

# The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers' well-being

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## Executive summary

It is crucial that we listen to and understand the experiences of care leavers at all times, but especially in challenging times. Responding to young people's views and experiences respects their rights, acknowledges their expertise, and is the foundation of high-quality services. But local authorities can struggle to engage a wide range of young people. Even where participation in a local authority is strong, often only a minority of young people inform service development. The *Your Life Beyond Care* survey (part of the Bright Spots programme) has been running since 2017 and offers local authorities the opportunity to hear from more of their young people and in a more systematic way than ever before.

This report is a follow up to our ['What Makes Life Good?'](#) report published in 2020 about the views of care leavers on their well-being, using pre-pandemic data collected between 2017 and 2019 through the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey. In this follow-up report, we compare the 'What Makes Life Good?' pre-pandemic data from 1,804 care leavers to data from 2,476 care leavers in 2020 to 2021, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has allowed us to identify priority areas that have emerged recently. We asked care leavers aged 16 to 25 the same questions at both time points; about their living arrangements and safety, financial well-being, relationship with care workers, emotional support, stress, loneliness, overall well-being, and more.

Our data shows that care leavers have been exceptionally resilient during the pandemic, as have local authorities and practitioners whose efforts should be recognised and praised. The analysis found that measures of care leavers' stress and anxiety levels and loneliness have remained stable since the pandemic began, as well as optimism about the future. In some areas, the data actually shows small improvements during Covid times, such as for feeling safe in the home, and financial well-being, where 60% of care leavers felt that they were coping financially, compared to 56% pre-pandemic. This may be a result of the financial support that was put in place during the pandemic such as the increase in Universal Credit and additional support from local authorities.

Despite social distancing, our findings showed care leavers still had emotional support in the pandemic and just 5% didn't have anyone for support, which remains similar to pre-pandemic (6%). Similarly, care leavers are almost as likely to know who their leaving care worker is and slightly more likely to have a stable worker than they did pre-pandemic. A slightly higher proportion also felt that their leaving care workers provided them with emotional support than pre-pandemic (50% pre-pandemic compared to 47% in 2020-21), and digital connectedness continued to grow during the pandemic.

However, the pandemic highlighted some areas for concern. Young people have been particularly impacted by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. In 2020-21 we saw that those in more precarious living situations such as those who are homeless or in custody found it harder to get in touch with their leaving care worker all or most of the time compared to pre-pandemic (though sample sizes were small, fewer than 30, for these groups). Support networks are key in helping care leavers transition to adulthood and are more necessary than ever. However, feeling involved in pathway planning fell slightly from 62% reporting they felt involved pre-pandemic to 59% in 2020-21, which may be due to social distancing constraints.

It's important to note that although our data does not show dramatic differences to pre-pandemic times, there were already gaps in how well the care system supported care leavers before the

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pandemic which still need to be addressed. Our previous work showed that, even before the pandemic, care leavers have disproportionately worse mental health and well-being, suffer from loneliness and isolation, and struggle more financially than young people in the general population. Gaps in support are exacerbated if care leavers have long-term disabilities or health conditions or have especially unstable living situations, which again is still the case in 2020-21. Therefore, recovery planning should not aim to see a return to the pre-pandemic care leaver system. It should instead focus on maintaining some of the positive interventions prompted by the pandemic, while also looking to address long-standing concerns with care leavers' health and well-being, supporting them to manage the challenges that all young people face as a result of the pandemic.

### Summary of findings

|   | <b>Pre-pandemic survey (2017-2019)</b><br>1,804 care leavers | <b>Covid survey (2020-21)</b><br>2,476 care leavers |
|---|--|---|
| Always feel safe in their home  | 64%  | 67%   |
| Is where you live now right for you? Mainly yes                         | 68%  | 69%   |
| Could access the internet from their home                               | 83%  | 90%   |
| Had a smart phone   | 91%  | 95%   |
| Coping financially (living comfortably + doing alright)                 | 56%  | 60%   |
| Know who their leaving care worker is                                   | 93%  | 92%   |
| Had the same leaving care worker for the last 12 months                 | 60%  | 61%   |
| Feel able to get in touch with leaving care worker all/most of the time | 71%  | 72%   |
| Trusted leaving care worker all or most of the time                     | 78%  | 80%   |
| Feel involved in pathway planning all or most of the time               | 62%  | 59%   |
| Felt friends gave emotional support                                     | 61%  | 68%   |
| Felt lonely always or often   | 22%  | 21%   |
| High or moderate levels of positivity about the future                  | 80%  | 79%   |
| Low scores on how happy you felt yesterday                              | 26%  | 26%   |
| Low scores on life satisfaction   | 26%  | 27%   |
| Low scores on feeling the things you do in life are worthwhile          | 23%  | 24%   |
| High scores on how anxious you felt yesterday                           | 34%  | 35%   |

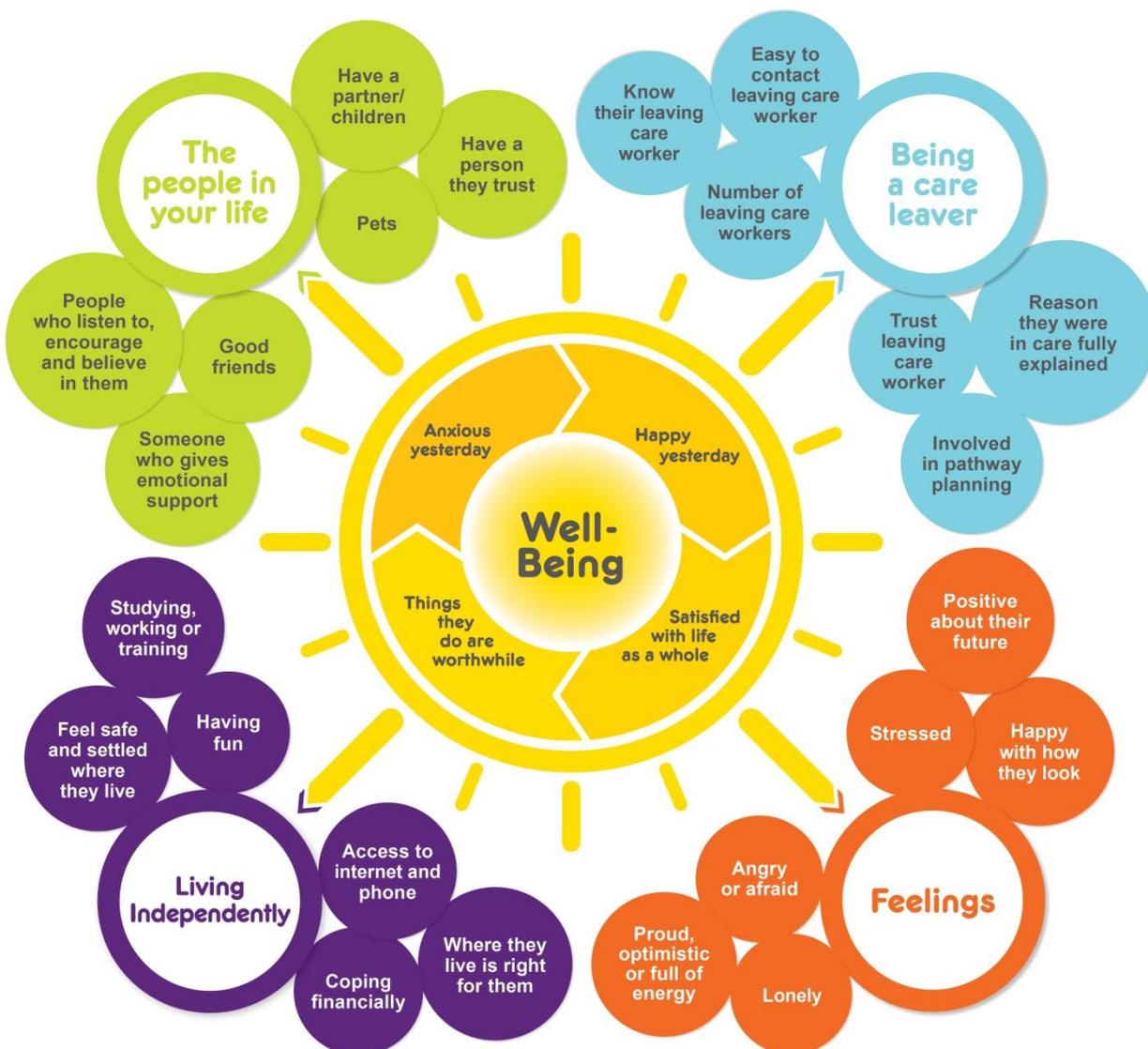
## Introduction

### Background

The *Your Life Beyond Care* survey collects the views and experiences of the care leavers as part of the Bright Spots programme. The Bright Spots Programme is a partnership between Coram Voice and the University of Oxford, funded by the Hadley Trust. It supports local authorities to systematically listen to their children in care and care leavers, about the things that are important to them.

The survey was co-produced with care leavers to reflect what they felt made their lives good. The Bright Spots well-being indicators that were identified by care leavers formed the questions asked in the survey to explore care leavers' subjective well-being. The surveys also include some core well-being measures that are used in other national surveys, so that we can compare care leavers' well-being to young people in the general population.

**Figure 1: Your Life Beyond Care, Bright Spots well-being indicators**



### Purpose of this report

In 2020, we published [What Makes Life Good?](#) a report about the views of care leavers on their well-being, using data collected between 2017 and 2019 from our *Your Life Beyond Care* survey. In this follow up report, we assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers' responses to the same survey questions, in order to identify how the past year and a half may have impacted on care leavers and the implications for policy and practice.

Throughout this report, we compare data collected in 2020 and 2021 (during the Covid-19 pandemic) to pre-pandemic *What Makes Life Good* data, collected between 2017 and 2019. We analysed a total of 4,280 care leaver responses, 1,804 collected in 2017 to 2019 and 2,476 collected in 2020 and 2021.

### What do we already know about the impact of Covid-19 on care leavers?

In March 2020, England went into national lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The restrictions imposed on the country in terms of social distancing and the 'Stay at Home' message, meant everyone had to adjust to a new reality. There was a huge demand on support services, especially for children and young people. A survey of more than 1,700 youth organisations found that 66% had seen a rise in demand for their services ([UK Youth, 2021](#)).

From research conducted throughout the pandemic by [ONS \(2020b\)](#), it is clear that Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the general population of young people in the UK. In May 2020 more 16 to 29 year olds (66%) reported that their well-being was being affected by the pandemic than 60+ year olds (49%). 16 to 29 year olds' relationships have also been affected more than over 60s (35% and 21% respectively). Those aged 16 to 29 were also more likely to spend time alone and feel stressed, bored or lonely compared to older age groups. Their work and education has been severely impacted, with 84% reporting a reduced income and 24% struggling to pay bills, again much higher compared to older people.

Among certain groups the pandemic has exacerbated existing disparities. This is particularly the case for care leavers. Care leavers are young adults who have spent some of their childhood in the care of a local authority, mostly in foster care or in a children's home ([Briheim-Crookall et al, 2020](#)). Over 13,300 young people aged 16 or over left care in 2020-21 ([Department for Education, 2021b](#)), transitioning to adult life. Care leavers often have complex, diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, and may experience the pandemic differently to the general population of young people.

In respect of the Covid-19 pandemic, specific guidance and support for young care leavers was outlined by the [Department for Education \(2021c\)](#), and highlighted the responsibilities of managers and staff in open and secure children's residential homes, social workers, foster carers and local authorities. The government guidance stated that local authorities should take account of Covid-19 when making decisions about leaving care, and to ensure that no one had to leave care during this period. It was also outlined that this same principle should be applied in respect of young people in Staying Put arrangements and those due to make a planned move to new accommodation. Moves were to be permitted if this was what the young person wanted and the setting was safe in relation to Covid-19. The guidance also recommended that local authorities consider putting additional financial support measures in place such as using additional government funding for discretionary

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payments to cover food, utilities and rent if care leavers were struggling financially. These discretionary payments could be authorised and paid at short notice if necessary.

