



DEGREES OF SUPPORT

How Care-Experienced Graduates
Navigate the Transition Beyond University

DEFINITIONS

Care leavers are those who have been in the care of their local authority for 13 weeks or more. This period also needs to span their 16th birthday. They are entitled to the support of a Personal Advisor in their local authority until the age of 25.

Care-experienced includes those legally defined as **care leavers**, as well as anyone who has spent any length of time in care but does not meet the legal definition. Those who do not meet the legal definition of 'care-leaver' are not entitled to local authority support.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Care-experienced people overcome significant challenges to enter and complete higher education. These include disrupted schooling, stigma and mental health challenges arising from childhood trauma.

While previous research has led to improved support for *accessing* higher education, little attention has been provided to their graduate transitions until the Care-Experienced Graduates Project (2021-2024).

This qualitative, longitudinal study used repeat interviews and participant diaries to explore how care-experienced graduates navigated life after higher education, examining what supported or hindered their progress, and how their care backgrounds influenced their journeys.



HOPES AND PLANS

I would love to be an academic.
What I really enjoyed over my studies was my dissertation.
I've really, really loved researching.

The plan is to go into research.
I bloody love it. I'm like 'what are we changing today then?'

I want to be able to have the freedom and the independence to use the skills that I have to really help people.

I am excited to step beyond the 'student' label and make a difference where it matters.

I'm excited about the opportunity for better life prospects, being financially better off in the future as opposed to just going pay cheque to pay cheque.

I want stability. I want something that I know is going to financially support me. It's going to make my life a bit easier.

I'm looking forward to working on something that's a *career* rather than just a job.

I want a Masters to be able to progress.

After graduating from university, care-experienced people face challenges in accessing **housing**, finding **employment** and moving onto **postgraduate study**, as barriers linked to their care backgrounds make these harder to obtain.

This comic will demonstrate the differences in care-experienced graduates' transitions out of university and into their graduate lives when support is and isn't provided. It is written using direct quotes from participants in the Care-Experienced Graduates Project¹ to amplify their voices.

Recommendations for local authorities, higher education institutions and employers are presented throughout; these aim to make transitions out of university and into graduate life more equitable for care-experienced people.

1. For some quotes, minor wording changes have been made to provide clarity and context.

HOUSING

I've never really felt at home anywhere.



I moved more than usual between different homes when I was younger.



I feel like it's really important for me now to have my own home.



I applied to the local authority for housing and they rejected me.



So I had to apply to my home local authority.



I'm on the list now, but they said it's probably going to take two years.



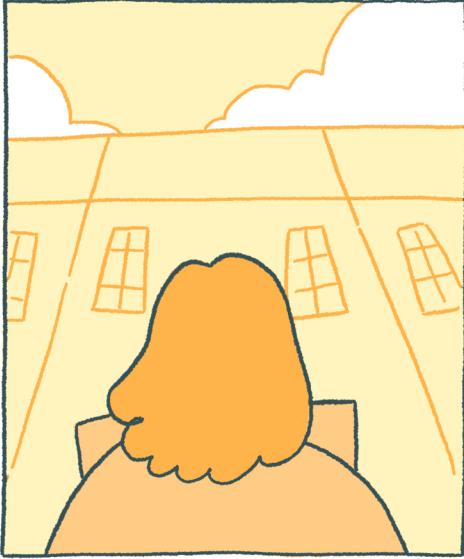
When I tried to rent privately my local authority wouldn't give me a guarantor.



