

# Supporting Supporters:

A Practical Tool-kit for Stakeholders Supporting the Journey of Care-Experienced Young People to University





# Contents

<b>1. Introducing the Supporting Supporters project</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. The tool-kit and how it can be used</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. What do we know about how to support the journeys of care leavers into higher education?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4. Activities included in the toolkit:</b>	<b>5</b>
Activity 1: Discussion of Images	6
Activity 2: The 'triangle of support'	7
Activity 3: Mapping the journey to higher education	8
<b>5. Foster carers involved in the project and their perspectives on the 'triangle of support'</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>6. Key messages from the Supporting Supporters project</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Annexes</b>	
<b>A. Resources to support workshop activities:</b>	<b>14</b>
• Triangle template	15
• Selected images	16
• Some possible questions for discussion	17
<b>B. Sources of Information and Support</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Supporting the Supporter Project Team &amp; Contact Details</b>	<b>21</b>

# 1. Introducing the Supporting Supporters project

The **Supporting Supporters** project was funded by the Sussex Learning Network (SLN:COP) and delivered through a collaboration between the University of Sussex Widening Participation (WP) team and staff from the School of Education and Social Work. The underpinning rationale for the project was to ensure improved opportunities for care experienced young people to access Higher Education (HE). It included a series of workshops attended by adults working within the 'triangle of support': foster carers, social care professionals and staff working in a range of educational contexts. Workshop content was designed to extend beyond that typically included in the kinds of general Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions commonly led by WP practitioners in university settings. During the workshops time was spent exploring - from different perspectives – not only opportunities and challenges but first-hand experiences of 'success'. The process facilitated the identification of some key messages around how to (better) support the progression of young people through care and into higher education and beyond. Perhaps unsurprisingly it has also reinforced the value of more holistic, joined up approaches.



## An overview of what we did

- We began the workshops with a short film that explored the transition to university from the perspective of care experienced young people (see Annexe B for full details of this and all other resources)
- We used mind-mapping techniques and images to support discussions that enabled us to better understand how supporters located in different positions contribute to 'the triangle of support' for care experienced young people
- Finally, before producing this guide we undertook some individual interviews with workshop participants to try and get a more in depth understanding of the issues raised.



## 2. Introducing the tool-kit and how it can be used

This tool-kit has been developed out of the workshop sessions led as part of the **Supporting Supporters** project. The primary aim has been to provide a resource that can be used by others involved in supporting the educational trajectories of care-experienced young people. It has been designed to stimulate reflection and discussion but also to enable the identification and sharing of some key messages - and potentially ideas for moving forward. It includes information about activities that can be included when running similar workshop sessions, plus resources that can either be used as they are presented or adapted to fit particular needs. It is likely to be particularly useful to WP practitioners running similar sessions with local stakeholders but it can also be used with discrete professional groups (eg. social work teams) and across a range of professional settings (eg. within teacher education programmes or foster care networks). We hope that you will find reading the following first-hand accounts about the process of developing the tool-kit interesting and that they will encourage you to try using (elements of) the tool-kit, either as part of your conversations within your networks or when incorporating them into more formal CPD.



“Anything that raises people’s aspirations for young people with care experience... has to be applauded. This toolkit will be extremely useful to anybody involved in helping these young people, who wish to go to university, overcome some of the many hurdles they may face on the way. I participated in one of the workshops and would highly recommend them - lots of very practical tips and thought-provoking exercises.”

**Terri Clark, Foster Carer,  
Brighton and Hove**



“I felt honoured to have the opportunity to contribute to this toolkit, appreciating how my insight as a care-experienced university student was sought and valued... I’m hopeful that the journey to university for future care-experienced students might be easier than mine thanks to this toolkit. I would especially highlight the importance of collaboration and regular communication between all those involved in the care and education of the student, together with equal (or, as needed by the student) consideration to emotional, academic, financial and pastoral support (which are all interlinked). Lastly, I will emphasize the need to believe in care-experienced students without expecting them to rise above everything: we need to do away with the stigma whilst still being aware of how vulnerable care-experienced students can be.”