The guidance for leaving care personal advisers included:

- contacting care leavers during the pandemic, including those over 21 who are eligible for support up to age 25, but who were not accessing support before the pandemic
- communicating with care leavers in a way that is most effective for them, including face-to-face where reasonably necessary, and assessing the right level and frequency of contact
- always considering the wishes and feelings of the young person

Leaving care services provided additional support. For example, in the early stages of the pandemic several local authorities described 'Red Amber Green' (RAG) rating their care leavers to establish what support they required, taking into account where they were living, their access to support, their health and wider needs and circumstances ([Munro et al, 2021](#), [Coram Voice, 2020](#)). Leaving care managers spoke of making assessments about individual young people in light of social distancing measures, whilst recognising that placement type and the quality of relationships would influence what was needed and who should be prioritised for more intensive levels of support ([Munro et al, 2021](#), [Coram Voice, 2020](#)). The government guidance for all professionals was to look out for issues that may affect looked-after children's mental health and well-being, encourage looked-after children to speak to their social worker, carer or other trusted adult about how they are feeling, and ensure they get the help and support they need ([Department for Education, 2021c](#)).

Despite the measures put in place by Government and local authorities it is daunting to navigate the world after leaving care without the support networks in place other young people may take for granted. It is even more daunting with the isolation that lockdowns and social distancing bring. This report looks at how care leavers reported they were feeling during coronavirus outbreak compared to care leavers in non-pandemic times and also explores how they were doing in comparison to the general population of young people.

## What Makes Life Good for care leavers

In our previous *What Makes Life Good* report, we made seven recommendations for policy and practice makers to improve the experience of care leavers. These were:

1. Prioritise what is important to care leavers when developing policy and practice in the care system;
2. Ensure services are guided by the factors that make life good for care leavers and use this knowledge to inform individual pathway plans, local offers and service development;
3. Promote a culture where services aspire for young people to do well and give care leavers the same opportunities as other young people;
4. Systematically measure care leavers' subjective well-being to address the postcode lottery by each local authority – specifically identifying where care leavers struggle and they do better;
5. Ensure the transition to independence is gradual and goes at the young person's pace;

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6. Recognise and adapt services and support to care leavers who have a long-term health condition or disability; and
7. Continue to build services that foster the stability of workers and give them the time and support needed to develop trusting relationships with all the young people they support.

The findings from this new report, which uses a larger sample than its previous iteration, confirm and update the previous findings regarding care leavers' perceptions, as well as giving new insights into how Covid-19 has impacted on the well-being of care leavers.

## Methodology

### Your Life Beyond Care survey

The *Your Life Beyond Care* survey was first run in 2017, and is part of a youth engagement, research and practice development programme called *Bright Spots*. The Bright Spots programme is a partnership between Coram Voice and the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford. The programme offers local authorities the opportunity to conduct the *Your Life, Your Care* survey with their looked-after children (age 4 to 18), and the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey with their care leavers. The latest data analysed in this report were gathered through this programme, but have not previously been combined across local authorities. Local authorities who choose to use the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey are supported by Coram Voice to distribute the survey to their care leavers aged 16 to 25. Full details of the development and rationale behind the survey can be found in the *What Makes Life Good?* report ([Briheim-Crookall et al, 2020](#)).

### Analysis

All data in this report is from the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey. The analysis compares care leaver survey findings from before the Covid-19 pandemic in 2017 to 2019 to during the pandemic in 2020 to 2021.

We analysed a total of 4,280 care leaver responses, 1,804 collected in 2017 to 2019 and 2,476 collected between 23 March 2020 and 29 March 2021.

The data has been aggregated into 2017-2019 data and 2020-21 data, therefore no analysis has been carried out on individual years.

Throughout the report, we report valid percentages, meaning we did not carry out any imputation of missing data, but analyse only data from young people who responded to particular questions.

We have not carried out significance testing on our findings.

## Participant profile

### Sample size and responses

This report is based on 4,280 responses to the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey from care leavers in 34 local authorities in England between 2017 and 2021. Of these, 1,804 were from 2017-2019 and 2,476 from 2020-21. The local authorities covered all English regions. In 2020/21: 8 were in the South West, 4 from Yorkshire & the Humber, 2 from each of the North West, East of England, Inner London, Outer London, and the West Midlands, and 1 from each of the North East and South East (Table 1). In places, percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding and respondents who did not answer a particular question.

**Table 1:** Number of local authorities from each English region taking part in survey

| Region                 | Number of local authorities in survey in 2020-21 |
|------------------------|--|
| South West             | 8  |
| Yorkshire & the Humber | 4  |
| North West             | 2  |
| East of England        | 2  |
| Inner London           | 2  |
| Outer London           | 2  |
| West Midlands          | 2  |
| North East             | 1  |
| South East             | 1  |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>24</b>  |

Eleven of the 24 local authorities are also included in our earlier analysis, so there is some continuity in the sample. From the sub-sample of 11 continuing local authorities there were 806 respondents in the pre-pandemic (2017-2019) dataset and 837 responses from 2020-21.

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As the survey is anonymous, we do not know how many (if any) of the same individual care leavers responded more than once at different survey years to the same questions. We therefore checked whether the characteristics of the 'new' respondents were similar or different to the pre-pandemic sample. We found that composition of the two samples are comparable in terms of age, gender, long-term health problem or disability, and length of time spent in care. When it comes to ethnicity, a slightly higher proportion of White care leavers and a slightly lower proportion of Black, Asian, Mixed and other ethnicity care leavers completed 2020-21 surveys compared to 2017-2019 (Table 3).

### Age

In 2020-21, the largest age group of young people in the sample was 18 to 20 year olds, followed by 21 to 25 year olds (Table 2). The smallest age groups were those aged 16 and 17 (1%) and those aged 26 and over, which made up less than 1% of the sample. In the pre-pandemic sample, the age distribution was similar.

**Table 2: Age breakdown of pre-pandemic and 2020-21 samples**

| Age band        | % in pre-pandemic sample (n) | % in 2020-21 sample (n) |
|-----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 16 and 17 years | 9% (154)                     | 1.2% (30)               |
| 18 to 20 years  | 62% (1,062)                  | 62% (1,513)             |
| 21 to 25 years  | 29% (492)                    | 36% (874)               |
| 26+ years       | 0.1% (1)                     | 0.4% (10)               |
| <b>Total</b>    | <b>100% (1,709)</b>          | <b>100% (2,427)</b>     |

The age bands we use mirror the legislative framework of leaving care support. Local authorities have greater responsibilities for 16 and 17 year olds who have left care, known as 'relevant children', than for care leavers aged 18 and older, 'former relevant children'. Service provision changes again when young people turn 21, with no automatic duty of local authorities to keep in touch and provide a service to young people who do not ask for it. Few young people will be supported by services beyond the age of 25 ([NAO, 2015](#)).

### Gender

Just over half (51%) of the care leavers in our sample described themselves as female, with 46% describing themselves as male. When asked about their gender, 1% of care leavers reported they were 'other', and another 1% answered 'prefer not to say'. This was similar in the pre-pandemic sample where 52% described themselves as female and 48% male. Young women were over-

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represented in the sample - national data from the [Department for Education](#) (2020c) shows that in 2020, 61% of care leavers were male and 39% were female.

### Ethnicity

The majority (67%) of respondents reported that they identified as White, with 12% identifying as Black, 7% as Asian, and 5% each as Mixed or Other. A small percentage (3%) preferred not to give their ethnicity (Table 3). In pre-pandemic data, fewer respondents identified as White (59%), more identified as a minority ethnicity (33%) and 8% did not answer the question. The 2020-21 sample is therefore more in line with what we would expect given government statistics on the ethnic group breakdown in children in care, the best available proxy for the ethnic group breakdown of the population of care leavers in England. Among all looked-after children in England, 26% are BAME, compared to 33% in the pre-pandemic sample and 29% in the 2020-21 sample.

**Table 3: The ethnicity of care leavers**

| Ethnicity         | 2017-2019 sample % (n) | 2020-21 sample % (n) | Total % (n)         |
|-------------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| White             | 59% (1,066)            | 67% (1,660)          | 64% (2,726)         |
| Black             | 12% (223)              | 12% (297)            | 12% (520)           |
| Asian             | 9% (158)               | 7% (180)             | 8% (338)            |
| Mixed             | 7% (133)               | 5% (121)             | 6% (254)            |
| Other             | 5% (81)                | 5% (114)             | 5% (195)            |
| Prefer not to say | 3% (54)                | 3% (75)              | 3% (129)            |
| Missing           | 5% (89)                | 1% (29)              | 3% (118)            |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>100% (1,804)</b>    | <b>100% (2,476)</b>  | <b>100% (4,280)</b> |

### Long-term health problem or disability

We asked care leavers whether they had a long-term health condition or disability that limited their day-to-day activities. The same question is asked in national surveys, enabling comparison with young people of the same age in the general population. Over a quarter (26%) of care leavers reported they had a disability or limiting health problem. This was 24% in the pre-pandemic sample. Both are much higher than the 14% reported in 2019 and 16% reported in 2020 by the general population of 16 to 24 year olds (who make up 99.6% of our sample of care leavers) ([ONS, 2020e](#)).

### Length of time in care

Previous research has shown that young people who enter care at a later age ('adolescent entrants') may have different experiences compared with those who spend more of their childhood in care, in terms of the aims, duration and nature of their placements and their educational achievements (Sinclair et al, 2007; [Sebba et al, 2015](#)). Most care leavers in our survey (61%) had been looked after for four or more years, with 34% having been looked after for fewer than four years, and the remaining 5% reporting that they 'don't know' how long they've been in care. This was similar in the pre-pandemic sample where 60% had been looked after for four or more years and 37% had been looked after for fewer than four years.

### Living arrangements and safety

We asked care leavers several questions about their homes, which covered where they were living and whether they felt safe and settled in their homes and neighbourhoods.

Just under half (46%) of the care leavers in our sample lived in a home they rented, a substantial increase on the 39% from the pre-pandemic sample, and much higher than the national figure of 36% (for 19 to 21 year old care leavers) in 2021 ([DfE, 2021a](#)). This rise in care leavers living in rented accommodation was mirrored by a similar drop in the proportion of care leavers living in supported accommodation; only 12% of care leavers in this sample reported that they lived in supported accommodation, compared to 23% in the pre-pandemic sample. Between 2018 and March 2021, the number of care leavers in supported accommodation has remained stable ([DfE, 2021a](#)).

Since 2014, care leavers have been able to remain with their former foster carers after they turn 18; this is called 'staying put'. In our sample, 11% reported that they were living with foster carers and this is the same figure as for the pre-pandemic sample.

In 2020, 66% of young people in the general population aged 18 to 23 were still living at home with their parents, and 39% were still there at age 25 ([ONS, 2021a](#)). These figures are significantly higher than 2019, during which only 50% of young people in the general population were still living at home with their parents. These figures may be inflated by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, with many young people making the choice to stay at home with their parents rather than risk the isolation of moving away.