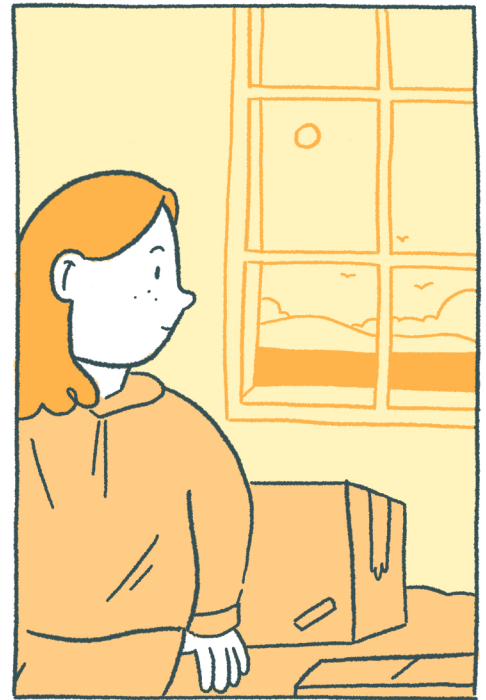
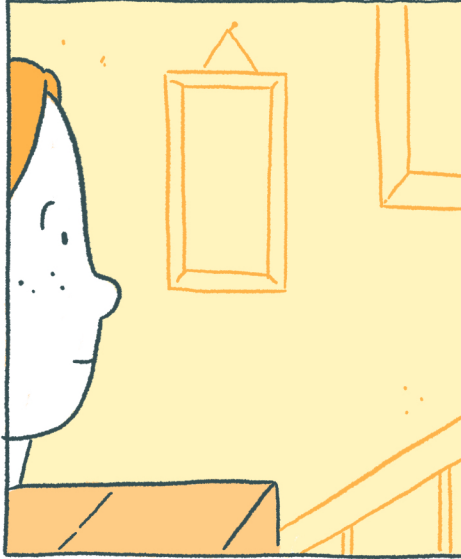
We had to pay four months of rent up front with only one weeks' notice.



I used my graduate bursary that my university gave me to put down a security deposit...



...and to pay the rent.



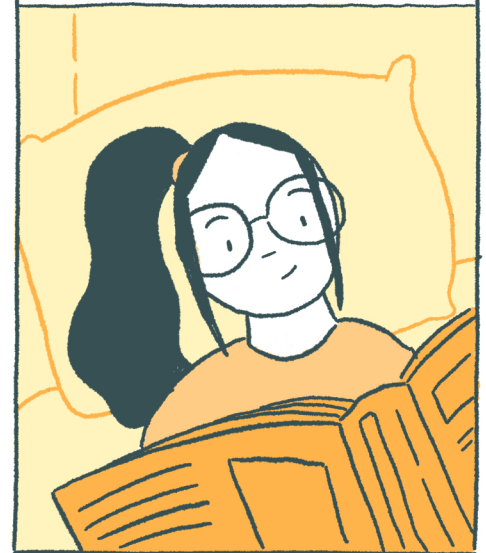
Throughout my undergraduate degree I had support.



The university let me stay in student accommodation until August after I graduated.



They even covered the cost. I'm actually so grateful for how they helped me.



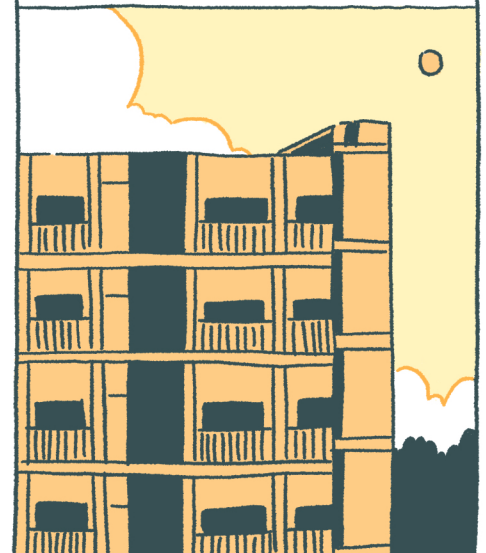
My local authority provided me with social housing.



I wasn't expecting it to happen so quickly.



I'm so grateful and I feel a lot more stable now.

