



# Supporting care-experienced students into higher education

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# Introduction

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- Access to information
- Supporting open day participation
- Named contacts
- UCAS: 'Ticking the box'
- Support
  - Emotional support
  - Mental health support
  - Academic support



# Prior and current research

- Positive Impact (2018-2020)
- Care-Experienced Graduates Decision-Making, Choices and Destinations Project (2021-2024)

The cover of the report features a white background at the top with logos for Sheffield Hallam University (Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research), the Department of Education, and the University of Oxford. Below these are the logos for the Unite Foundation and StandAlone. The title 'Positive Impact?' is written in a large, bold, purple font. A horizontal bar with a multi-colored, barcode-like pattern separates the title from the subtitle. The subtitle, 'What factors affect access, retention and graduate outcomes for university students with a background of care or family estrangement?', is in a smaller purple font. At the bottom, it states 'A report to the Unite Foundation by' followed by the authors' names: Jacqueline Stevenson, Zoe Baker, Neil Harrison, Becca Bland, Stella Jones-Devitt, Alan Donnelly, Nathaniel Pickering, and Liz Austen. It also mentions support from the STEER project team at Sheffield Hallam University, listing Carolyn Fearn, Caroline Heaton, and Louise Ward.

The cover features a dark background with a blurred image of graduates in caps and gowns. The title 'The Care-Experienced Graduates Decision-Making, Choices and Destinations Project' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font at the bottom. Logos for The British Academy and the University of Oxford are visible in the top right corner.

# Access to information about HE

## Importantly:

- Financial support
  - What can they expect from LA? E.g. holiday bursaries, HE bursary
  - What may they be able to get from HE institutions?
- Access to accommodation
  - Is social housing needed?
  - What HE institutions may offer (365 accommodation, free/discounted accommodation)
  - Private accommodation: Plan who can act as a guarantor.

**Ensuring information is comprehensive and in one place is key.**

# **'I should have been aware of what I was entitled to'**

Over holidays I've been incredibly isolated and/or struggling with money...so I was in my accommodation for the whole duration of the summer, twiddling my thumbs and I didn't have very much money... So I was very poor, very - struggling to eat. I took out a small- it was a student payday loan...I shouldn't have been in that position. I should have been aware of what I was entitled to. (Female, 22)





## Comprehensive and consistent information

I honestly think something as simple as just having a sheet somewhere...that a social worker can easily print out if say a care leaver or someone in care is considering going to university or has applied ...They can send it over an email, but just so that it's there, so you're fully aware and not having to ring around and be like 'Oh I've heard this but I'm not sure'. Just a really simple 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 'this is what you get, this is what you can get' and like I mean who am I to criticise the council, but I feel like it shouldn't be that difficult. (Female, 22)



# Facilitating open day participation

- Institutional visits play a critical role in higher education decision-making (Diamond et al., 2012; HEFCE, 2010).
- Creating school-university partnerships are a helpful way to facilitate this:

‘He (the teacher) organized a trip to (my current university) – he went to (my current university) and studied English literature, and we went to (the university) and all that and it was absolutely amazing’ (Female, 21)

- Helpful and less intimidating if carers, PAs or social worker can attend too.
- Some universities can organise a ‘named contact’ to attend with them.

# What/who is a 'named contact'?

A staff member who acts as a single point of contact allocated to care-experienced and estranged students within the university. They can provide:

- Pre-entry information and support.
- Information on what support the university and (sometimes) what the local authority can provide.
- Help with completing paper work/applications to access support.
- Signposting to university support and services.
- Checking in with students to see how they are.

