Relational

Child &Youth

Care

Practice

Addressing the Challenges and Agency of Youth Leaving Care in India during Covid-19

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Abstract

We, the authors of the article, are researchers who have supported academic work on aftercare in India while relating with Child Care Institutions. We are vocal about the inheritance right of the care leavers as wards of the State. The inheritance rights of girls, though legally ordained, are hugely contested in practice, as the institution of marriage barters them away for family unpaid labour. Girls brought up outside families in institutions are doubly deprived of their inheritance. When marriage disfunction takes place, the female is on her own, often loaded with responsibility of children from the marriage. During the pandemic, the girls and women faced increased violence within homes as well as in institutions. We explore case study evidence to hold stakeholders answerable on the efficiency and effectivity of strategies utilised to safeguard the wellbeing of its wards.

This article holds the State as responsible for the wellbeing of those it has taken the responsibility of protecting. These include people who have suffered violence, indignity, hunger and life-threatening circumstances. The five-year planning of state and district plans have utilised more resources than produced outcomes and output. In this article we put together a learning from strategies that can facilitate duty holders to emerge as more responsible actors during the pandemic that continues.

The names of the people mentioned in the article have been changed to protect their identity.

Youth leaving care homes, are continually unemployed, stigmatized and excluded. This increased during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020 and continues in 2022 as the world is coming to terms with the new 'normal' regime of isolating self even when you live within a family. The relational practice of developing association for "those in care of the State" is the focus of this article. State as a guardian takes on the responsibility to adopt the children who are placed in Child Care Institutions (CCIs) but at 18 years of age and most of the times even before they attain adulthood, the children are "handed back" into a dysfunctional family environment sans association of the child with different sets of people who can nurture them back to wellness. Our article is based on a relational matrix of women who were raised in care homes to offer a perspective as a way forward based on case studies. We summarise a few cases below.

Shivani was in a care home in Pune in India, which housed her along with her elder sister. Their father, a labourer, was a substance abuse addict and was violent to the mother and the children. Shivani was trained in stitching and designing by the Usha Silia School with assistance from New Vision Foundation – which supports youth care leavers with their skills and professional education – and can earn around Rs 3000 by stitching clothes at home. Her mother cooks food as a domestic worker but has been struggling with cancer for a long time. Her earnings do not pay for her medicine, so the daughters must help out. Her mother has not been able to make her identification documents as Shivani's father had no permanent home and she was homeless. As a result, she has not been able to access any of the government schemes for a widow pension, subsidy of liquified petroleum gas (LPG) or for medical relief. The elder daughter earns Rs 25,000 as an accountant, so they are able to pay the rent of a house post Covid-19 wave three and

the electricity. Her engagement for marriage broke up for want of money during Covid first wave.

During the first wave of Covid-19 in India the sources of income dried up for many including Shivani's family. The mother's treatment was postponed, which has had long term negative effects on her health currently. They had support of groceries from the Youth Care Leavers Association, India (YCLA, India). From this support a bond developed between Shivani and her elder sister to help them understand the strength of relating with other care leavers who faced multiple level isolation during Covid-19 waves. The isolation of being a care leaver and the isolation of poverty evaporated when the YCLA leader (Aditya: one of the co-authors) asked the mother to cook for him as well and thus began a tiffin service, which the family generated as an alternate income and to form a relationship of co-interdependence during Covid-19 pandemic.

Similar relationships were built when the YCLA leader Aditya, who is a care leaver himself, reached out to other care leavers. The good thing about being in care is that the children get the opportunity to educate themselves. Twenty-six-year-old Shobhita completed her LLB degree, while thirty-six-year-old Manju became a schoolteacher at the care institution after completing her Masters and Bachelor degrees in Education. Associations and activities in her social sphere gave her recognition and she has applied for the Child Welfare Committee member of her district. During the pandemic she had the names and addresses of youth care leavers, some of which YCLA supported with groceries and educational fees. It is rare for schoolteachers to have phone numbers of the students they taught, but Manju had a good relationship with the children in care while she taught them, and this is the reason why they keep coming back to her.