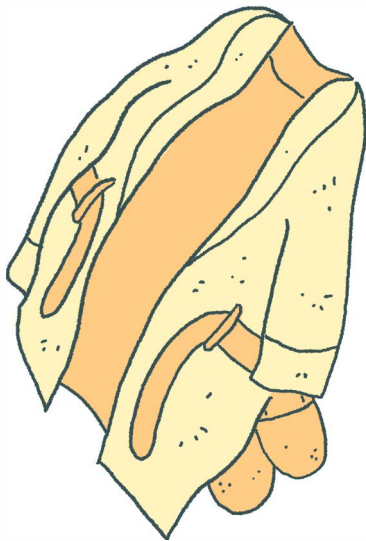


HOUSING RECOMMENDATIONS



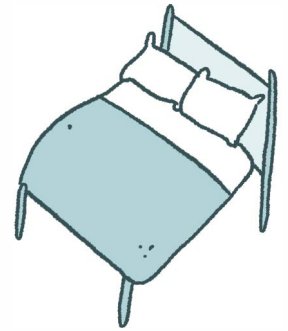
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Higher education institutions should provide **graduation bursaries** as part of their package of support for care-experienced students.



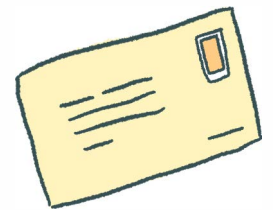
2

Higher education institutions should offer **extended university-owned student accommodation contracts** into the immediate postgraduation period at both the undergraduate and taught postgraduate level to reduce the risk of homelessness.



3

Local authorities should offer **guarantor schemes** to enable care leavers to access privately rented housing following graduation².



2. A small number of local authorities have successfully implemented guarantor schemes (for example Kent County Council and Teignbridge District Council), but this is not consistent across the sector.

EMPLOYMENT

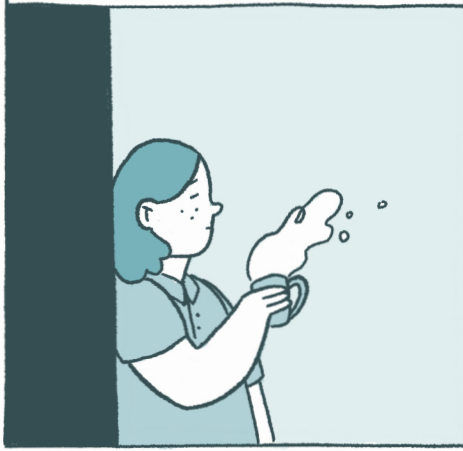
I have to work four part-time casual jobs just to make ends meet.



Other graduates might start a job and if it turns out to be wrong for them they can just go home to their parents.



With me I can't just try something and fail. If it fails then that's my life, that's my home. There's that risk.



As a care-experienced person you can't just walk away.



If a non care-experienced person decided to quit their job and find other work...



...they might have financial support from their families.



My employer says "This is our care-experienced person, look at the opportunity we've given them".



No, I'm here because I've got qualifications and I know what I'm talking about.



It's nothing to do with me being care-experienced.



My workplace is trauma informed, so me and my colleagues all sit down at the end of the day to reflect on how we feel, which is nice.



They have given me access to an Occupational Health Advisor.



They've paid for me to have access to speech-to-text technology...



...and practical support that's helped me do my job well.



My team know about my experiences and know that I am care-experienced.



While I go to them for a lot of things, they come to me as well to ask questions.

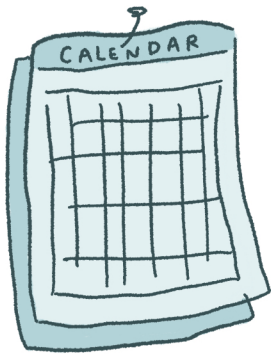


But they're not intrusive.



EMPLOYMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

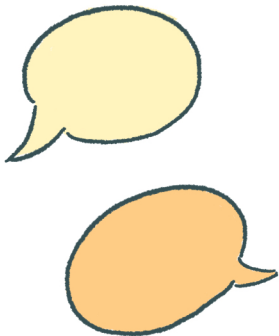
1



Organisations and local authorities who work with employer partners to locate employment opportunities for care-experienced people should **encourage employers to offer a livable wage** that adequately sustains independent living.