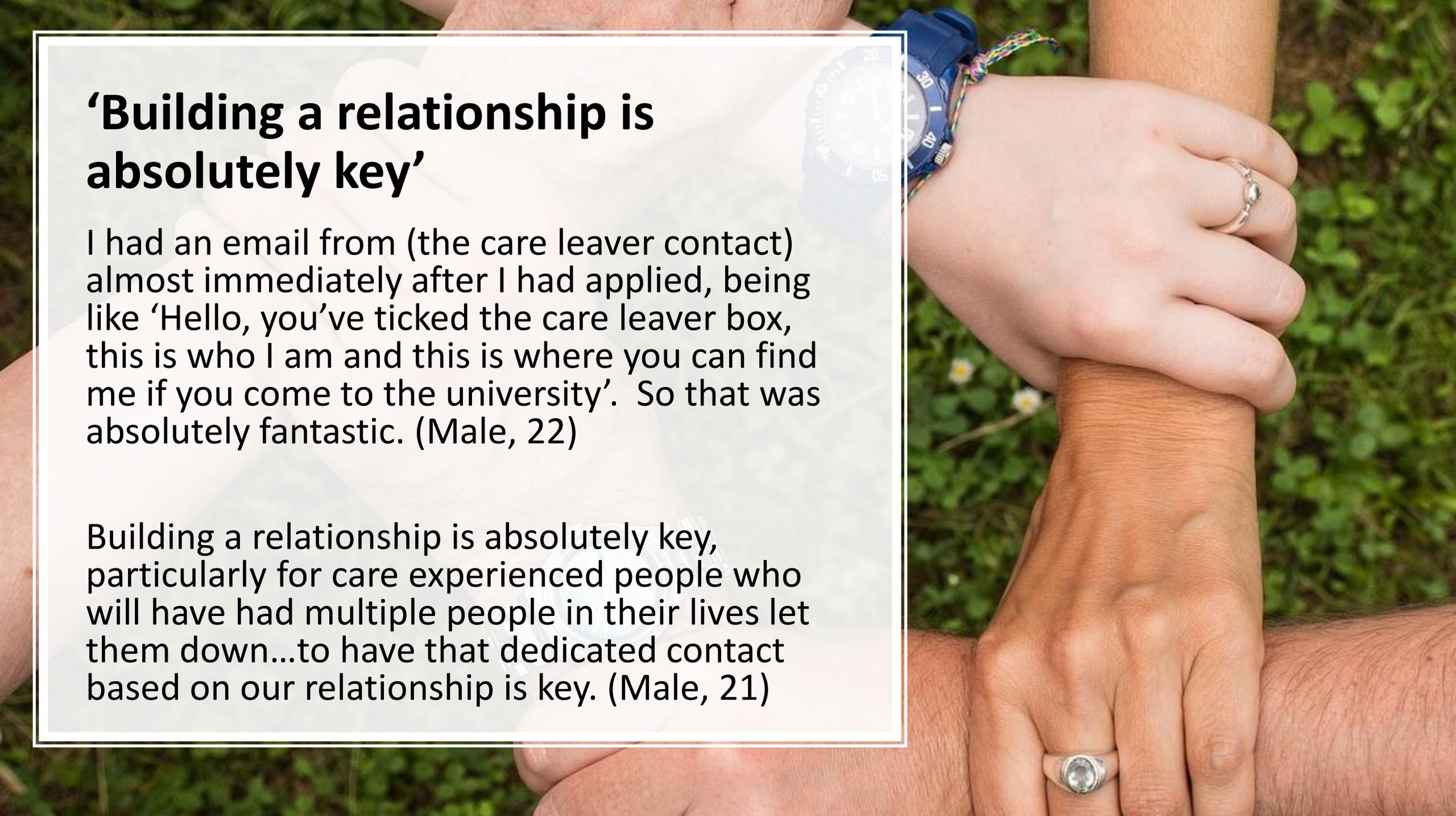
Contact details for named contacts across universities in the UK are available on the [Propel website](https://propel.org.uk) ([propel.org.uk](https://propel.org.uk))



## **‘Building a relationship is absolutely key’**

I had an email from (the care leaver contact) almost immediately after I had applied, being like ‘Hello, you’ve ticked the care leaver box, this is who I am and this is where you can find me if you come to the university’. So that was absolutely fantastic. (Male, 22)

Building a relationship is absolutely key, particularly for care experienced people who will have had multiple people in their lives let them down...to have that dedicated contact based on our relationship is key. (Male, 21)





## UCAS: Ticking the box

- Primary way for universities to identify who needs a named contact, and who is eligible for other forms of support (accommodation support, financial support etc.)
- Not every CE person will tick the box:
  - Concerns about stigma.
  - Uncertainty as to why it is asked.
  - Experiences of institutions and professionals knowing about your life and background.

‘It's definitely a matter of awareness...if you make it clear to people when you're applying through UCAS, look if you have experienced any of these different things... we can access all these benefits’ (Male, 21)