**Emily N'Dombaxe Dola,  
Care-Experienced Student,  
University of Sussex**



“I think this tool kit is a great resource for anyone working with care-experienced young people... I think people find practical advice helpful, but I think some of the most important things people can do to support care-experienced young people are not so easily measured and ticked off. One of these things is to show that you really believe in the young person you’re working with, even if they don’t currently have the best grades or if they don’t believe in themselves. My grades through GCSEs weren’t great but when I went to live with a new foster carer who really believed in me, my grades shot up, my belief in myself grew, and I ended up going to university and completing a Masters. Having someone believe in you really makes a difference!”

**Amber,  
Care-Experienced University  
WP Practitioner**



# 3. What do we know about how to support the journeys of care leavers into higher education?

Care experienced young people are significantly under-represented in higher education internationally, making it all the more important to ensure that they get access to the right kinds of support at the times when it is most needed. While it is hard to give a precise figure for this, research completed by Harrison<sup>1</sup> suggests that this may be as low as 6% compared to 43% of the general population although this may be an underestimate as care leavers tend to have longer and more difficult journeys through the education system.



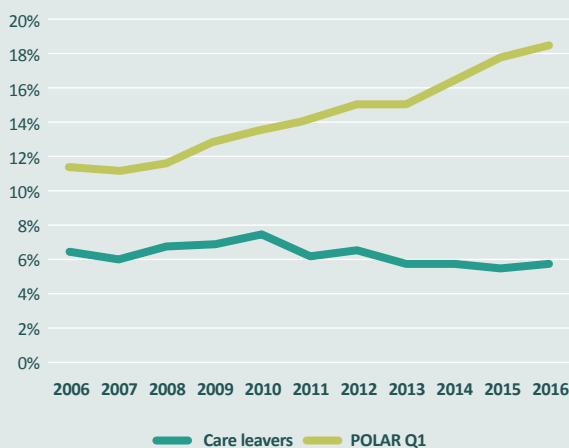
**On average, care-experienced young people achieve significantly lower educational outcomes than their peers. For example, 17.5 percent of children in care achieved GCSE passes in English and mathematics at Grade 4 or above in 2017, compared to 58.9 percent of those not in care.<sup>4</sup>**

However, it is important to remember that care experienced young people can be very successful, even against the odds and that one of the most important factors is the continuing support of a single person. While care leavers tend to take a little longer to get to university, once there they are just as likely to go on and obtain a good degree as their peers.

Previous research suggests that care experienced young people benefit from tailored support including 1:1 coaching from peers. There are many examples of good practice in the English context and some excellent sources of information and support (for more on these see Annexe B). Forms of support that are important include:

- High expectations and recognition of their achievements
- Supporters who will advocate and speak out for them, including when they are being challenged or facing prejudicial treatment
- Access to people who have first-hand insights of university to share
- Support with choosing a course and place of study
- Support with the admissions process, including preparation for interviews and writing a personal statement
- Support with getting back on track if things don't work out as expected eg: in changing their course of study or repeating a year
- Support in managing the practical, financial, social and emotional dimensions of the transition to university
- Supporters who will be a positive influence and continue to believe in and encourage them even when they doubt themselves

**Higher education participation rate for care leavers and other disadvantaged young people:**



Source: Neil Harrison (2016) 'Care leavers and higher education: getting in and getting through.'

In 2017 not a single person leaving care went on to study at university in almost 30 per cent of local authority areas in England<sup>3</sup>. One of the factors contributing to this under-representation is that care leavers tend to leave compulsory education with fewer and lower status qualifications.

<sup>1</sup> Harrison, N. (2017) Moving on up: Pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education. Winchester: National Network for the Education of Care Leavers.  
<sup>2</sup> Harrison, N. (2016) Care leavers and higher education: getting in and getting through. [nnecl.org/file/NNECL-Harrison9.pptx](http://nnecl.org/file/NNECL-Harrison9.pptx)  
<sup>3</sup> Parr, C. (2018) No care leavers go to university from a third of local authorities. <https://www.researchprofessional.com/0/rr/he/student-trends/2018/No-care-leavers-go-to-university-in-30-per-cent-of-areas.html#sthash.eD959ISJ.dpuf>  
<sup>4</sup> Harrison, N. (2019) Patterns of participation in higher education for care-experienced students in England: why has there not been more progress? Studies in Higher Education.