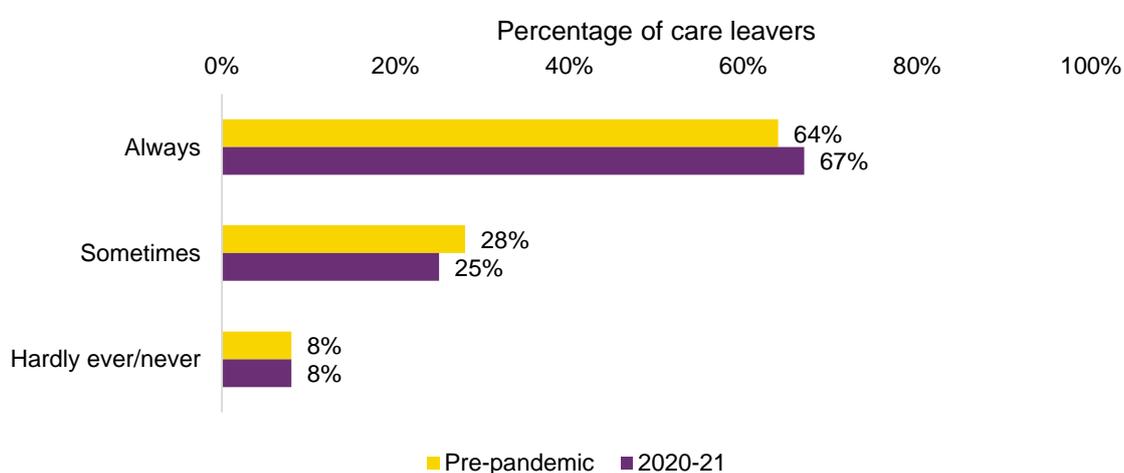
In comparison to the general population, most care leavers were not living with an adult with whom they had an established relationship. 11% of care leavers were living with previous foster carers and 8% with parents or other relatives: a total of 19% were living with an adult with whom they had an established relationship, marginally lower than the 21% who reported living with an adult with whom they had an established relationship in the pre-pandemic sample. It is also possible that some of the young people in supported lodgings (4%) were living with hosts they had known for some time or were living with foster carers, as foster placements can be reclassified as supported lodgings under staying put arrangements.

### Feeling safe and settled

We asked care leavers if they felt settled and safe in their home and in the neighbourhood where they lived. Most care leavers did feel safe in their homes, with 67% reporting that they always feel safe in their homes. This is small increase on the pre-pandemic sample, where 64% reported that they always felt safe in their homes. It may be the case that care leavers felt safer in their homes in light of the 'stay at home' message during the pandemic and, of course, the virus itself. In the general population of 16 to 29 year olds, 84% felt safe or very safe in their home since the Covid-19 outbreak ([ONS, 2020b](#)).

A quarter (25%) reported that they only sometimes felt safe in their homes, with the remaining 8% telling us that they hardly ever or never felt safe in their homes, similar to the pre-pandemic level.

**Figure 2: Feeling safe in the home, 2020-21 vs pre-pandemic**



Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) (n=1,729), 2020-21 (n=2,437). Question reads: 'In my home I feel safe'.

In total, 33% of care leavers reported that they do not always feel safe in their homes in 2020-21, and 36% pre-pandemic (Figure 2). In comparison, 16% of young people in care (aged 11 to 18 years) did not 'always' feel safe in their placements ([Selwyn et al, 2018](#)). In the general population of 16 to 29 year olds in Great Britain, only 2% felt unsafe or very unsafe in their home, 13% felt neither safe or unsafe, and 84% felt safe or very safe ([ONS, 2020b](#)).

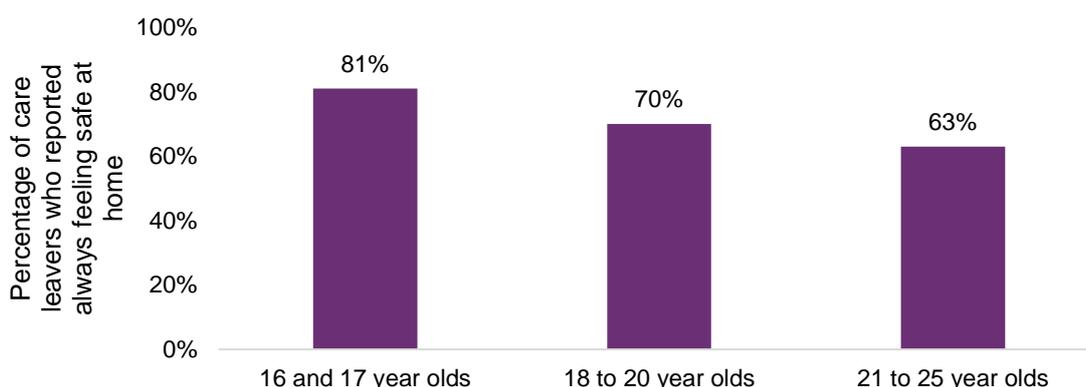
Feeling safe in one's home was also associated with care leavers' living arrangements. The large majority of those living with foster carers (93%) or with parents or other relatives (81%) reported 'always' feeling safe in their homes. This is an improvement compared to pre-pandemic where 85% of those living with foster carers and 72% of those living with parents or other relatives reported 'always' feeling safe. Those living in a house they own (78%) or in supported lodgings (71%) also reported a high degree of feeling 'always' safe (sample sizes are too low for a meaningful comparison with the pre-pandemic sample). Those in rented accommodation reported a slight increase in 'always' feeling safe in their home compared to pre-pandemic (60% pre-pandemic compared to 64%).

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Unsurprisingly, those in short stay or emergency accommodation, and those who are homeless, felt least safe in their homes. Among homeless care leavers (including sofa surfers), 35% reported 'hardly ever/never' feeling safe in their homes, as well as 30% of those in short stay or emergency accommodation.

Slightly fewer young women (66%) than young men (69%) told us that they 'always' felt safe in their homes, although there was no difference in the percentage of males and females reporting that they 'hardly ever/never' felt safe in their homes. Age plays a role in 'always' feeling safe in the home – this decreased as age increased (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Always feeling safe in home by age, 2020-21**



Base: 2020-21 (n=72 aged 16 and 17; N=1,539 aged 18 to 20 year olds; n=851 aged 21 to 25 year olds)

Fewer care leavers felt safe in their neighbourhoods than in their homes, with only 61% reporting that they always feel safe in their neighbourhood. This is similar to the 59% who reported always feeling safe in their neighbourhood pre-pandemic. While a direct comparison with the general population is not possible, 80% of 16 to 24 year olds reported feeling very or fairly safe walking alone after dark in their neighbourhoods ([ONS, 2020e](#)). There was a larger discrepancy in feeling safe in their neighbourhoods between men and women than for feeling safe in their homes. Only 57% of young women in the sample reported always feeling safe in their neighbourhood, compared to 65% of young men.

Care leavers with a disability or long-term health problem were more likely to report feeling unsafe in their homes and neighbourhoods compared to care leavers without a disability or long-term health problem (Table 4). The percentage of care leavers with a disability or long-term health problem feeling unsafe were broadly similar to the pre-pandemic sample, with a slight increase in those feeling unsafe in their homes, and a slight decrease in those feeling unsafe in their neighbourhoods.

**Table 4:** Feeling unsafe in my home and neighbourhood by disability status

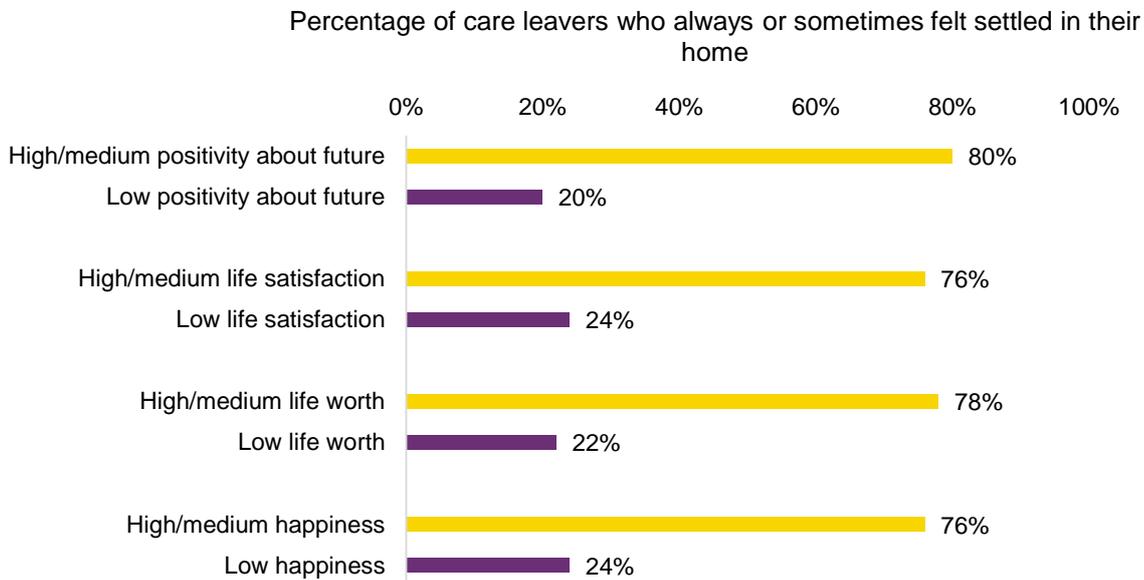
| Response  | Care leavers reporting a disability or long-term health problem (pre-pandemic sample in brackets) | All other care leavers (pre-pandemic sample in brackets) |
|---|---|--|
| Hardly ever/never feel safe in my home          | 14% (12%)   | 5% (6%)  |
| Hardly ever/never feel safe in my neighbourhood | 14% (16%)   | 6% (8%)  |

Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) care leavers with a long-term health problem or disability (n=388), all other care leavers (n=1,171). 2020-21 care leavers with a long-term health problem or disability (n=630), all other care leavers (n=1,846).

When it comes to feeling settled in their homes in 2020-21, 86% told us they always/sometimes feel settled, with 13% reporting hardly ever/never feeling settled. This is similar to pre-pandemic levels where also 86% reported they always/sometimes felt settled. In 2020-21, a high proportion of care leavers who were in rented accommodation told us they felt settled (88%), comparable to pre-pandemic levels (87%). The eviction ban put in place during the pandemic in June 2020 is likely to have brought some relief to care-leaver renters, however it is important to note that this was only temporary and the ban was lifted in June 2021.

Well-being plays a role in feeling settled - those reporting always/sometimes feeling 'settled in my home' also reported high/medium positivity about the future, life being worthwhile and happiness (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Well-being measures for care leavers who always/sometimes felt settled in their home**



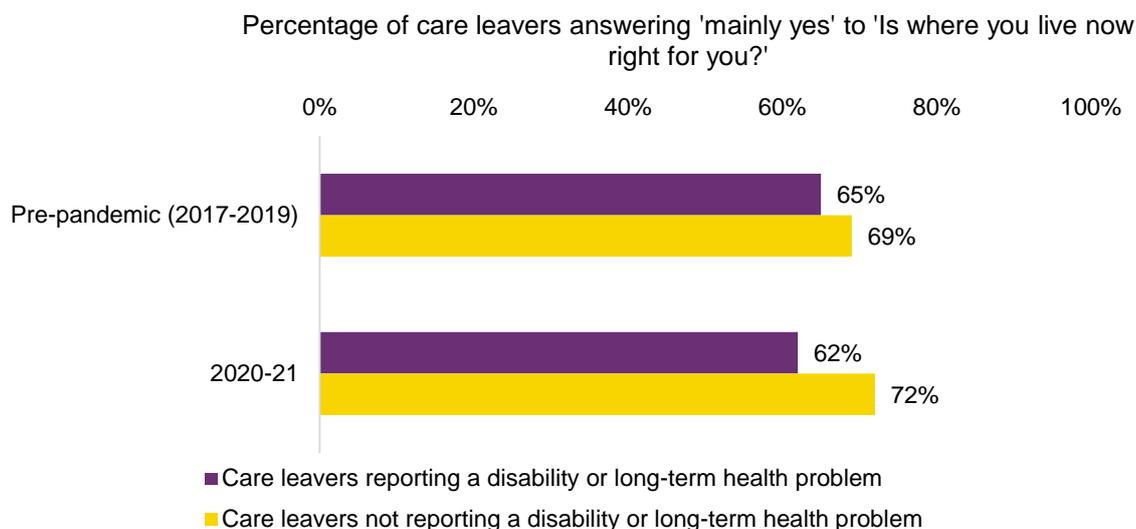
Base: 2020-21. Questions read: 'How positive are you about your future?' (n=2,423), 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?' (n=2,428), 'Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?' (n=2,413) and 'How happy did you feel yesterday?' (n=2,433).