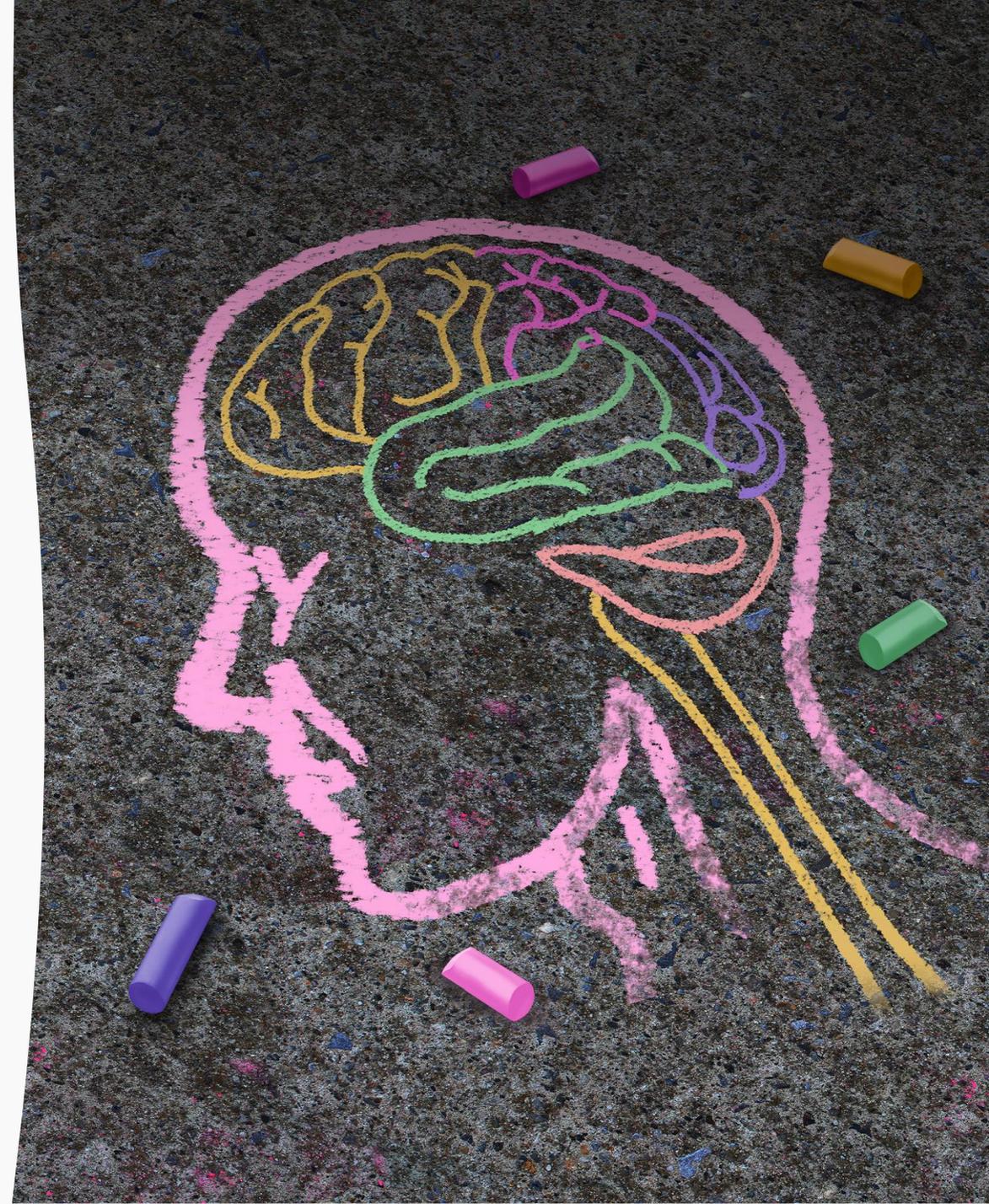
# Retention: The importance of support

Care-experienced students are 38% more likely to withdraw from their studies (Harrison, 2017).

What hinders retention?	What helps retention?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Financial difficulties</li><li>• Mental health issues</li><li>• Isolation</li><li>• Academic challenges</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Financial support (proactive)</li><li>• Emotional support &amp; expressions of care</li><li>• Personal support – friendships, student support services</li></ul>

# Emotional and mental health support at university

- Emotional support from carers, professionals, and the university results in more successful transitions (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2020).
- In cases where therapeutic support is being provided via LA before entry to university, finding ways to continue this provision (even at a distance) is important.
- While universities offer counselling and well-being services, these are often not set up to support long-term or complex mental health conditions.
- Awareness that new MH concerns can emerge at university (due to change, stress, and making sense of care history).





# Academic support at university

- Most universities have ‘academic skills’, ‘learning development’ teams.
- They support students in developing the skills needed to achieve highly on their coursework (academic writing, critical thinking, revision techniques etc.)
- University brings a whole new set of academic expectations and language that has not been encountered in compulsory education.
- *Not* remedial - any one can access.
- Particularly helpful in cases where there has been a lot of educational disruption e.g. through placement moves.
- Making prospective students aware of these services in advance can be helpful; it can help prevent becoming overwhelmed with new academic demands.

# Summary

- Proactive provision of comprehensive information about financial and accommodation support entitlements.
- Supporting prospective students to attend open days and to discuss their choices.
- The Propel website lists what support each university provides for care-experienced students, and includes details of named contacts.
- Advising prospective students that they will have a named contact (and the importance of ticking the UCAS box to receive this).
- Checking in while students are at university and providing emotional support.
- Continuation of MH support – or putting plans in place for new provision.
- Making prospective students aware that there are services within universities which provide academic support (and that it is completely acceptable to use them!)

# References

- Baker, Z. (2022) [The care-experienced graduates' decision-making, choices and destinations project: How does a background of care affect graduate transitions?](#): A literature review. York: University of York.
- Diamond, A., Vorley, T., Roberts, J. and Jones, S. (2012) [Behavioural approaches to understanding student choice.](#) York, The Higher Education Academy.
- Harrison, N. (2017) [Moving on up: Pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education.](#) Bristol: University of the West of England.
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- Stevenson, J., Baker, Z., Harrison, N., Bland, B., Jones-Devitt, S., Donnelly, A., ...Austen, L. (2020) [Positive impact? What factors affect access, retention and graduate outcomes for university students with a background of care or family estrangement?](#) Bristol: The Unite Foundation.