## 4. Activities included in the toolkit

In the following sections we introduce three of the activities that we ran as part of the Supporting Supporters project workshops:



An exercise involving thoughts about care experience, stimulated by selected images



A group activity involving the construction and then discussion of the 'triangle of support'



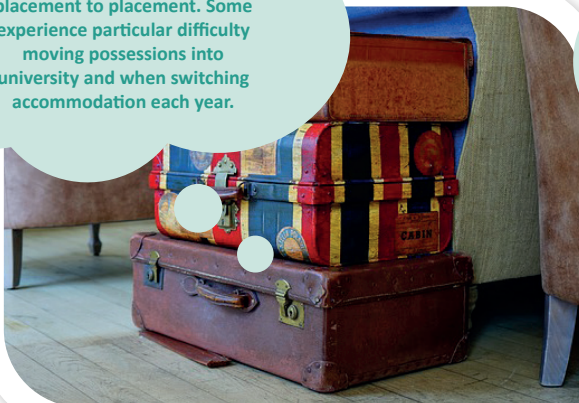
A visual mapping of a care experienced young person's journey, from Early Years to university and beyond

We hope that you will enjoy reading more about these activities in the following sections and find them readily adaptable to your own particular contexts and purposes.

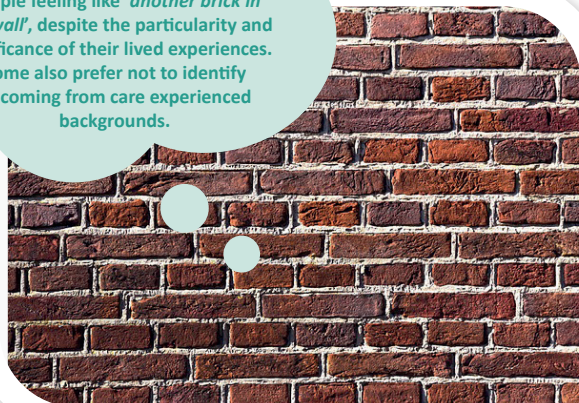
# Activity 1: Reflecting on images

One of the workshops involved small groups of participants discussing a selection of images. They were left free to select those they wished to talk about and to interpret them as they thought best. What follows below are simply some of the thoughts that were in our minds when selecting images for inclusion in this activity.

Care experienced young people may suffer from a lack of permanence – moving from placement to placement. Some experience particular difficulty moving possessions into university and when switching accommodation each year.



Universities can be large and quite impersonal spaces, leaving young people feeling like *'another brick in the wall'*, despite the particularity and significance of their lived experiences. Some also prefer not to identify as coming from care experienced backgrounds.



Care experienced young people are no different from their peers in having interesting lives in currently unthought of places ahead of them. Some may benefit from help envisaging these opportunities and working through how to get there.



Beautiful things can flourish even in the most unexpected and seemingly inhospitable places. We can always be surprised.



## How to run this activity

All you need to do is provide a selection of images on separate cards. Ask participants to choose one and to take turns discussing what it brings to mind for them in relation to care experienced young people and their journeys to HE.

