers would be difficult to locate online.

Language

Some LAs appeared to have made significant efforts to make the information contained in the Local Offers easy to read and engaging, using images and supporting videos. Others provided only Word documents. The language used in some of the Offers was



potentially problematic on two fronts. Firstly, some of the language was complex and legalistic. Legal entitlements for care leavers often are complex and dependent on various conditions and categorisations. Some LAs had made good use of tables to help provide simple visual checklists for entitlements. Other formats were difficult to understand and relied heavily on jargonistic and legalistic terminologies such as 'relevant child' and 'former relevant child'.

A number of offers used the language of 'corporate parenting' to frame their offers. Whilst this reflects current policy language, it occasionally led to inappropriately cold and detached language. For example, stating "as your corporate parent we are legally obliged to...". Whilst it is important that the offer provides clear information about care leavers rights, this type of phrasing may be off-putting and stigmatising for young people³⁹. On occasion, the offers used jargonistic terms that, whilst likely to be used frequently when practitioners communicate with each other, are not necessarily appropriate in communicating directly with young people.

Some LAs use the acronym 'NEET' frequently in their offer. Others used phrases like 'Open to CAMHS' to refer to young people who were receiving support from the Children and Adolescents Mental Health Service. The Catch-22's organisations initial research on the 'Local Offer' in 2019, which included the views of young people, highlighted how problematic this type of language could be and made suggestions for improvement⁴⁰. The findings of our review suggest that this remains an issue four years after their recommendations that LAs urgently review the use of language in their offers.

Rights

A key aim of the care leaver offer was to ensure that care leavers are aware of their legal rights and entitlements. However, many of the Local Offers we reviewed did not provide the required clarity about which provisions were statutory entitlements and which were not. Setting out this detail can be complicated as legal rights and entitlements are dependent on a number of factors. Some LAs had clearly worked hard to present this information clearly but in many the information was potentially confusing. Some LAs relied heavily on qualifying language such as 'you may be entitled to this provision' or directed young people to talk to their Personal Advisor to check their entitlements. Whilst we understand that there are often complexities around entitlements and LAs are likely to be cautious about accidentally providing incorrect information, an overuse of this qualifying language can render the information unhelpful.

However, some LAs were able to deploy the language of rights effectively, using empowering language and emphasising entitlement, advocacy and ensuring care leavers were able to access the support they deserved. However, where LAs emphasised exclusions from entitlements (for instance for some UASC and migrant young people) there were marked changes of tone, shifting from a caring and empathetic language to a frequently punitive tone.



Discussion

Our analysis of 20 'Local Offers' for care leavers demonstrates that there is still limited provision available to tackle some of the most pressing and significant issues facing care leavers. Decades of research has demonstrated that preventing homelessness, building strong supportive relationships and social networks and improving mental health are all really important to care leavers. However, support and provision in these specific areas is frequently lacking from local offers.

However, there is evidence of some positive developments, which could be more widely adopted, including council tax reductions for care leavers, ring fenced apprenticeships and policy measures to prevent care leaver homelessness. Whilst some of these developments rely on the ability of the LA to fund them, others are less resource intensive (for example, a commitment by one LA to learn and respect care leavers pronouns is not costly but demonstrates an important stance on inclusivity and diversity).

Despite a few positive examples, strikingly, there is very limited attention paid to the diversity of care leavers and the fact that they are not a homogenous group. In particular, the lack of attention to race, sexuality and disability is evident. Our review of 'Local Offers' shows that there is some important work ongoing to address this, but significant gaps remain and this should be a priority area to address when LAs review their Local Offers.

Another key area for development is in support for care leavers to develop positive relationships. This has been highlighted as crucial to positive outcomes and is a key element of the government's current strategy. However, our review of Local Offers demonstrates that there is little concrete support for this kind of work. Whilst we know that building strong relationships with a social worker or Personal Advisor is really important, this support is ultimately time-limited and based on access to formal services. Whilst befriending services and independent visiting is sometimes available and additional funding is likely to be made

available from the government for this type of work, we need more creative interventions and solutions in this area.

Importantly, there are clear indications that many LAs are not yet fulfilling the requirements of the Local Offer around ensuring that Local Offers are accessible and available to care leavers. A number of basic provisions, such as ensuring that the offer is available in different languages, are missing from the majority of local offers. One of the core aspirations of the Local Offer was to ensure that care leavers have easy access to comprehensive information on the support and services available to them. On this fundamental aspect of the policy, there is still a significant amount of work to be done, not least to ensure that LAs are not unnecessarily excluding certain groups of care leavers from equal access to important information.

Entitlements for care leavers can be complex and there are certainly challenges to collating and presenting up to date information in easy to comprehend ways. However, too many LAs are producing Local Offers which are confusing, inaccurate and use language which may compound the stigma and dehumanisation that many care leavers experience.

Conclusions

The intention of the Local Offer to produce accurate and comprehensive information for care leavers on their rights and entitlements was an important and positive development. However, the potential of the Local Offer to improve care leavers access to information on the support available to them is not yet being fulfilled. There are significant issues across the full range of LAs in terms of how the offer is communicated and the accuracy and comprehensibility of the information provided. Some good practice and good examples do exist - but these tend to be exceptions to the norm.

The requirement for all LAs in England to produce and publish a Local Offer provides us with a unique snapshot of the support available to care leavers across England at the current time, with the caveat that some Local Offers are not routinely updated. Our review of provision across England demonstrates that there are some emerging positive developments, but these are still not routinely and consistently available - meaning a 'postcode lottery' of provision continues and that hopes that the Local Offer would lead to greater standardisation have not yet come to fruition.

There are some striking areas where support does not seem to adequately meet the significant challenges care leavers face, including support to prevent homelessness, to improve mental health and to understand the diversity of challenges different care leavers face as they transition to adulthood and independence.



Implications for Practice

Whilst the findings here present a clear need to address gaps in support at a national and local policy level, there are also implications for practitioners, particularly those that have the opportunity to be involved with the development, review and maintenance of the Local Offers produced in their area.

- Local Offers should be accessible for all care leavers. It is important to ensure that the offer is available in a variety of formats and languages and that care leavers are aware this is available.
- Attention should be paid to the way in which the Local Offer is presented, particularly avoiding stigmatising or dehumanising language. TACT has produced a terminology guide in collaboration with care leavers which sets out what language care leavers prefer and suggests alternatives to terms like 'NEET'.
- Framing Local Offers around the 'rights' of care leavers leads to a more positive presentation of language and can assist LAs in providing clarity about what support care leavers are legally entitled to and what support is discretionary.
- LAs should use the publication of Local Offers to celebrate and look out for emerging good practice. For this to be successful, Local Offers need to be accurate, detailed and up to date.
- Practitioners can encourage the care leavers they know to get involved with any review of the offer. All Local Offers should be produced in consultation with young people. Make sure you know what opportunities there are for young people to get involved and encourage them to do so.
- The requirement to review Local Offers every two to three years gives an important opportunity for LAs to improve the content and presentation of material. This document provides a useful resource of issues to consider in undertaking this work.



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