Sushmita is a thirty-five-year-old care leaver who received support as a young adult in Pune, India. Today she works with a non-profit foundation to support other care leavers. Her skills as a social development personnel developed through the years while she was able to get support for her living from a fellowship. Sushmita has a house she owns with her married family. During the initial phase of the pandemic year, she was able to shelter five women and two male care leavers. These care leavers are homeless again as the house had to be rented out to augment the household incomes. Women care leavers

struggle to find accommodation, as work is intermittent, even when rent should be paid every month. Sushmita points out, "Issues of care leavers, especially orphans, remain the same. They still do not have shelter, have no access to rations/meals, and education options and job avenues are unclear. These concerns just became more pressing during the pandemic. The situation has been more acute for women." (UNICEF, 2021b)

Most girls in a Child Care Institution (CCI) are "married off" at 18 years of age to rehabilitate an orphan into a family. Rashmi at 28 years is an anxious and stressed mother of three children. She was raised in an NGO supported orphanage. Her married family has now left her to fend for herself in a metro city as they are looking after her paralysed husband in a small town. She has to manage her household and children's educational fees from her meagre monthly salary of Rs 7000. As a nurse who could not complete her nursing course, she can only fill in as a *"Para Nurse"* or Assistant Nurse when other, fully qualified nurses, do not turn up for duty hours in the neighbourhood nursing home. She had to take on night shifts too, as her rent and school fees for the children make her expenses run up to Rs 12,000 a month. Tired and over worked her health does not seem good and needs care. There is hope for her. "I have to provide the best possible for my children, for their good future," she says unwaveringly.

Her participation in a Care Leavers Association provided her with grocery support and psychological support from the YCLA during pandemic crises and attending regular care-leavers' meetings gave her hope. Her vision is to lead the collective as she is acquainted with other young men and women who are in worse condition than her. She says, "I want to be a be a youth facilitator, guide other young people to better options and opportunities." These care leavers are those who still do not have a family to give them an identity and stability. They have difficulty in procuring government benefits like public distribution systems (PDS) or subsidized rations, for their orphanage cannot legally be responsible for them after 18 years of age. They would rather not go back to the care shelter as it is struggling to feed younger children it now shelters since the onset of pandemic. Care leavers do not get jobs, shelter and food as they are not verified, they migrate from one place to another, in search of work. Others, unlike Rashmi, may not be as fortunate.

Homes that take in care leavers are not free of violence either. Achala is a forty-year-old care leaver who, as a teenager, was married without her consent by her CCI to a man fifteen years older than her who as a daily wage labourer from a higher caste. She has a fifteen-year-old son. She is today earning Rs7,000/- per month as a Para nurse at a small clinic near her home. During Covid-19 first wave India was under severe lock down and the clinic was shut. The couple lost their jobs and income and the husband began to sexually and physically abuse her. Her calls for help to other female care leavers at that time suggested her to bear it as the police were not taking in any cases of violence at that time. She then reached out to YCLA and was counselled to file the complaint in the nearest police station. Aditya also referred this case to the District Women Protection Cell (DWPC) and immediately the husband was given adequate summons and Achala got the adequate psychological support from the formal protection system as a woman facing domestic abuse. Achala related with the support system on getting the confidence of relating with the YCLA.

The non-existence of rights of care leaver wards to State institutions as children of the state is the gap that these cases point out. The children get to being the wards of the State and in this lies a very powerful relation that must be given a formal set up. A District Care of State Wards inheritance cell can be proposed to safeguard those that the State needs to protect.

Youth in general need protection but in some cases care leavers need it more than those who have not yet been failed by the state systems. Care leavers aspire to lead parts of the mainstream youth movement and to transform the very situations that makes parents abandon children in the first place, but they are at the bottom of the pyramid of the Indian youth population. The challenge arises: can they lead this large youth population in a country which has 356 million citizens in the age bracket of 10-24 years (*The Economic Times*, 2014). These youth are alienated and enraged that the government spends less than 5% of annual budget on youth related schemes and programs (*The Indian Express*, 2020) when youth contribute 34% of the gross national income and constitute about 27.5% of the population in age group of 15-29 years (MoYAS, 2014).