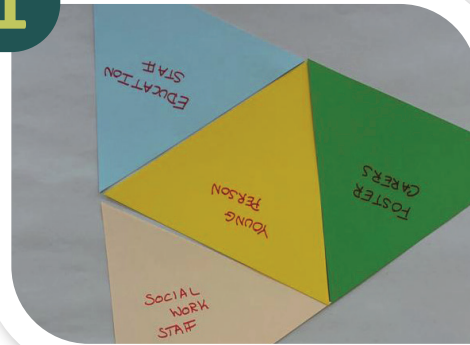


# Activity 2: The 'triangle of support'

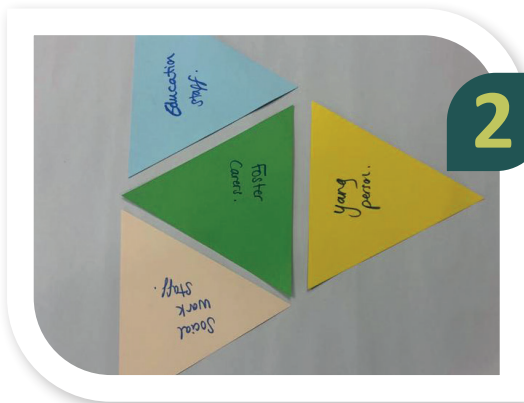
The Supporting Supporters project brought together foster carers, education staff and social care professionals. One activity involved them working in groups to arrange four triangles in the way that they felt best represented how these different groups were working together to support care experienced young people on their journey into higher education. The groups elected to organise the triangles in different ways, highlighting different perspectives on how support is currently (not) working.

In **Version 1** the triangle representing the young person has been placed at the centre of the triangle, reflecting the group's belief in the importance of adopting a person-centred approach.

1

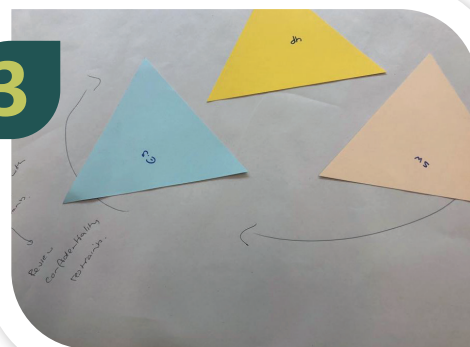


2



In **Version 2** the three groups of stakeholders have been placed across the bottom of the triangle and the young person at the top, reflecting the group's belief that the role of the stakeholders is to work together to provide a strong foundation for the young person. The foster carer has also been placed directly underneath the young person because they were considered to be the most central element in this foundation.

3



The group who produced **Version 3** felt that the triangles could not really be incorporated into a single triangle as the different stakeholders were not yet working together closely enough. They reflected this separation by maintaining the separateness of each of the four triangles.

## How to run this activity

Cut out some different coloured triangles and ask the group to organise them in the way they think best represents the relationships between the three groups. It's important to let the group write on the triangles so that you do not suggest which way up they go or impose the structure! When they have finished, ask them to feedback on how they decided this and discuss any differences.





# 5. Foster carers involved in the project and their perspectives on the ‘triangle of support’?

The Supporting Supporters project also involved us interviewing some foster carers. These interviews highlighted the importance of ensuring that everyone involved in the ‘triangle of support’ has a sound understanding of how to make these roles work together in the interests of the young person. In particular, there seemed to be a need for other professionals to better understand how communication, trust and co-operation can feed into improved opportunities for care experienced young people to realise their potential. Yet like any other parent, foster carers will themselves have had varied educational experiences, contributing to different knowledge bases and potentially anxieties and gaps in understanding around HE.

The foster carers we interviewed also had quite varied experiences of supporting care experienced young people into HE. These illuminated the importance of individual commitment, especially when systems appeared impersonal and uncaring. One of the key concerns was a perceived need to challenge low expectations.



## Extracts from the interviews

### Being an advocate

**‘I think in terms of education, the biggest thing that I’ve been disappointed by when I became a foster carer... [was] when I went to the school and presented myself as this foster carer looking after this really troubled kid with a really troubled upbringing. I thought that support would come freely and openly.’**

### Equipping all foster carers to envisage positive futures

**‘What is not typical of all foster carers is to look at the future. And that even though somebody might not be attaining this month or this year, that isn’t to say they won’t be, and that they’re not capable of that. It’s just that life’s a bit complicated right now.’**

### Addressing experiences of care in initial teacher education

**I feel like... it should almost be compulsory that teachers learn about... looked-after children. And form an understanding before they actually go into teaching because I don’t think that teachers realise what an impact they have on the children at school.’**

.....