### Suitability of accommodation

The *Your Life Beyond Care* survey asks care leavers if where they live is right for them. Around two-thirds (69%) of care leavers of all ages felt that their home was mainly right for them, compared to 68% in the pre-pandemic sample. According to the latest government figures, in 2020, the percentage of care leavers in suitable accommodation were: 65% of 17 year-olds; 91% of 18 year-olds; and 85% of 19 to 21 year olds. Our findings did not indicate as much variation by age, 70% of 17 year olds (low base, n=23), 71% of 18 year olds and 70% of 19 to 21 year olds felt their accommodation was right for them.

Those care leavers with a disability or long-term health problem less often felt that where they lived was mainly right for them (Figure 5); 62% felt this way, compared to 72% of those without a long-term health problem or disability and 70% who preferred not to say. In the pre-pandemic sample, 65% of those with a disability or long-term health condition felt where they lived was right for them, compared to 69% without a disability or long-term health condition and 63% who preferred not to say.

**Figure 5: Where I live is right for me by long-term health problem or disability**



Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) with a long-term health problem or disability (n=384), without a long-term health problem or disability (n=1,165). 2020-21 with a long-term health problem or disability (n=630), without a long-term health problem or disability (n=1,647).

Housing bidding, where council housing applicants can tell their council which properties they are interested in, was suspended for a period during the pandemic. There was also decreased access to private rented accommodation, which meant some care leavers were put in inappropriate accommodation such as Bed and Breakfasts. Those who were particularly vulnerable to Covid-19, more likely to have pre-existing health problems, or who had to isolate, also found themselves removed from shared accommodation and placed in accommodation such as Bed and Breakfasts ([Munro et al, 2021](#)).

### Access to smartphones and the internet

Almost all care leavers (95%) had a smartphone, suggesting they are catching up with the general population of 16 to 24 year olds where 99% have a smartphone ([Statista, 2020](#)). This represents an increase of four percentage points over the 91% who reported having a smartphone in the pre-pandemic sample.

Most care leavers (90%) could also connect to the internet from their home. These findings are not surprising given some local authorities have reported that they were quick to respond to the technology needs of care leavers during the pandemic and provided different types of hardware, internet access and funds for repairing or substituting smartphones ([Munro et al, 2021](#)). Similarly, at the start of the pandemic in April 2020, the [Education Secretary](#) announced that disadvantaged children and young people across England, including care leavers, were to receive laptops and tablets as part of an effort to make remote education accessible for pupils staying at home during the pandemic.

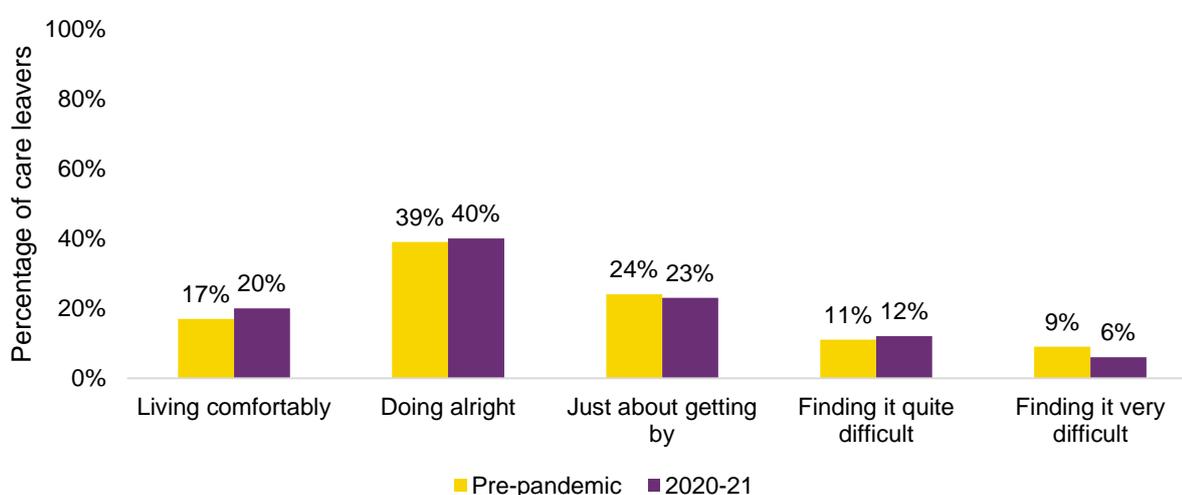
It is important to note that while there was an increase on the 83% of care leavers able to access internet from home in the pre-pandemic sample, it remains far below the 96% of households in Great Britain who have access to the internet ([ONS, 2020c](#)).

## Financial well-being

### Coping financially

The way we asked care leavers whether they were coping financially replicated a question that is asked of 16 to 24 year olds in the general population ([ONS, 2017](#)). In 2020-21, although 18% were struggling financially, the majority (60%) of care leavers felt that they were coping financially, with the remaining 23% reporting that they were just about getting by (Figure 6). These figures show a slight improvement over the pre-pandemic sample, in which only 56% of care leavers were coping financially, with 20% reporting that they were struggling. In April-May 2020, 24% of 16 to 29 year olds reported that they were struggling to pay bills and 84% reported that the pandemic had resulted in reduced income ([ONS, 2020b](#)).

**Figure 6: Coping financially, pre-pandemic vs 2020-21**



Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) (n=1,751), 2020-21 (n=2,445)

On the surface, this is a surprising result, as we may have expected to see a decrease in perceived financial security given the temporary or permanent closures of many employers during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it may be that lower outgoings, increased support from local authorities or the £20 per week increase to Universal Credit payments introduced in April 2020, have helped to make care leavers feel more financially secure ([BBC News, 2021](#); [Munro et al, 2021](#)). During the pandemic, some local authorities have also made discretionary emergency payments to help with bills, or supplied food hampers, or accessed winter grants for care-leavers, depending on their individual circumstances ([Munro et al, 2021](#)).

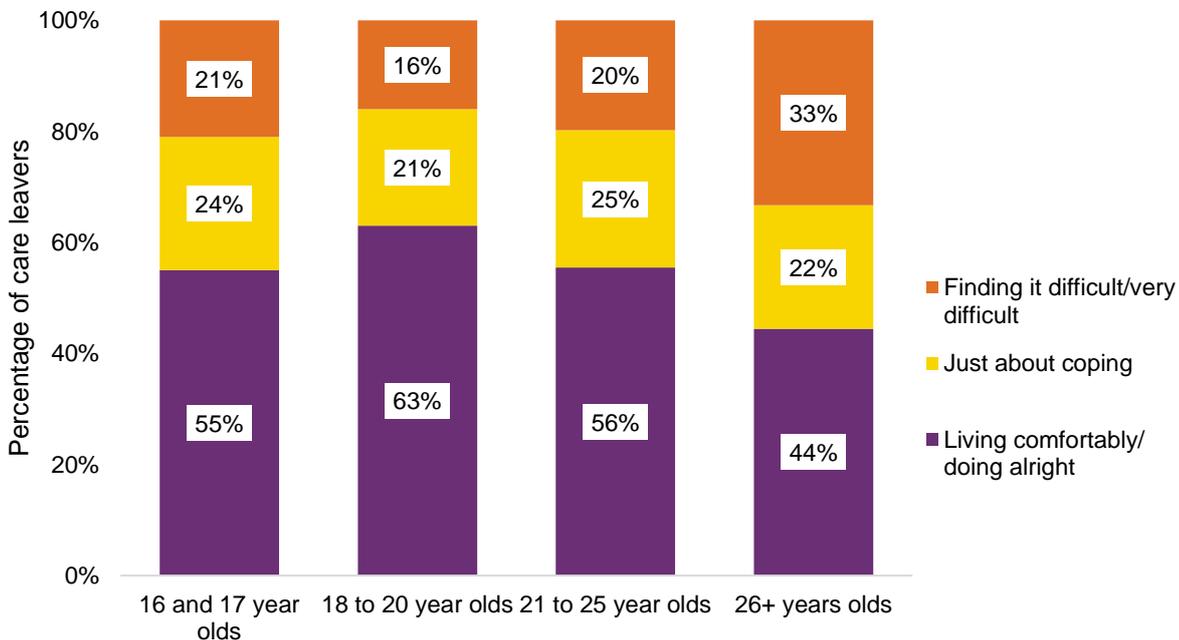
There were differences between how care leavers were coping financially across age groups, although it is hard to pick out any clear trends (Figure 7). The most financially stable group in our sample was those care leavers aged 18 to 20 years old, of whom 63% reported that they were either 'living comfortably' or 'doing alright', with only 16% reporting that they were finding things 'difficult' or 'very difficult'. Those aged 21 to 25 were the next most stable, with 56% answering that they were 'living comfortably' or 'doing alright', closely followed by 16 and 17 year olds, at 55%. The least financially stable group was care leavers aged 26 and over, although it must be noted that this was

## The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers' well-being

based on a very small number of respondents (n=10), so this figure may not be generalisable to this age group as a whole.

These findings are perhaps not surprising. Care leavers aged 18 to 20 year old are offered a service by their local authority and will have the most support, whereas the 21 to 25 age group do not automatically get offered leaving care support. Care leavers over 25 would normally not be entitled to receive a service at all and local authorities would have to use their discretion to address particular needs. As it is local authorities that invite care leavers to take part in this survey, only those care leavers that are still in touch with their local authorities take part. Some will still be in touch because they are struggling and need extra support. Therefore, this survey is unlikely to include older care leavers who are doing well and not struggling.

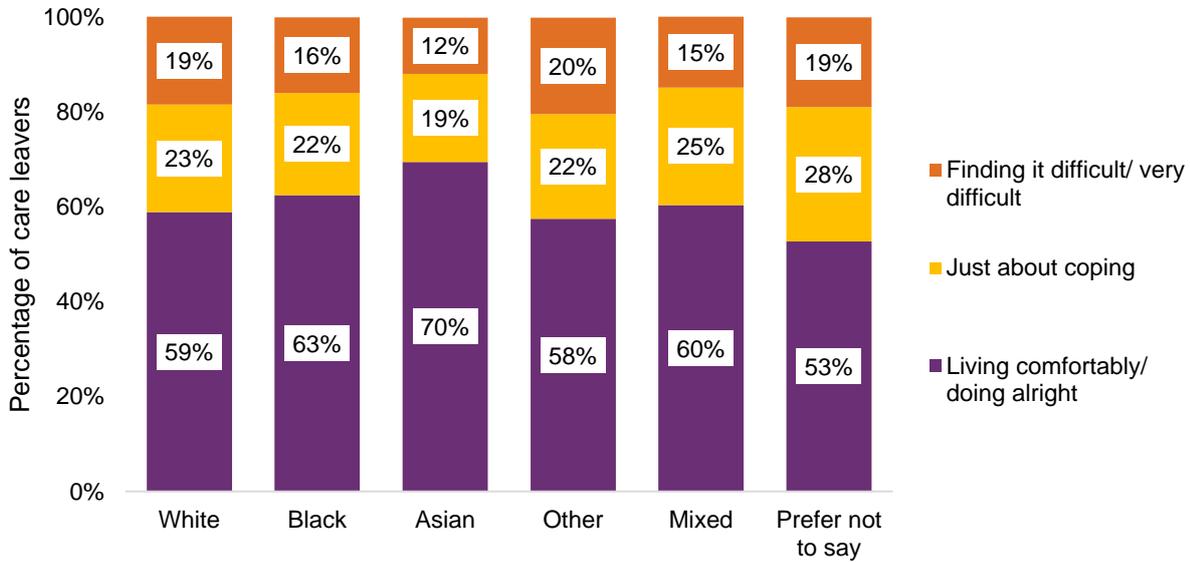
**Figure 7: Coping financially by age group**



Base: 2020-21 care leavers aged 16 to 17 (n=30), 18 to 20 (n=1,513), 21 to 25 (n=874), 26 and older (n=10), total n=2,227

There were also some differences in how well care leavers were coping financially by ethnicity (Figure 8). Care leavers identifying as Asian were by far the group coping the best financially, with 70% reporting that they were 'living comfortably' or 'doing alright', following by those identifying as Black (63%) and Mixed (60%). It must be noted that while these findings are based relatively small numbers; besides those identifying as Asian, there was only a 5 percentage point difference between the most (Black – 63%) and least (Other – 58%) financially stable ethnic groups (excluding those who preferred not to say).