The young grapple not only with increasing their employability but also with a lack of education, skill training, robust health and social protection. They face unemployment, deprivation, homelessness and migration compulsions in the absence of a pivotal support system. The educated youth are troubled with fee hikes, reduced education budgets and limited opportunities to participate equally in matters that concern them.

Youth are not a homogenous group; they differ in competence, engagement and their well-being quotient. The stress and pressure faced by both educated and working-class youth has been reported widely and the increase in suicide among youth is an area of concern. According to the Lancet (2012) report, 40% and 60% of the males and females who committed suicide were in the age group of 15-29 years (The Hindu, 2020). The figures of suicides have soared since the onset of the pandemic with the National Crime Report Bureau (NCRB) reporting a 29% jump in suicide rates, the highest in the last decade. Student suicides comprised 8% of total deaths by suicide in 2020 (News18, 2021) and an 18% rise compared to 2019 (NDTV, 2021). Care leavers like Amreen Parveen, who is a 23-year-old understands this. While addressing the gathering in a UNICEF arranged forum, she said "We care leavers have supported other care leavers across the state. Please reach the terminally ill, disabled, adolescents and youth facing mental distress." (UNICEF, 2021b). Care leavers like her are able to voice their leadership style and aspirations and with support of apex bodies like UNICEF they can develop relational formalisation of their role as primary agents of State property and policy by addressing existing gaps in their relationship matrix.

Addressing Care Leavers Social Network and Services Gap

Adolescence is the emergence of physiological and bodily changes and is a transition time for children who face various psycho-social challenges. In addition to this, for youth leaving foster/alternative care homes upon turning 18 years, the precarious nature of their life is increased further due to the impending uphill tribulations related to adaptation and integration to mainstream life. Numerous studies (Hojer and Sjoblom, 2014) had evidenced that these youth care leavers are the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, more so if they are unprepared and lack proper transition care plans

(Courtney et al., 2019). These youth are generally devoid of support networks and financial or educational safety nets and are not consulted in their aftercare or rehabilitation plans (Roy, 2020). This makes them highly vulnerable during and after transitioning out of childcare homes. Once the access to assured services of care stop, they are left to fend for themselves, and this is more daunting for children who have history of abuse, neglect and homelessness (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Problems such as difficulties in finding suitable accommodation, seeking healthcare access, continuing higher education, paid work, dependence on alcohol or substances, lacking knowledge and self-care skills surfaces once out of care.

Past decade has witnessed organised activity to promote youth on platforms where their role as change makers is lauded. Youth programs do offer services and a community network for youth which provide mentorship, acceptance and reliable resources as the care leavers transition out of care. Yet these organisations do not give confidence to the youth that they are secure in a safe family, community and country.

In India, youth work is a creative pursuit of the young and it also promotes a leader's legacy. Today, youth leaders work on their social and economic enterprise and support causes along with their work. Not all category of youth can congregate as only some have the time from pursuing their daily needs, permissions from their providers and skills to communicate. Many are struggling to find their path, identity and most are resource less. Not all young have a connect to a network as they are economically and socially backward, or physically challenged. Some have special vulnerabilities when they are without adult support, some are homeless and stateless. As a volunteer or an intern, the young learn by contributing to people while they educate themselves. The opportunity to volunteer and intern is through network support or through the internet. These opportunities are to be provided to the young till they can be independent income earners. Young people today support their peers and also support themselves as they seek their place in the system. Youth wish to transform current vulnerabilities especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Youth have begun social innovation online to do more than what they had aspired earlier.

Aditya (one of the co-authors) has been mentioned in the case studies above as a leader. He is pursuing doctoral degree in a reputed institute circulated a form to more than 1000 care leavers in the state of Maharashtra during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic first wave lock down and asked care leavers about their situation. The research investigation revealed that the care leavers are dealing with panic attacks and heightened anxiety, loneliness due to hunger and uncertainty. Often due to hunger and vulnerability the care leavers are sucked into anti-social networks that endanger the children the orphanage may still be caring for. Aditya is a care-leaver, a leading activist for YCLA, India and has been relating to the care-leavers to strengthen an alumni network group named Ekla that aggregates its membership from many individual CCIs. He thus is developing a new relational platform that is apart from the CCI based relationship network. A UNICEF report documents how these young and dynamic members of YCLA coordinated with the police in state of Maharashtra, India to distribute 'medicines and rations to care leavers across the state, established peer support for emotional well-being and created linkages with NGOs and government relief bodies' (UNICEF, 2021b). In this way he is taking up own responsibility to build a social network and contribute back towards best interest of the likes of him, but youth like Aditya need immense support and handholding to tap their resources.