### Challenging the underestimation of potential

‘When the child moved to a new school, he came home a few days later and I asked him what sets are you in? And he said they put me in bottom set for everything because of my behaviour at my previous school. And I said did you not get a test? No. What sets were you in previously? And then that prompted me to write an email every day until he got a test. And this is now a child who’s done the higher paper in maths, who’s done the higher paper for science, and is probably going to get a B for English’

.....

### From caring individuals to caring systems

‘One of the things I’ve learnt during the whole social worker involvement, you are very much dependent on which social worker you have. So, you’ll have a social worker, or teacher, the same goes for teachers, for social workers, for anybody who thinks actually, you can do it, and they’ll give them a push. Then you’ll get the others. Well, they say they’re happy, they’re not being abused, that’s enough.’

.....

### Supporting readiness to learn

‘I think it’s got to be done completely individually and sometimes you’ve got to go right back to basics and do all that stress regulation and everything you can to actually get them in the position that they can learn. Because there’s a lot of these young people that have the intelligence, but maybe are not in an emotional state to learn. And if you’re not regulated, you can’t learn. It doesn’t matter how intelligent you are.’

.....

### Nurturing self-belief

‘So I don’t think teachers fully appreciate the lives of these children. And I think that if they had even a snippet of an insight, that they would be much better teachers. Because it’s not just maths, English, geography and science that they’re learning at school; they’re learning about self-belief. They’re learning about becoming an individual, social, just everything.’

.....

### Sending out the message that it can be done!

‘It’s quite rare to find children who’ve actually gone on to university. And there’s this expectation that they’re not going to get there. So, I feel a lot more could be done within schools about, actually you can do this. Just because you’ve been in care, yes, you’ve had difficult times etcetera, but actually you can do it. And I think lots of people think, oh well they’re in care so they won’t go on to university, but actually, with the support, you feel that they can.’

.....

### Normalising higher education as a possible destination

‘We’ve got a map in the house and it’s got pins in where different people [in the family including previous foster children] have gone to. And so that idea comes up in itself, doesn’t it. So we’ve mentioned that and it was a uni and everything, and it was so they can see that it is possible.’



.....

## How to run this activity

.....

You might like to copy these extracts and ask group members to discuss them. They might like to use them to think about:

1. The different forms of support that might be needed and who is best to be placed to deliver it
2. Identify the continuing challenges and reflect on what might be done to mitigate them


# 6. Key messages from the Supporting Supporters project

Conversations with care experienced students and stakeholders involved in supporting them that took place during the course of these workshops strongly suggested that there is no one single action - or tick-list of actions - that will provide the whole answer in terms of supporting a care-experienced young person's progression to university. What we have brought together below are a number of key messages around what good support around this important agenda might entail.



**1** Adopt a **life cycle approach** that includes talking about university at an earlier age, including clearly discussing pathways and destinations throughout their educational journey, whether or not it is part of their current thinking or trajectory. This might include offering mentoring, coaching or access to role models but also simply 'keeping in touch', recognising that care experienced young people may enter university later than their peers.


**2** Ensure that **assessments of academic suitability take account of accrued underachievement** and are informed by an awareness that childhood trauma and instability may have long term and hidden effects. This might include HEIs offering contextualised admissions, but also working with a young person to explore their options based on fairer and more holistic understandings of their potential, ensuring that they are able to grow beyond their current levels of achievement.



**3** Promote **collaborative approaches** that build trust across role boundaries and strengthen communication practices and teamwork. This might involve setting up, or joining existing, working groups or local networks, bringing together representatives from all stakeholder groups to discuss challenges and opportunities to support the young people in their care.