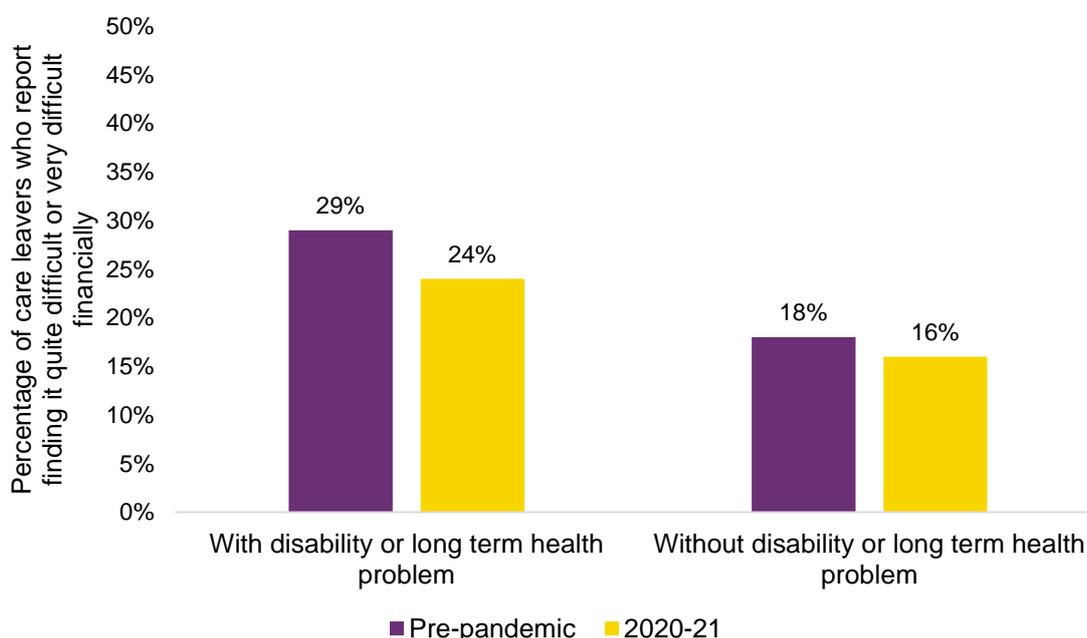
**Figure 8: Coping financially by ethnicity**



Base: 2020-21 care leavers identifying as White (n=1,660), Black (n=297), Asian (n=180), Other (n=114), Mixed (n=121) and prefer not to say (n=75), total=2,327

Given the lower rates of employment among those with a disability or long-term health problem in the general population, it is unsurprising that 24% of care leavers with a disability or long-term health problem were struggling to manage financially (compared to 16% of care leavers without a disability or long-term health problem). However, it appears that the situation for care leavers with a disability or long-term health problem has improved slightly since pre-pandemic, in which 29% reported that they were struggling to manage compared to 24% in 2020-21 (Figure 9). Again, decreased outgoings and/or the increase in Universal Credit payments may have played a role.

**Figure 9:** Percentage reporting they were finding it quite difficult or very difficult financially, by disability, pre-pandemic vs 2020-21



Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) (n=1,751), 2020-21 (n=2,416). Question reads: 'How are you coping financially?'

## Leaving care worker relationship and support

### Knowing your leaving care worker

Care leavers are entitled to a leaving care worker (also known as a Personal Adviser or PA) provided by their local authority until they are 25 years old. A PA is there to provide advice and support and co-ordinate services for the care leavers they work with. Therefore, it is important that leaving care workers are responsive, consistent, and reliable. Reassuringly, the vast majority of care leavers (92%) knew who their leaving care worker was, although this was down slightly from the 93% who knew the identity of their leaving care worker in the pre-pandemic sample.

### Trusting leaving care worker

Whether care leavers 'trust' their leaving care workers is a measure of the quality of their relationship. Our previous report found that a higher proportion of care leavers trusted their leaving care workers than the young people in care who trusted their social workers. In the 2020-21 sample, four out of five care leavers (80%) trusted their leaving care worker 'all or most of the time', 16% trusted them 'sometimes', and 4% reported that they 'hardly ever' or 'never' trusted their leaving care worker. This is similar to the pre-pandemic sample where 78% trusted their leaving care worker all or most of the time.

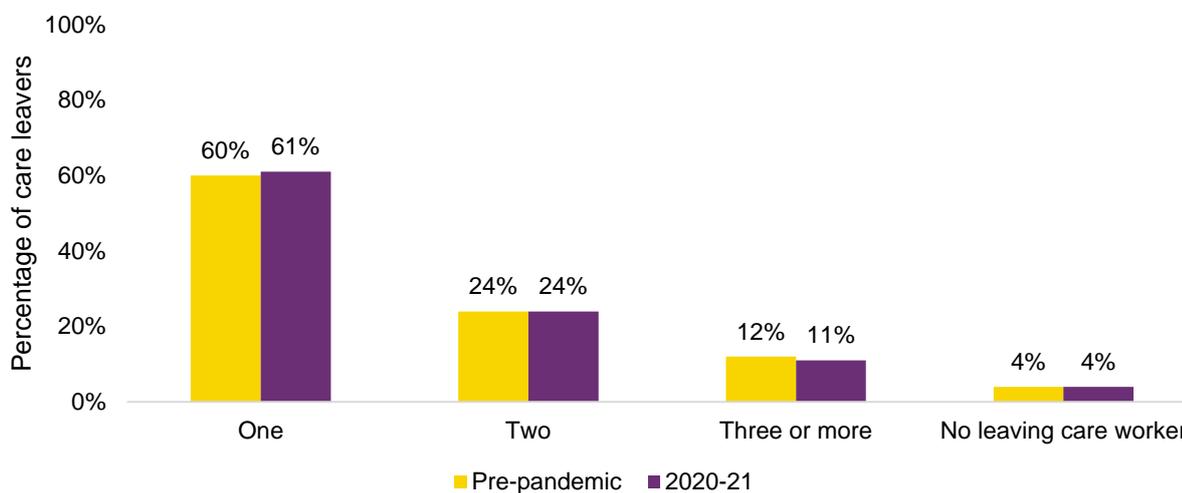
### Stability of leaving care worker

Most care leavers (61%) in the pandemic sample reported having only one leaving care worker in the last 12 months, compared to 24% who reported having two, and 11% who reported having had

## The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers' well-being

three or more (Figure 10). Finally, 4% did not have a leaving care worker at all. Again, this is a slight improvement on the results from the pre-pandemic sample, in which 60% of care leavers reported having had only one leaving care worker in the past year.

**Figure 10:** Number of leaving care workers in the last 12 months, pre-pandemic vs 2020-21



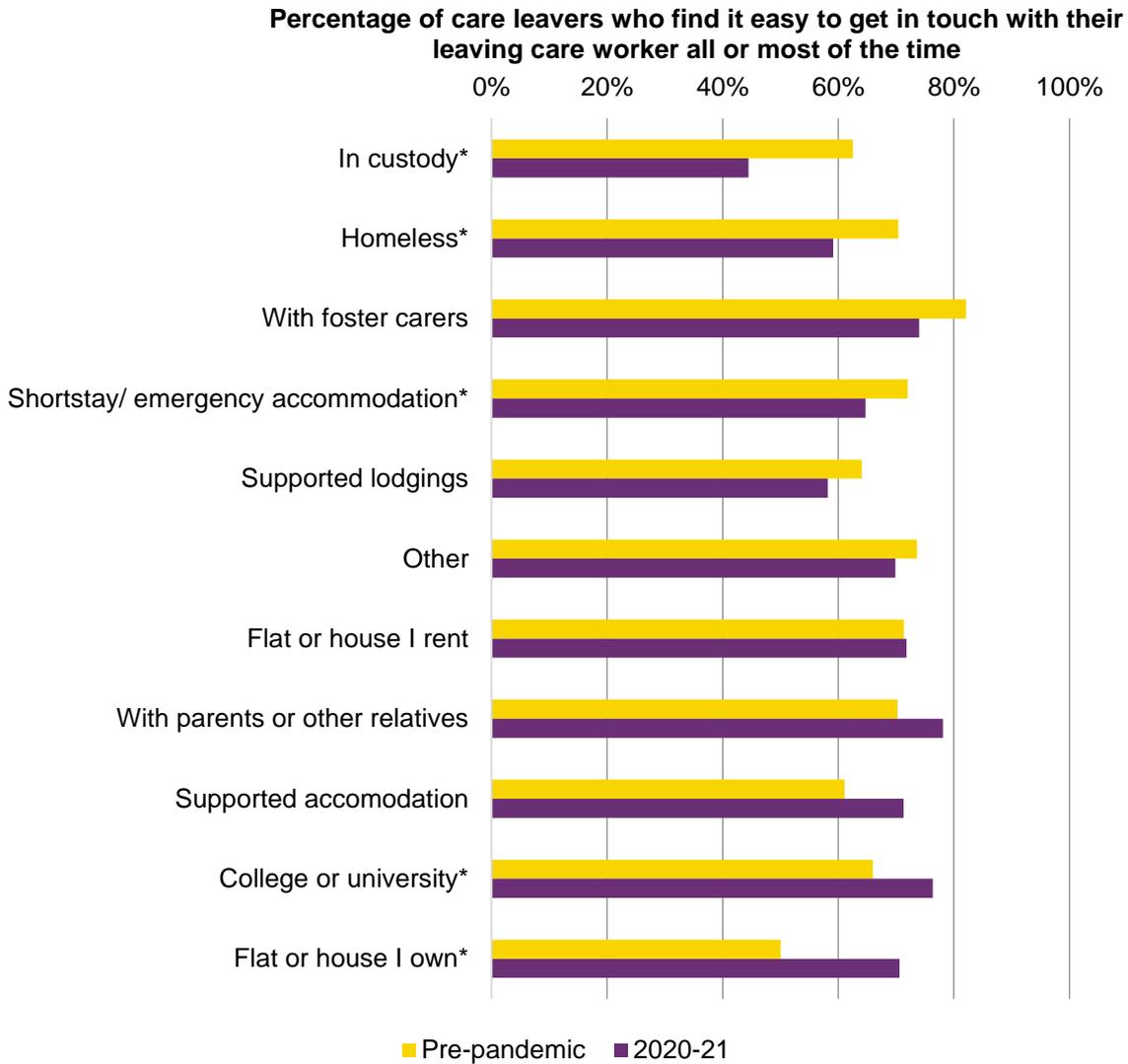
Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) (n=1,784), 2020-21 (n=2,465), total=4,249

### Getting in touch with leaving care workers/personal advisers

Most care leavers (72%) reported that they were able to get in touch with their leaving care worker all or most of the time, similar to in the pre-pandemic sample, in which 71% of care leavers reported that they could easily contact their worker. During the pandemic there was a reduction in face to face contact with care leavers and local authorities tried to make up for this with more regular virtual contact ([Munro et al, 2021](#)). This may have contributed to the continuity in responses.

There were notable differences by living arrangement in how easily care leavers found it to get in touch with their leaving care worker. The biggest drops in those reporting they found it easy to get in touch with their leaving care worker all or most of the time since the pandemic were among those who were in custody or homeless (however, base sizes are below 30) (Figure 11). Those with foster carers also reported reduced ease in getting in touch with their leaving care worker all or most of the time since pre-pandemic (82% pre-pandemic and 74% in 2020-21). For those living with parents/relatives or in supported accommodation, however, ease in getting in touch with their leaving care worker had increased since the beginning of the pandemic.