The adult support to youth is often conditional. Each social generation has a value base that changes with the next as these values interact within the divisions of the socio-political economy. NGOs, UN and the Government representatives though cognizant of such care-leavers groups do their bit but in doing so, they incur larger costs on their own staff and infrastructure. NGOs in India are being crushed under compliances and are forced to shut down under a compliance heavy regulations regime. Support needs to be directed towards Care Leavers Associations directly. Youth leaders like the ones mentioned in this article need support to address the particular gaps faced by youth with a care leavers identity to address their wellbeing gaps.

Initiatives and Associations for Empowering Care-leavers

As ward of the State the youth at 18 years must be skilled at inter-personal communication, academic and vocational development, management and coping with mental/emotional health issues, management of finance and time, physical health self-care and grooming learning, legal literacy. This training must start once these children are in adolescence in the CCIs to prepare them to get mainstreamed with a resilience, exposure and prior learning in how to tackle the untoward life events post care-leaving. If a youth at 18 years does not have these skills, then the State is to be made to provide for the youth well enough during the time it took responsibility of adopting children as its own. The State should also socialize the children as societal support to the youth care-leavers is imperative. There is mammoth difference in living within protective environment of care homes and negotiating the life outside it at a young age. Notwithstanding the skills and aptitude learnt previously, the youth care-leavers need enabling environment to realize their goals, for confidence building, for social networking and stepping onto the life events such as marriage and family creation and community living.

The tasks mentioned above are carried out by child welfare agencies and CCIs on behalf of the State and they must prepare and involve the care-leavers in their transition plan. These agencies are under huge stress as the State gives them more responsibilities than opportunities and budgets to carry on their designated roles. The child care and education budgets in India have been constantly decreasing over the years and this is a limiting factor indeed as finances are one important part of organized professional help.

Besides money, soft skills and nurturing requires emotive energies. Youth require hand holding, coaching, guidance, assistance, networking and advocacy from the larger society. These include mentoring in skill training, finding potential and stable employment, help in building social networks from among the youth peers and mentors who can provide fruitful information on jobs, healthcare, pursue higher education, secure housing and develop additional life skills. The youth need encouragement for decision making, being independent and self-reliant with reduced control and supervision, public acceptance through positive reinforcements. Peer support networks and regular

participation in group activities with youth in similar situations play a crucial role in transition into adulthood and out of care-homes. It promotes a sense of belongingness, helps in nurturing of advocacy groups based on similar interests, and needs and strengthens interpersonal bonds even out of the care homes.

UNICEF India in collaboration with YuWaah, a multi-stake holder forum facilitated launch of the National Care Leavers Network (NCLN) which is a youth based collective with a history of living in CCI focusing on aftercare for care leavers (UNICEF, 2021a). The need for support highlighted at the launch emphasized on skill training, financial handholding, knowledge dissemination, and access to higher education opportunities. The pandemic has worsened the challenges which was already uphill for the care-leavers in educational opportunities, access and affordability to healthcare services, shortage of accommodation, food insecurity, isolation and poor mental health.

The NCLN is an independent and democratic formal association of care-leavers with regional representation which provides a platform for the youth to raise voice. A Charter of Demands consisting of medical insurance, affordable housing, professional counselling, employability skills training, financial literacy and legal rights knowledge, access to identity documents such as Aadhar Card, Birth Certificate, Ration/PDS card, monthly financial stipend support until age 25 years, maintaining authentic and verified CCI database and conducting regular group meetings were drafted (UNICEF, 2021a).