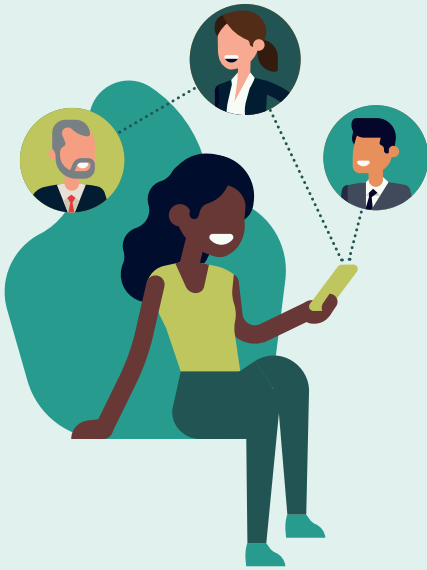


**4** Avoid making assumptions (for example that everyone knows what UCAS is) and **ensure that sources of support and information are well signposted**. Web-based advice and guidance should be easy to find and navigate and details of any support packages should be clearly communicated. Staff in university WP teams might also wish to consider offering short (on-line) courses to key supporters covering such things as pathways, timelines and terminology for example.



**5**

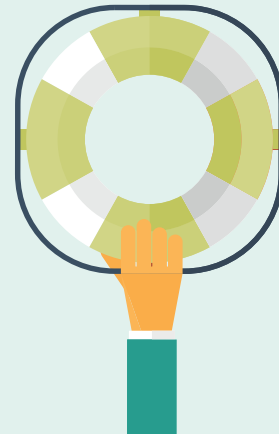
**Facilitate dialogue between care experienced young people, their key supporters and staff in universities** in order to ensure ready access to tailored advice and guidance when needed. With regards to outreach by universities this may involve developing positive working relationships with local virtual schools and providing bespoke opportunities where possible and appropriate. It should also include ensuring that they are included rather than overlooked when it comes to other forms of targeted outreach.

**8**

**Be proactive in anticipating the material and practical challenges** that care experienced young people face when making the transition to university, removing the need for them to self-identify need in order to access support. This might include such things as ensuring they are offered practical support to assist them when moving in/moving out, or between rooms, rather than having to request this.

**9**

**Recognise that support encompasses practical life skills** such as opening a bank account as well as emotional and academic support such as coping with exam stress, ensuring that there are back up plans in place, and making provision for out-of-hours and vacation support.

**6**

**Involve care-experienced students or colleagues** in the planning and delivery of new initiatives and outreach activities, ensuring that support is developed in the light of insights and experiences that might otherwise be unrecognised or overlooked.

**7**

**Promote understandings of support as an entitlement**, reducing the risk of stigma or undisclosed needs. This follows discussions which suggest young people are often reluctant to ask for help, may not know they are entitled to it, or even to recognise that they are facing unique challenges.

**10**

Promote **personalised and holistic approaches** that recognise the young person as more than 'a job.' Often the key is one strong relationship within their network – a foster carer, social worker or a teacher - someone who knows and understands them, and who can be a champion for them, offering an unwavering encouragement and belief in their ability to achieve.



**We hope you have found this resource useful and insightful. We would be delighted to receive any feedback, or information on how you have used the toolkit or the resources enclosed. Please see the back cover of this document for our contact details.**

# Annexe A

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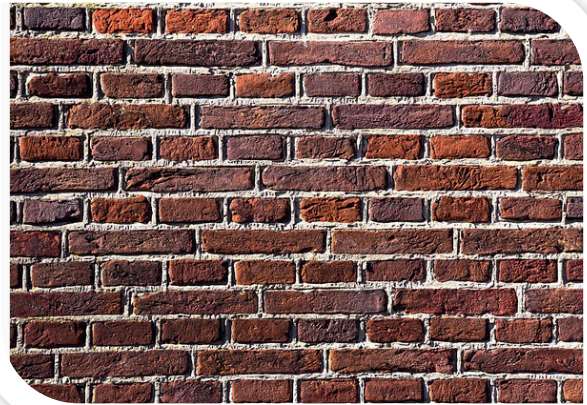
## Resources to support workshop activities



# i Triangle template



## ii Some images found on pixabay to get you started



## iii Some questions that could be used to stimulate discussion

- ? What is your experience of supporting care experienced young people in their journeys through education?
- ? What kinds of gaps in knowledge and/or experience might be limiting when it comes to supporting care experienced young people's educational progression? How might these gaps be addressed?
- ? Where might someone go for information or support if interested in accessing additional support for a care experienced young person thinking of progressing to university?
- ? What could be done to make it easier to support people involved in supporting the educational progression of care experienced young people?
- ? How closely do stakeholders work when it comes to supporting care experienced young people interested in progressing to higher education? What more might need to be done to promote collaboration and understanding?
- ? Can you describe in an anonymised way, a time when support for the educational progression of a care experienced young person has worked well? Can you identify what it was that made this success possible?