**Figure 11:** Easy to get in touch with leaving care worker all or most of the time by living situation, pre-pandemic vs 2020-21

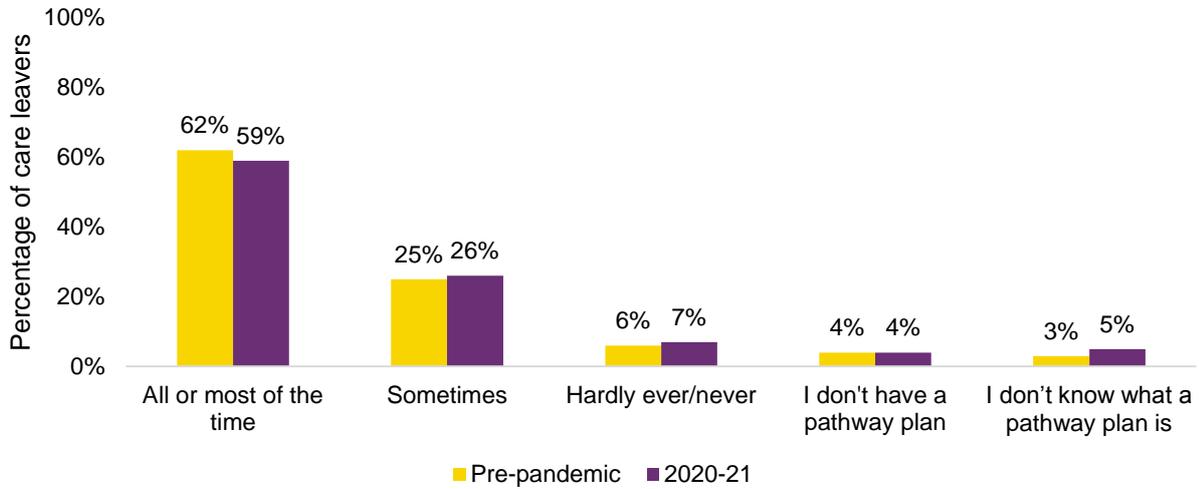


\*Low base of less than 30. Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) (n=1,653), 2020-21 (n=2,271)

### Pathway planning

The majority of care leavers (59%) felt involved in their pathway planning ‘all or most of the time’, a fall from the 62% from the pre-pandemic sample (Figure 12). Just over a quarter (26%) felt that they sometimes felt involved in their pathway planning, up slightly from the 25% who reported this in the pre-pandemic sample. A small but still concerning number of care leavers (7%) reported that they hardly ever or never feel involved. It is of even greater concern that 4% of respondents reported that they did not have a plan, and 5% did not know what a pathway plan was. All of these figures are marginally higher than in the pre-pandemic sample, which found that 6% hardly ever or never feel involved, 4% did not have a plan, and 3% did not know what pathway planning was.

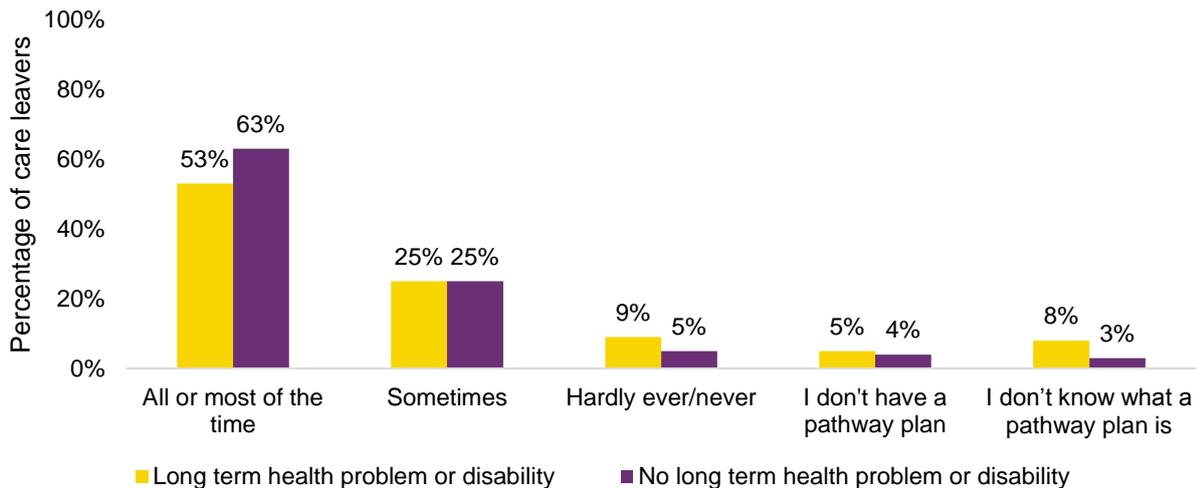
**Figure 12: Feeling involved in pathway planning, pre-pandemic vs 2020-21**



Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) (n=1,775), 2020-21 (n=2,467), total=4,242. Question reads: 'Do you feel involved in your pathway planning?'

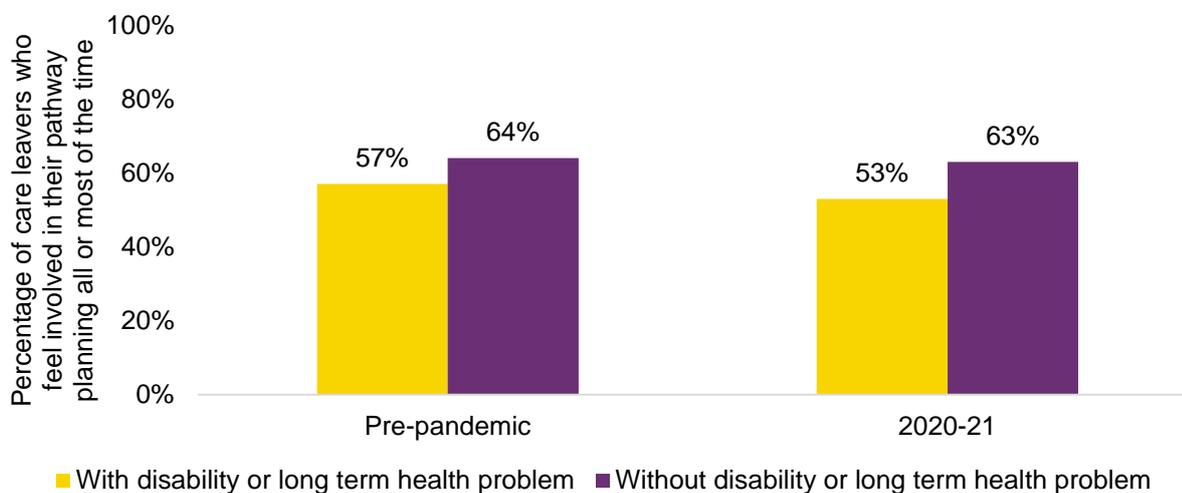
Again, these issues were exacerbated for care leavers with a disability or long-term health problem (Figure 13). Only 53% of these care leavers felt involved in their pathway planning 'all or most of the time', compared to 57% in the pre-pandemic sample (Figure 14). More care leavers with a disability or long-term health problem reported they hardly ever or never felt involved in their pathway planning (9%), compared to 5% of those without disabilities or long-term health problems. Care leavers with a disability or long-term health problem were also more likely to not have a pathway plan (5%) than those without (4%), and far more likely (8%) than other care leavers (3%) not to know what pathway planning is.

**Figure 13: Feeling involved in pathway planning by disability, 2020-21**



Base: 2020-21, those with a long-term health problem or disability (629), those without (1,646), total=2,275

**Figure 14:** Feeling involved in pathway planning all or most of the time, by disability, pre-pandemic vs 2020-21



Base: Pre-pandemic, those with a long term health problem or disability (392), those without (1,185). 2020-21, those with a long term health problem or disability (629), those without (1,646).

While our data does not explain the drop in the percentage of care leavers who felt involved in pathway planning, it may be due to the reduced amount of face-to-face contact during the pandemic. Moving pathway planning online, whether via surveys or forms or video calling, may have led care leavers to feel less directly involved and supported in their pathway planning. This highlights the need to review the impact of different forms of contact on feelings on involvement.

## Emotional support

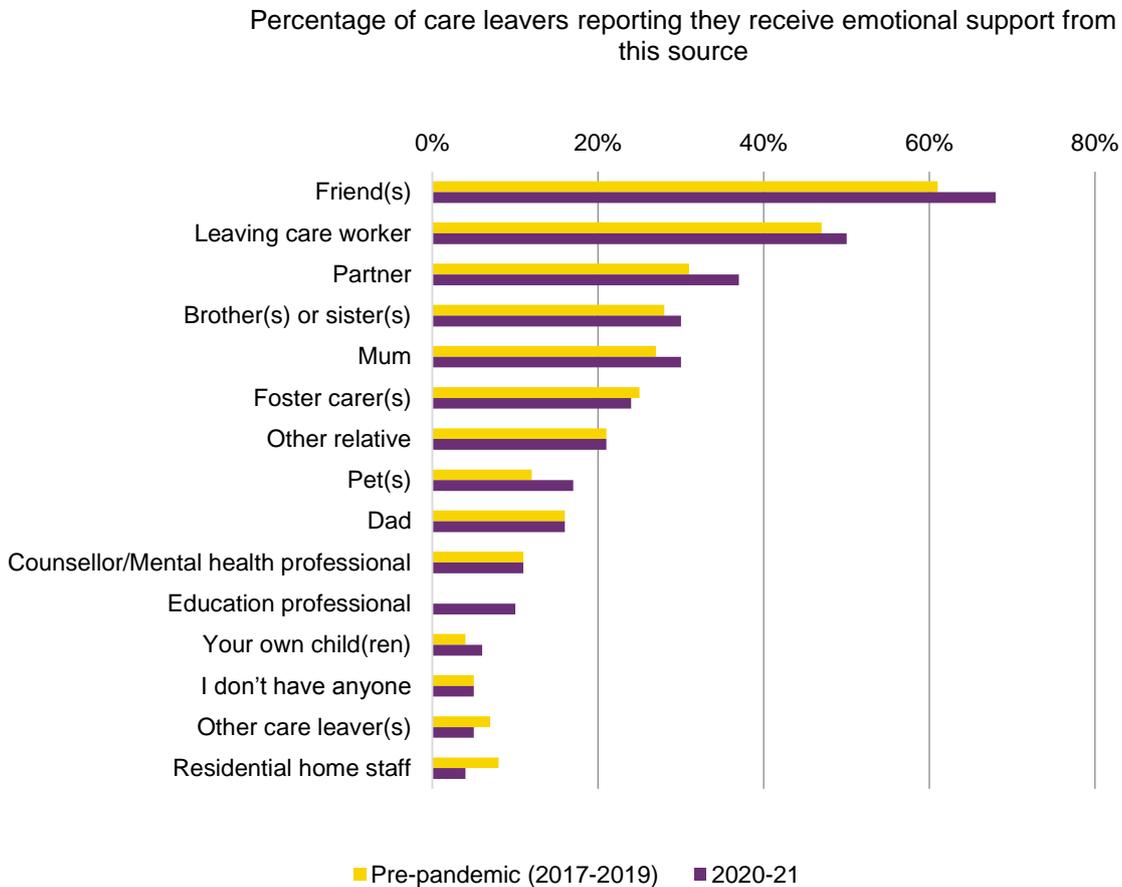
We asked care leavers who gave them emotional support. They could choose as many as they wished of the 15 types of people. The categories were: friends(s); leaving care worker; partner; brother(s) or sister(s); mum; foster carer(s); other relative; dad; pet(s); counsellor/mental health professional; education professional<sup>1</sup>; residential home staff; other care leaver(s); your own children; or 'I don't have anyone'. More care leavers got emotional support from their friends (68%) and partners (37%) compared to pre-pandemic (61% and 31% respectively). Similarly, 28% of care leavers had a pet pre-pandemic and this rose to 32% in 2020-21, suggesting more were relying on pets for companionship. We saw no increase in those reporting they had a really good friend from 85% pre-pandemic. Just 5% say they did not have anyone, and reassuringly this figure has not risen since the beginning of the pandemic (

<sup>1</sup> Note: new response option added in the 2020-21 survey

## The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers' well-being

Figure 15).