Community integration, independent living, ignorance about higher education and diverse employment opportunities, poor sense of self and lack of creation of belongingness are some of many trials that youth who leave CCI on turning 18 years confront. As Aditya Charegaonkar, says, "Care leavers stay in rented rooms if they have jobs or more often than not, in slums and suddenly, those jobs are gone. So, where do we go? It's really tough for us because our network comprises our own peers who are in a similar situation. But nobody thinks of our unique situation. For instance, civil society provides ration, but mainly to families. Most care leavers are single." Thus, support in the form of job-readiness, career guidance, insights and inputs from professionals, community-based organizations (CBOs) and NGOs are likely to help combat and mitigate the challenges escalated due to the ongoing pandemic.

Relating by responding to an immediate need.

1. Get a support group to deal with immediate needs of care leavers in crises
2. Share information on youth volunteering and paid internship via internet to link the care leaver with others and ongoing development process.

Setting the wardship agenda and care leavers contribution to development of the district.

3. District authorities to allocate funds proportionate to the number of youths at risk and those facing systemic vulnerabilities.
4. Set up services to train youth to lead services enterprises to address vulnerabilities in each neighbourhood.

Entrenching the excluded youth to related with development of district as a long-term work.

5. Local Area Plan sets up projects that not only run inclusive and sustainable youth development at scale but offer youth residence at that facility.
6. Work in partnership with youth and adult forums for the above. (IVCO, 2018)

Recommendations and Way Forward

The authors represent a Non-profit organization called Sathi All For Partnerships (SAFP) that participated in the short term needs of 400 care leavers by crowd sourcing Rs 4,20,000 during the first lock down of 2020 for YCLA. The care leavers got Rs 1200 for grocery or Rs 5000 to pay for rent and fuel. Similar work was done by many other CCIs and individuals before they got back to their routines not linking the first support as a point through which relationship can be built for a long-term association as part of a

continued engagement with the person and the agency of the ward of the State. The box explains the steps that can be taken by any supporter to carry this process to a conclusive stage.

Challenges: The relational support required by care leavers cannot be a short-term bail out from a current crisis situation. The ongoing need of a person who does not have a home or a social network is rent and medical assistance besides daily expenses of food and transport. These ongoing needs can be taken care off through long term systems change approach that is to be applied in practice on a case-by-case basis.

Long term relationship approach: First the system has to work in favor of the care leavers. The Indian government has allocation of Rs 2000 a month for care leavers, but this money has not been released by the Central Ministry to reach the care leavers. This money can reach them after they are certified by their CCI as alumina of the CCI who are reluctant to certify as they want care leavers to navigate their own relationships themselves after they have graduated from the institution. Formal system support is a gap that has to be addressed by training children in care to lead vulnerable youth including care leavers to access resources for themselves by being a part of the existing governance and protection systems.

Solution: SAFP advocates the initiation of neighborhood resource zone (NRZ) within local area plan of District planning to address the existing resource and relational gaps. The NRZ consists of projects that initiate enterprises to house neighborhood services that can be managed by women in the area with help of interns who are care leavers. The Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in different districts are already existing under a National Urban or a Rural Livelihood scheme. These groups are in need of support from educated youth who could help them with reading and writing assistance for on-call support messaging to clients or to Government, NGOs and Corporates for assistance.

A group of mentors are required who understand the concept of NRZ. These mentors need to be renumerated or rewarded to guide the care leaver interns to seek the women

and livelihood SHGs to begin a relationship that could have long lasting impact for the development of the district they belong to together. This second level of a relational link of the care leavers with women SHGs is to become a mandate of the district planning process where a State Livelihood Mission undertakes additional responsibility to provide women groups to access public and private properties on the basis of a Detailed Project Report (DPR) they submit with assistance of designated mentors.

These SHGs need strengthening their livelihood enterprises in groups but they do not realize what kind of gaps need to be addressed. One of the basic gaps is that women always lag behind men in their asset and resource base. They along with care leavers need to become aware that the reason they have to articulate and ask for spaces is for reaching equity and equality they should have because it is the State who has not ensured equal property and asset base for women. Asking for spaces from the government and the corporate is a way to address the unmet constitutional guarantee of gender equality.