2



Organisations should identify and address unconscious bias and stereotypical perceptions by **investing in training on care-experience**³.



3

Organisations should **conduct an assessment of trauma training needs** across management staff to identify areas for development⁴, and address these through the recruitment of a high quality trauma trainer⁵.



4



Organisations should **create a culture that views accommodations and reasonable adjustments as the norm** for employees by incorporating exploratory discussions and the requisite planning for this into the formal onboarding process.



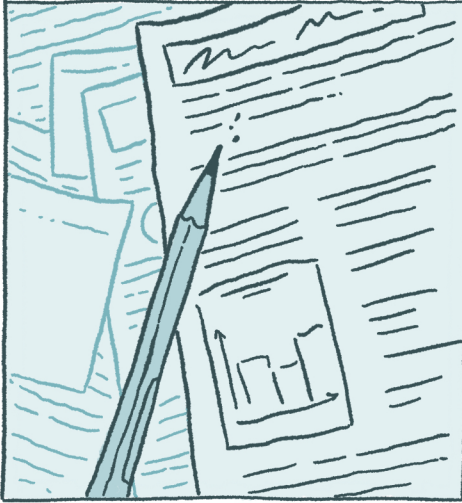
3. The Rees Foundation's 'Caring for care leavers in employment' course is one example of such training.

4. See NHS Education for Scotland (2019:58-65) 'Appendix 1: Trauma training needs assessment and planning: Guidance for managers'.

5. For guidance on locating a high-quality and effective trauma trainer, please see NHS Education for Scotland (2019:30-34).

POSTGRADUATE STUDY

All of my lecturers have said "You should go and do your master's".



I would love to do that...



...but would I be able to afford to live if I was to go off and do a master's?



There's just no support for postgraduates...



...and you can't access the university's hardship fund if you have savings.



But I need savings because I can't just go back to mum and dad when I graduate.



My local authority wouldn't pay for my accommodation.



But they did give me some money towards it, which was the same amount as the average weekly rent in my area for a year.

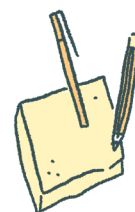


POSTGRADUATE STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

1



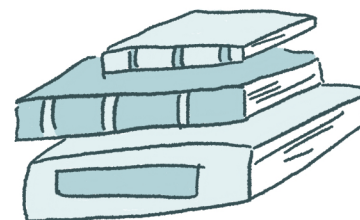
Higher education institutions should **integrate a contextual component to hardship funds** at the taught postgraduate level. This should allow flexibility for care-experienced students when assessing existing financial resources, acknowledging that these protect against more precarious transitions out of postgraduate study in the absence of family support.



2



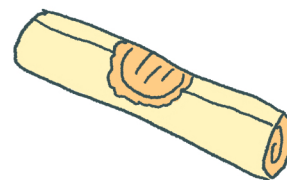
Higher education institutions should **create postgraduate scholarships for care-experienced students** to assist with the cost of living.



3



Local authorities should **clearly state whether support for taught postgraduate students is included** in their local offer. Where such support exists, the local offer should explain what is available and set out a clear process for accessing it.



What happens when your childhood circumstances constrain your opportunities as a university graduate?

This comic follows care-experienced graduates as they navigate the transition out of higher education and into their graduate lives. It reveals the unique challenges they face - despite their higher educational achievements - and contrasts the realities of making this transition with and without appropriate support. Along the way, it offers clear recommendations for local authorities, higher education institutions, and employers on how to make graduate opportunities fairer for those with backgrounds of care.

Dr Zoe Baker has been researching issues of inequality and social justice in higher education for over ten years and has previously received funding from the British Academy, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and the Unite Foundation. Her work seeks to redress inequalities for care-experienced people's access to, progression through, and transitions out of higher education. Outside of her research activities, Zoe volunteers as an Independent Visitor for children and young people in care.

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CREDITS

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