**Figure 15:** Sources of emotional support for care leavers (pre-pandemic, 2017-2019, compared to 2020-21)



Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) (n=1,743), 2020-21 (n=2,411), total=4,154

### Professional support

There was a slight increase in care leavers feeling their leaving care worker was a source of emotional support – 47% felt this pre-pandemic and this rose to 50% in 2020-21 (Figure 15). Counsellors and mental health professionals were a source of emotional support for only a very small proportion (10%) of care leavers, a figure that did not differ according to whether the care leaver had a disability or other long-term health condition. This figure was the same pre-pandemic (10%). There were some small differences in the proportion of care leavers who felt supported by a counsellor or mental health professional between ethnic groups. Care leavers who identified as White were most likely (11%) to have felt that they received emotional support from a counsellor or mental health professional, compared to just 6% of those identifying as ‘mixed’. Between these extremes, 8% who identified as ‘Other’, and 7% each of Asian and Black respondents told us that they received emotional support from a counsellor or mental health professional.

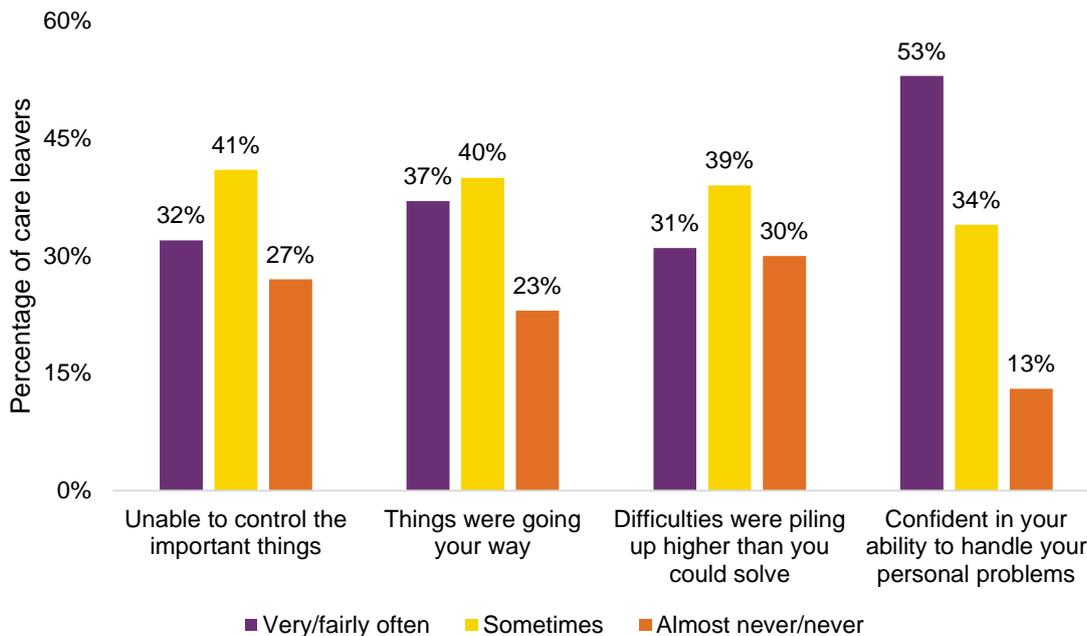
Pre-pandemic, there were a higher proportion of Asian and Black respondents who felt they got emotional support from a counsellor or mental health professional (10% and 9% respectively). The

limitations of offering support virtually during the pandemic and increased demand may have resulted in some care leavers being unable to access professional support ([Munro et. al, 2021](#)).

## Feelings

### Stress

**Figure 16: Measures of stress in the last month**



Base: 2020-21. Question reads 'In the last month, how often have you felt': unable to control the important things (n=2,417), things were going your way (2,427), difficulties were piling up higher than you could solve (n=2,404), confident in your ability to handle personal problems (n=2,418)

The *Your Life Beyond Care* survey included the 4 item Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al, 1983) measured on a five-point scale. We chose the scale because it does not focus on identifying specific stressful events but on an individual's perceptions of how well they are coping. Individual total scores can range from 0 to 16 with higher scores indicating high stress.

Overall, while just over half (53%) of care leavers often felt confident in their ability to handle personal problems, just under a third (32%) reported being unable to control the important things in their life, and a similar number (31%) reported that it often felt like difficulties were piling up higher than they could solve them (Figure 16). These are very similar figures to those found in the pre-pandemic sample (

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Table 5), although there have been marginal improvements in each measure. As we saw earlier, care leavers in 2020-21 reported having had as much or even more emotional support during the pandemic than those surveyed pre-pandemic, and emotional support may have helped in coping with feelings of stress.

**Table 5:** Comparison of measures of stress between 2020-21 sample and the pre-pandemic (2017-2019) sample

| Measure of stress  | Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) |            |                    | 2020-21            |            |                    |
|--|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------|--------------------|
|  | Very/fairly often        | Some times | Almost never/never | Very /fairly often | Some times | Almost never/never |
| In the last month, how often have you felt unable to control the important things?                       | 33%                      | 39%        | 28%                | 32%                | 41%        | 27%                |
| In the last month, how often have you felt things were going your way?                                   | 37%                      | 41%        | 22%                | 37%                | 40%        | 23%                |
| In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up higher than you could solve them? | 34%                      | 37%        | 29%                | 31%                | 39%        | 30%                |
| In the last month how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? | 50%                      | 35%        | 15%                | 53%                | 34%        | 13%                |

Base: Question reads 'In the last month, how often have you felt': unable to control the important things (pre-pandemic: n= 1,678, 2020-21: n=2417), things were going your way (pre-pandemic: n= 1,689, 2020-21: n=2427), difficulties were piling up higher than you could solve (pre-pandemic: n= 1,667, 2020-21: n=2404), confident in your ability to handle personal problems (pre-pandemic: n= 1,665, 2020-21: n=2418)

## Loneliness

A key element of well-being is the presence of positive social connections, and chronic loneliness is associated with a host of poor physical, mental, and emotional health outcomes ([ONS, 2018](#)). The lockdowns associated with the Covid-19 pandemic have been a key source of loneliness in the UK for more than a year, especially among young people. One ONS survey found that 'lockdown loneliness' (those responding that they had felt lonely in the past seven days between 3 April and 3 May 2020) was far more prevalent among 16 to 24 year olds (51%) than the overall adult population (31%) ([ONS, 2020a](#)). During the pandemic the same ONS data showed that 5% of all adults were 'chronically lonely'; that is, that responded that they feel 'often' or 'always' lonely. This was 7% for those aged 16 to 24.

In our sample, loneliness seems to be a far more prevalent problem; 21% of care leavers reported feeling 'always or often' lonely (compared to 7% of young people in the general population).

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However, the problem of loneliness among care leavers has marginally improved since the pre-pandemic sample, which found that 22% of care leavers felt 'always or often' lonely.

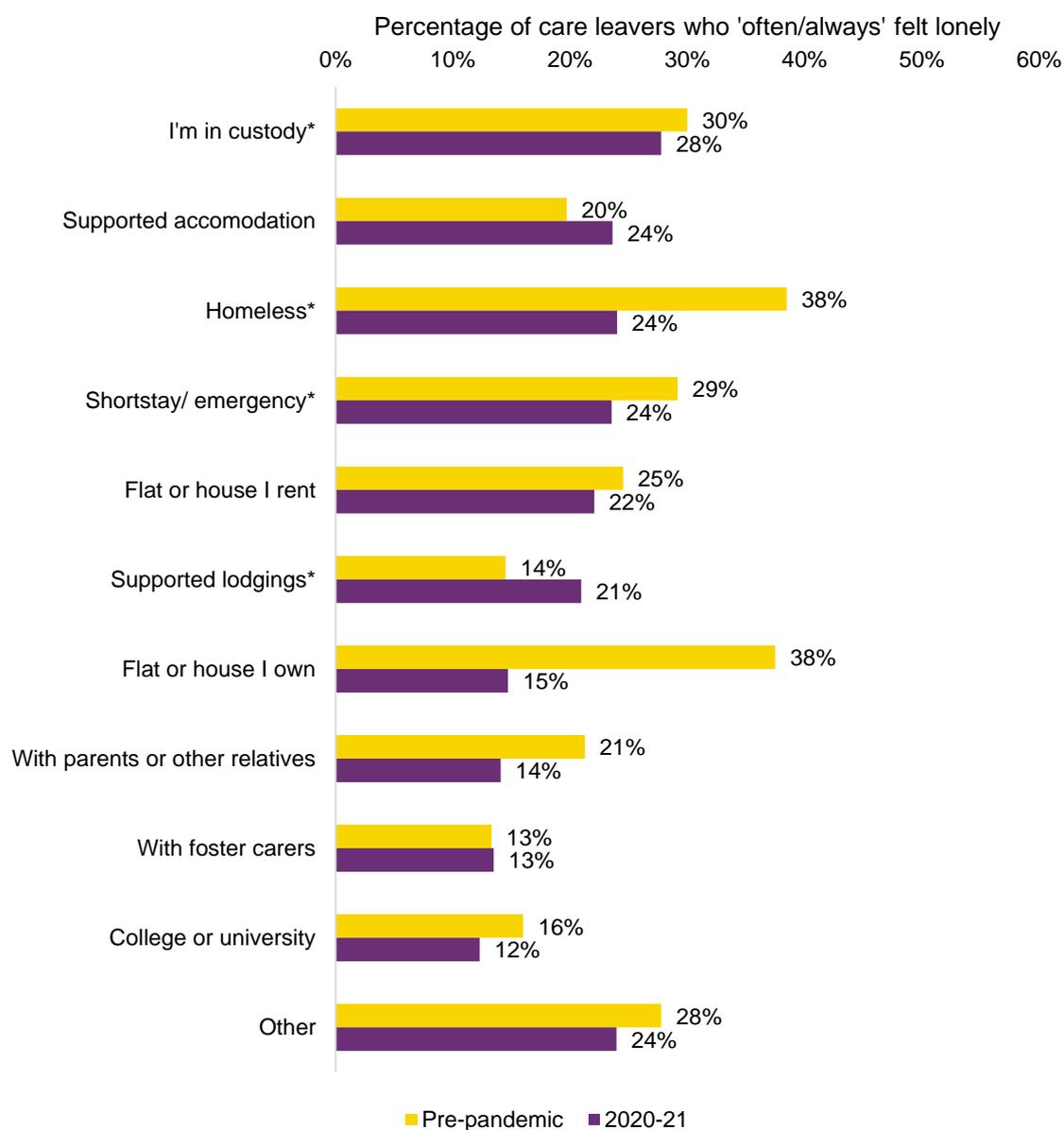
Care leavers with a disability or long-term health problems were more likely than others to report 'always/often' feeling lonely (31% compared with 17%). But this group's responses were slightly better than those given by the pre-pandemic sample, in which 35% reported 'always/often' feeling lonely. Pre-pandemic, there was a difference of 19 percentage points between those with and without a disability in 'always/often' feeling lonely, which has decreased to 13 percentage points in 2020-21. This is a surprising finding given the wealth of data connecting the Covid-19 pandemic to increased loneliness, especially among younger people and those with mental health issues ([Groarke et al, 2020](#); [Bu et al, 2020](#)). The pandemic looks to have fuelled more focus on combating loneliness among care leavers, for example, local authorities increasing virtual contact by personal advisers and setting up online activities such as arts and crafts, cooking sessions, drop-ins, exercises classes ([Munro et al., 2021](#); [Coram Voice, 2020](#)).