# Annexe B

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## Sources of information and support

# Sources of information and support

## Become

[www.becomecharity.org.uk/](http://www.becomecharity.org.uk/)

Become is a charity and source of information and advice for children in care and young care leavers. They also run the Propel website (details below).

## Brightside

[brightside.org.uk/work-with-us/](http://brightside.org.uk/work-with-us/)

Brightside offer online mentoring programmes to support young people in making confident and informed decisions about their future.

## Barnados

[www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-young-people/leaving-care](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-young-people/leaving-care)

Along with fostering and adoption services, Barnados offer services to support young people leaving care.

## Coram Voice

[www.coramvoice.org.uk/voices-2018](http://www.coramvoice.org.uk/voices-2018)

A source of information and advice, and advocacy for young people, including care leavers.

## National Care Leaver Association (CLA)

[www.careleavers.com](http://www.careleavers.com)

The CLA is a user-led charity run by care leavers for care leavers.

## NNECL (National Network for the Education of Care Leavers)

[www.nnecl.org/](http://www.nnecl.org/)

NNECL is a national charity that aims to bring key supporters of care leavers together, to network, share good practice and drive the care leaver agenda nationally through effective collaboration.

## Propel

[propel.org.uk/UK/](http://propel.org.uk/UK/)

A central point for information about the support that FE colleges, universities or HEI's (Higher Education Institutions) offer to care-experienced students, both financial and pastoral.

## Prospects

[www.prospects.ac.uk/](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/)

A website focusing on careers and pathways, including job profiles, careers advice and study options.

## UCAS

[www.ucas.com/advisers/toolkits/supporting-care-leavers-toolkit](http://www.ucas.com/advisers/toolkits/supporting-care-leavers-toolkit)

UCAS is the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. Prospective students submit their applications for university here and they can also find a wealth of information available about support for care leavers, university courses across the UK and video tutorials on the university application process.

## Unite Foundation

[www.unitefoundation.co.uk/get-a-scholarship/](http://www.unitefoundation.co.uk/get-a-scholarship/)

Offers University accommodation scholarships in cities across the UK.



# Acknowledgements

**This project was funded by the Sussex Learning Network, National Collaborative Outreach Programme. We are grateful to the whole team, including Debra Vice-Holt, for sharing our interest and supporting us in exploring these topics through a collaborative, workshop based approach.**

**We would also like to thank artist Michi Mathias for working with us to co-create the visual mapping included in this toolkit and GB:Met - particularly Rosie Jones - for supporting the delivery of the workshops.**

**Finally, we would like to thank all the foster carers, social workers, local authority professionals, teachers and school staff, and care-experienced university students who attended the workshops, contributed to the discussions and offered such expert insights into the support that is needed to help us move this agenda forward together.**

# Supporting the Supporters Project Team Members



If you would like to find out more about the Supporting Supporters tool-kit please contact:



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Senior Lecturer in Education  
[l.h.gazeley@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:l.h.gazeley@sussex.ac.uk)



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This project was funded by the Sussex Learning Network Uni Connect Programme.

Uni Connect is funded by the Office for Students. It is a national network of hubs across England which offer impartial advice, guidance and activities on the benefits and realities of higher education in college and university. It aims to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.

The OfS Uni Connect Programme in Sussex is delivered by the Sussex Learning Network, a strategic educational partnership that develops new opportunities for everyone to participate in and progress through higher level education.

For more information please visit our website at [www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk](http://www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk)