



**coramVoice** )))  
getting young voices heard

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# Messages to the Minister

Mental health support

Priority number **1**

2025

# Background

Back in October 2024, over 300 care-experienced children and young people from across England shared their views with us about what the Children's Minister should focus on. From that consultation, three top priorities were chosen:

- 1. Mental health support**
- 2. Listening to young people in decisions about their lives**
- 3. Building good relationships**

A National Voice has turned the words and quotes from those young people into a set of specific recommendations. These recommendations have been split into three separate briefing papers, with subheadings that group similar ideas together.

At our October 2025 Amplify event, an annual event run by A National Voice (ANV), the national children in care council, we gave more young people the chance to share their thoughts on the recommendations we created. Amplify brings together care-experienced children and young people from across the country to network, share their views, celebrate achievements, and take part in consultations that shape change. At the event, their task was to help us understand which of the recommendations they felt should be prioritised and focused on first. This activity focused on mental health, as it was identified as the top priority from the original consultation.

There are three separate briefing papers for each of the three topics. In this document, you'll find our recommendations to the Children's Minister in relation to mental health.

# Background

## **About A National Voice**

A National Voice is the national children in care council for England. It is led by care experienced young people aged 16 to 25, known as ambassadors, from across the country. Together they gather the views of children in care and care leavers, share what young people are saying, and work with decision makers, professionals and government so young people's experiences directly shape policy and practice.

## **About the order of recommendations**

On the next page, four headline mental health recommendations are presented. These were identified by young people at the Amplify event as the priorities to focus on first and are listed in that order. Any further recommendations that follow in this briefing paper are not presented in a ranked order.

*All italicised quotes in this document reflect a mix of the voices of over 300 care-experienced children and young people, alongside A National Voice's work to turn their words into clear recommendations.*

# The top recommendations

The four recommendations below were consistently scored the highest during consultation at Amplify, highlighting the areas young people felt the Children's Minister should prioritise first.

1

## **Make mental health support opt-out for young people entering care**

Mental health services for young people entering care should be opt-out, not opt-in. This means every young person gets automatic support straight away, without long waits or complicated referrals, unless they decide they do not want or need it.

2

## **Continue providing services until age 25**

Mental health services for young people should continue until age 25. They should not stop suddenly at 18, but carry on consistently until young people feel ready to end support.

3

## **Early and needs-based intervention**

Young people in care should get help with their mental health as soon as they need it, not only after reaching a crisis point. Support must be available based on individual need rather than strict criteria, so that problems are addressed before they escalate.

4

## **Consistency and trust in support**

Mental health support should be built around trusting, continuous relationships. Young people should have consistent support and not have to keep retelling their story to new professionals. All those working with care experienced youth must understand trauma and be equipped to support their mental wellbeing.

# Trauma and Emotional Impact

## Mental health Support

The following recommendations were also shared by young people, in addition to the top four identified on the previous page, and have been categorised under different headings.

Young people should have dedicated mental health services that last long-term and work at their pace. Support should always be a choice, not something forced, so that young people feel comfortable and stay engaged.

Mental health support should be led by young people and offered in a way that respects their preferences. They should have the choice to wait or pause if they are not ready, with an easy way to return and access support if and when they want it.

Every team that works with children in care and care leavers should have a dedicated mental health lead who helps children and young people access the right support for them based on their age and needs, and for as long as they need it.

*"I also think a recommendation is don't force that young person or person in care into therapy because if you're forcing them into it they're not going to seek therapy in the like longer term"*

*"I think like maybe play therapy... just getting to understand that young person... a young person might be 15, but they may have the mental age of someone that's lower... I think it really depends on the person, everybody's so different"*

# Early Intervention and Prevention

Pastoral staff in schools should support children earlier, before they enter care, not only after they have already moved into care.

All school staff should get training about children in care to reduce stigma and make sure pupils are supported sensitively. This training should help staff understand what it means to be care-experienced and avoid practices that make young people feel singled out.

Schools should play a stronger role in supporting the wellbeing of children in care and those at risk. Pastoral staff should be involved earlier so challenges are picked up sooner. Schools should also have independent mental health support workers on site, in safe and confidential spaces, so young people know support is there if they want it.

Respite care should be offered as a form of mental health support, giving young people short breaks when home or care situations feel difficult. It should always be a choice, not something decided for you.

Early intervention in child protection should be improved so that young people at risk can move into care more quickly instead of staying in harmful situations for too long.

*"Maybe [school pastoral staff] could be involved earlier rather than just you go into care then they start to sort of check on you – maybe they could be involved before it happens if it's looking it might go in that direction"*

*"I think also schools need to make children in care not feel like children in care and [not] make it as publicly known because... that just doesn't help the situation because then you're the talk of your peers"*

# Access to Mental Health Support

Local authorities should improve coordination when moving young people out of area, ensuring continuity of mental health support and avoiding service gaps.

Mental health support should be available in flexible, youth-friendly settings, not just clinical ones.

Young people should have access to a wider range of support, including therapies like animal, play or creative activities, with proper funding to make this possible. Everyone is different, so young people should be able to choose what works best for them.

*“I think there needs to be greater communication between different local authorities because if you are moving someone out of area... it’s hard for them to access... mental health support. There needs to be greater communication... This young person hasn’t had a choice to move, but it is your choice as professionals to... implement the support in place.”*

*“There isn’t enough funding... for things like counselling [and] therapy for teenagers – so... we’ve kind of said before, more funding. But then how that funding might look: pet therapy, animal therapy, play therapy.”*

## Trust Issues

Young people who struggle to trust their social worker should have access to an alternative, independent support worker, such as an advocate, Independent Visitor or participation worker.

Mental health assessments should feel like a supportive conversation, not a tick box exercise, with professionals trained to use them in a sensitive way that builds trust. They should be structured to give a full picture of young people's wellbeing, with prompts to really understand how young people are doing, for example exploring issues with sleep and concentration as well as feelings.

Social workers, personal advisers and mental health professionals should get ongoing training in mental health and care experience awareness, co delivered with young people with lived experience. This should go alongside trauma informed practice so young people feel properly understood and supported.

Mental health professionals should be trained on the care system and leaving care, so they better understand children in care and care leavers' challenges and reduce stigma. This training should be co-delivered with people who have lived experience.

*"What me and my social worker would used to do [is] we'll go to like eating places or something that we both enjoy doing and it allowed me to just talk about anything and everything... I think it's really important for social workers to come across as that they're really here to like listen, not for their job."*

## Build Trust

Foster carers should get mental health awareness training, as they are often the first to notice changes in young people's behaviour and can support early intervention. This training should be co-delivered with people who have lived experience.

Care-experienced young people should have access to peer mentors or care buddies who understand their experiences and can offer advice, encouragement and support. This should be alongside other trusted relationships, giving young people someone relatable to turn to.

*"...there's a whole host of different systems that need to get involved... it's all well and good PAs and social workers being mental health trained, but then the mental health team are the ones that aren't trained on leaving care and they add more stigma to it... I think there needs to be multiple agencies involved in it and there needs to be... meetings... between mental health, leaving care and... the young person to actually have these conversations"*

*"Maybe a suggestion of like an older... care buddy or something – so if you're a bit younger, talking to someone who's gone through something similar... they know the type of experiences you're talking about... and they have probably a greater insight into what's going on, so they can give you advice on simpler things and if something comes up that they're not equipped to deal with, they... know who to pass it on to... basically... you feel less isolation [with] someone who's going through [a] similar experience"*

# Stigma and Barriers to Seeking Help

Social care records should be written to the young people who will read them in the future, ensuring language is respectful and non-judgemental. This will make it easier for young people to make sense of and deal with their life stories when reading their records.

When young people request access to their files, they must be offered counselling or trusted support to help process the information in a safe and supportive way.

Social workers and services should provide youth-friendly mental health resources, such as leaflets explaining common struggles and signposting to accessible support services.

Social workers and professionals should read young people's files thoroughly so they do not have to repeatedly relive traumatic experiences. At the same time, social workers should be open about what they know and give young people the choice to share what they feel is important in their own words. This balance helps young people feel in control of their story while making sure professionals have the full context.

*"From my experience... you have to like retell your story each time to every single one of [your social workers] and it's like you don't want to relive... your past and yet you have to so they understand... it's hard to say to one social worker let alone another one... If they have like files... of all our information, why can't they just like read those, instead of like asking us, because we might not want to bring it up?"*

## Transition to Independence (Care Leavers)

Young people should be able to maintain relationships with trusted professionals, such as social workers or IROs, after turning 18 if they want to, rather than having support stop abruptly.

Care leavers should always have the option to request support from a trusted professional within the local authority until age 25, as they legally have a right to.

Life skills training should be prioritised before a young person leaves care, ensuring they feel prepared for independence in areas such as budgeting, housing and daily responsibilities. Feeling more prepared will reduce anxiety about leaving care.

Supported accommodation and gradual transitions to independence should be standard practice, rather than expecting care leavers to navigate adulthood alone overnight. The cliff edge of care, meaning the sudden drop off in support, affects young people's mental health.

Housing providers and social workers should reassure care leavers about their tenancy rights and offer clear guidance to reduce anxiety about eviction or housing instability.

*"...there needs to be some flexibility or the ability to be able to be flexible based on what works best for that young person – not just... 'that's it at an age and we're not helping you anymore.'...We hear it a lot, that cliff edge of support where... you get to a certain age and boom. It just all changes."*

# Get Involved

## Share your practice or try something new

Across the country, many local authorities, services and organisations are already doing positive work that reflects these recommendations. We want to help highlight what is working well and make sure it reaches national decision makers.

You might:

- already be delivering something that links to a recommendation, or
- have a recommendation you want to focus on in your area and tell us how it works in practice.

If so, we would really like to hear from you.

Please email [ANV@coramvoice.org.uk](mailto:ANV@coramvoice.org.uk) with:

- the recommendation or title you are responding to and why
- a short description of what you are doing (or what you plan to try)
- where the work is taking place (local authority, region or organisation)
- any outcomes, learning or impact you have seen so far



We may share examples of practice and learning with the Children's Minister and wider partners to help spread ideas and encourage change nationally. With your permission, examples may also be featured on our [Bright Spots Resource Bank](#) so others can learn from what is working in practice.

## Stay connected with A National Voice

If you would like to hear more about our work, future consultations or opportunities to involve young people, you can [sign-up to our network here](#).

Thank you for helping ensure care-experienced children and young people's views lead to real change.

**THANK YOU!**

Thank you to all **325** care experienced children and young people, aged 4-26+, who helped us shape these recommendations. Your voices came from **45** different local authorities across England, and together you created a powerful and honest picture of what needs to change. Because of everything you shared, our A National Voice (ANV) ambassadors were able to turn your views into clear, specific recommendations for the Children's Minister.

A huge thank you as well to each **ANV ambassador** for helping to turn these valuable voices into meaningful and actionable messages.

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**45**

Local  
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