The percentage of care leavers telling us they always or often felt lonely increased with age. In contrast, in the general population, loneliness decreases over the course of adulthood (ONS, 2018). Of those aged 16 and 17, 11% always or often felt lonely, rising to 19% among 18 to 20 year olds and 23% among 21 to 25 year olds. This then jumped to 55% of care leavers aged 25 or over, although there were only 6 care leavers in this age group in the sample. We also found this increase in loneliness by age in the pre-pandemic data; 14% of those aged 16 and 17 reported they always or often felt lonely, followed by 21% of 18 to 20 year olds and 26% of 21 to 25 year olds.

The living situation of care leavers played a major role in how lonely they felt. Unsurprisingly, the groups of care leavers most often reporting they often/always felt lonely were those in custody, supported accommodation, homeless, short stay or emergency accommodation (Figure 17). These living arrangements are precarious, but the effects of the pandemic and the resultant social distancing measures may have amplified feelings of loneliness. The next loneliest group was made up of care leavers who rented their own home, with 22% reporting that they felt lonely 'always/often'. Pre-pandemic, those experiencing homelessness reported often/always feeling lonely the most, followed by those who owned their home. However, caution should be taken as sample sizes in some groups were below 30.

## The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers' well-being

**Figure 17:** Percentage reporting 'often/always' feeling lonely, by living situation, pre-pandemic vs 2020-21



Base: Pre-pandemic (2017-2019) (n=1,250), 2020-21 (n=2,424) \*Small base size of less than 30.

The ONS also reported that 39% of the general population of Great Britain aged 16 and over who are renting experienced lockdown loneliness - that is, loneliness specifically as a result of the pandemic - compared to just 7% of renters aged 16 and over who experience chronic non-lockdown related loneliness ([ONS, 2020a](#)). It is not clear why this is the case, although it may be that many renters live alone and were unable to visit family and friends due to lockdown restrictions. In our survey, the least lonely groups were those living with parents or other relatives (14%) or with foster

## The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers' well-being

carers (15%), as well as those who owned their own home (14%). This is unsurprising, as these living arrangements suggest an element of company and support.

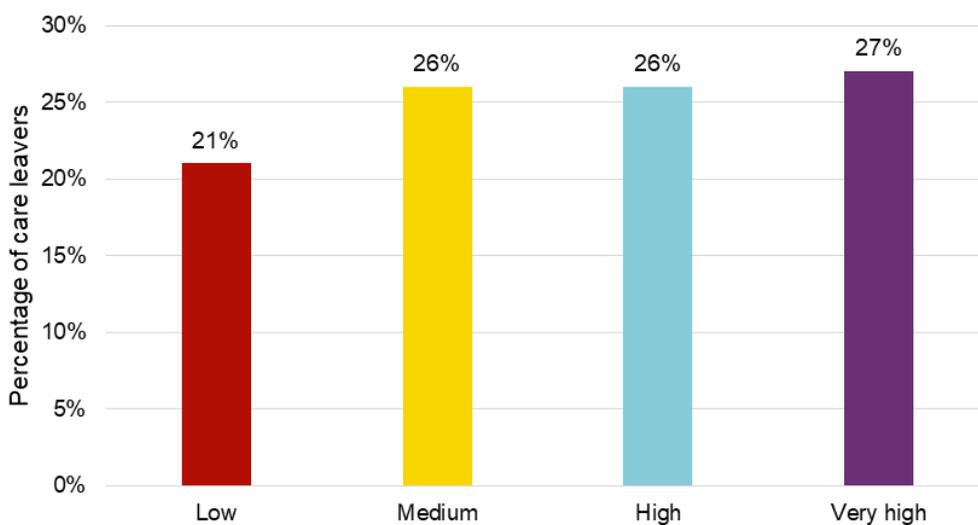
## Well-being

### Positivity about the future

Optimism is linked with mental and physical health, well-being, and lower levels of depression, as well as confidence in one's ability to achieve personal goals (Bouchard et al. 2018).

When we asked care leavers how positive they felt about the future, the majority (79%) reported high to moderate levels of positivity about the future (Figure 18). Just over one in five (21%) reported low positivity, answering 0 to 4 on a scale where 0 was 'not at all positive' and 10 was 'completely positive'. These results are very similar to the pre-pandemic sample where 20% reported low positivity and 27% reported high positivity. The percentages for medium and very high positivity remained the same.

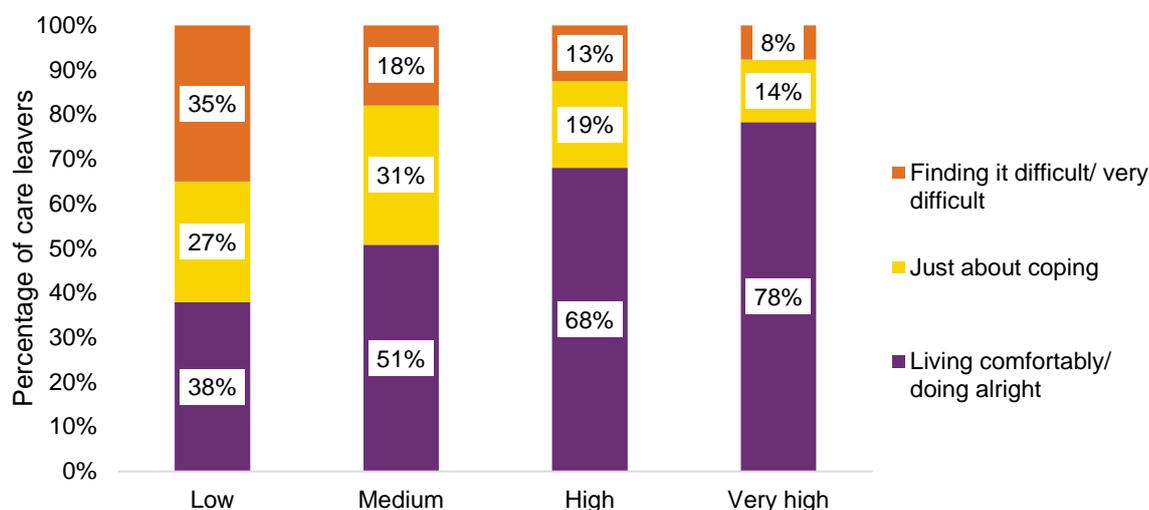
**Figure 18:** Levels of positivity about the future



Base: 2020-21 (n=2,423)

Unsurprisingly, the financial situation of the care leavers in our whole sample played a role in how positive they felt about the future (Figure 19), with higher positivity levels much more common in those who reported that they were 'living comfortably' or 'doing alright' than those finding it 'difficult' or 'very difficult'. Nearly four-fifths (78%) of care leavers who report 'very high' levels of positivity reported that they were 'living comfortably' or 'doing alright' financially, compared to 68% of those with 'high' positivity, 51% of those with 'medium' positivity, and just 38% for those with 'low' positivity. Similarly, 35% of those reporting 'low' levels of positivity were finding it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to cope financially, compared with just 8% of those with 'very high' positivity.

**Figure 19:** Levels of positivity about the future, by financial situation



Base: 2020-21 care leavers with low positivity about future (n=520), medium positivity (n=619), high positivity (n=619), very high positivity (n=669)

## ONS well-being measures

We also asked about happiness, life satisfaction, whether you think the things you do in life are worthwhile, and about levels of anxiety. These are questions used by the Office for National Statistics to measure well-being in the general population.

- Pre-pandemic, 34% had high scores on anxiety, answering 6 to 10 out of 10 to 'How anxious did you feel yesterday?' In 2020-21 this was stable at 35%.
- Pre-pandemic, 26% had low scores on happiness, answering 0 to 4 out of 10 to 'How happy did you feel yesterday?' In 2020-21 this was stable at 26%.
- Pre-pandemic, 23% had low scores on feeling life was worthwhile, answering 0 to 4 out of 10 to 'Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?' In 2020-21 this was 24%.
- Pre-pandemic, 26% had low scores on life satisfaction, answering 0 to 4 out of 10 to 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?' In 2020-21 this was 27%.

On all the well-being questions a much higher proportion of care leavers reported low well-being in comparison with young people aged 16 to 24 in the general population pre-pandemic (Briheim-Crookall et al, 2020; ONS, 2020e). These high levels of low well-being persisted, but, were not necessarily greatly worsened by the pandemic. The comparative data for young people has not yet been published for the year April 2020 to March 2021, but there is whole population data for this period. Looking at these measures there has been a slight increase (1-2%) in the percentage reporting low well-being on all four measures in the general population (ONS, 2021b).

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**Table 6:** Comparison of well-being measures of care leavers and the general population pre-pandemic (2017-19) and 2020-21.

|   | Care leavers<br>(16 to 25 years) | General<br>population<br>(16 to 24 years) | Care leavers<br>(16 to 25 years) | General<br>population<br>(all adults) |
|---|----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
|   | Pre-pandemic<br>(2017-2019)      | Pre-pandemic<br>(2019-20)                 | Pandemic<br>(2020-21)            | Pandemic<br>(2020-21)                 |
| <b>Low life satisfaction</b>                                | 26%                              | 3%  | 27%                              | 6%                                    |
| <b>Low rating of how worthwhile things done in life are</b> | 23%                              | 4%  | 24%                              | 4%                                    |
| <b>Low happiness yesterday</b>                              | 26%                              | 8%  | 26%                              | 9%                                    |
| <b>High anxiety</b>   | 34%                              | 23%                                       | 35%                              | 24%                                   |

## Conclusion

In last year's *What Makes Life Good* report, we identified key recommendations for local authorities, guided by factors that care leavers themselves have identified:

- Improving connections, building trusting relationships and addressing loneliness
- Providing emotional and mental health support
- Providing money management and financial support
- Improving accommodation support

This report confirms that these recommendations all remain relevant. Holes in the system existed before the pandemic and are even more important to address now. Pre-pandemic, not all care leavers had consistent leaving care workers who they could get in touch with easily. Care leavers still reported much higher levels of loneliness, anxiety and stress and lower life satisfaction than the general population. The availability of emotional support from counsellors and mental health professionals remains low. Increased financial pressures as a result of the pandemic among the general population already existed among care leavers. More still feel unsafe in their homes, compared to the general population.

But it is important to recognise the good news stories in this report. In a pandemic we would perhaps expect well-being and optimism to dramatically worsen for care leavers who have already experienced trauma. Care leavers reach independence much sooner than their peers and to do this during a pandemic requires significant emotional and practical support which still isn't always available. Yet in many areas there was no change or slight improvements in care leavers' experiences.

Some of the additional support that was put in place by local authorities, charities, communities and central government may have helped to stave off crisis for some. Financial and practical support and increased contact may have led some care leavers to feel more financially secure, ensured better digital access and helped prevent increases in loneliness and anxiety. Care leavers' own hard-won personal resilience may also explain this.

The pandemic has highlighted the strengths of local authorities and practitioners in responding to the needs of care leavers in challenging times. We should learn from these strengths. Local authorities and practitioners should continue to be proactive in contacting care leavers and responding to their needs, offering financial and digital support and keeping in touch more frequently and in different ways.

These positive findings should not result in complacency, as there are still urgent gaps to address. Local authorities should continue to prioritise what is important to care leavers, ensuring services are guided by this. They should promote a culture where services give care leavers the same opportunities as other young people, especially those who have a long-term health condition or disability, who we find continue to suffer disproportionate challenges. We must continue to aim to make the transition to adulthood more gradual, going at the young person's pace. To enter young adulthood successfully amid continued uncertainty, more than ever, care leavers need supportive, stable and trusting relationships with the people around them, including leaving care support workers, for as long as they feel they need them.

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## About us

For more information about the Bright Spots programme go to [coramvoice.org.uk/brightspots](https://coramvoice.org.uk/brightspots)

**Coram** is the UK's oldest children's charity and has been supporting vulnerable children for 280 years. Coram today is a group of specialist organisations helping more than a million children, young people professionals and families every year

**Coram Voice** is a leading children's rights organisation, championing the rights of children in care, care leavers and others who depend upon the help of the state. We get young voices heard in decisions that matter to them and work to improve their lives.