These spaces should be large enough to house the care leavers who work for SHG and stay on the premises. These premises need to be big enough to earn the SHG income either through rent or by running care services, information services, safe migration centers. For this funding, handholding and training for skills for developing different businesses is required.

A rural NRZ will be different than an urban NRZ as the context of each woman group, their livelihood and the service the neighborhood will require will differ. What can be common is that the NRZ could be a centre at source or a destination area where local and migrant workers can register themselves for their needs and rights.

This is how a care leaver can team-up with women SHGs in an area to manage the workers inflow that is required by the planned needs of the residents who may be involved in production or developing the care systems for a neighborhood of 200 units (public or private owned properties with people to be served) work with youth.

Medium-term support: The medium-term work towards the agenda of developing relational networks for wards of the State is placing the agenda with State authorities as well as CCIs and women SHGs. This proposal needs to be funded from an organization

that supports equality in a feminist perspective. The task once funded will involve intensive six months of training and awareness development on finance and livelihoods based on the potential for each actor to work towards bridging the resource gap for themselves as well as their local area services requirements. The local area plan guides an individual to work in group to be aware about their own potential, link with a set of vulnerable youth along with women who can work to uplift themselves, their communities and their geographies.

The system needs to respond to give vulnerable people like the care leavers over all support. Coming back to specific group like care leavers, we should work through people who have long term mission to address specific gaps in skilling, servicing and deepening resource base of the 200 households that should be linked to a facilitation centre.

Support is required to create youth community consciousness to work for the vulnerable and youth during and post Covid-19 timeline. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) realisation requires youth participation such that work on the vision should continue in the next generation. In central Asian countries, youth brigade is registered with the local administration to design neighbourhood activities. Youth in India too can contribute to serve the vulnerable like the elderly and those facing violence and discrimination, especially, battered women in every *Mohalla* (neighbourhood). For that they must be made aware of their potentials, roles and be encouraged to be responsible citizens.

Long term support: The NRZ is a plan to improve governance, need to work with youth. It manifests the co-creation of the 5th space in every neighbourhood (IVCO, 2018). This 5th space can be evolved to house homeless youth and women who can work to provide services as enterprise. Singapore and Malaysia have provided for infrastructure of the local area development to the youth. This neighbourhood space can also be used to train people in a neighbourhood to address chosen SDG gap in that area. Panchayats, cities and schools need to plan action with young people. These young people can work with the middle-age and the elderly. This is possible by involving adolescent and youth in the local decision-making processes that affect their lives such as in Bal Panchayats

(children governance) in Maharashtra during Covid-19 waves cited in a UNICEF (2021b) report.

The task of developing the 5th space in each neighbourhood managed by vulnerable and serviced by the youth could be piloted in each region through a local youth master plan (NLC, 2016). This constituency can be supported with an increased opportunity for youth for the following objectives:

- Increase youth resources including space (psychosocial/ community/ citizenship), services (housing, health, education and transport) and assets (infrastructure/property, financial base work equipment and communication modes)
- Foster youth mentoring to increase skills through placements that strengthen youth networks.
- Train and monitor youth associations to elect leaders at local, district, national and international level.

These youth care-leavers networks such as YCLA to assist youth in searching their identity. Their wellbeing becomes a shared responsibility for an adult youth partnership which looks after their needs right now, so that they can continue to work on SDG after adults no longer can, due to age and other factors. With the wellbeing taken care off, youth can equally participate in the development processes. These strategies need a trained youth workforce and a policy and programme environment.

Youth care-leavers networks need amplified support to become one with the youth work force in India to look up to by creating a youth group in each ward that works with people of all generation. This youth group can develop projects in their ward to increase intergenerational coordination and understanding on how their ward can create jobs and work locally to link globally. Post Covid-19 this is the core area to work upon.

Conclusion

The strategies documented in this paper have been shared with the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog; the erstwhile Planning Commission of India, as well as with different policy experts and Chief Ministers of States who understood bits and pieces and applied parts of these strategies within the gender equality umbrella. The CCIs supporting youth leaving care also have read about these strategies and efforts have been made by CCIs to try these out with their own alumnus. Small strokes already exist, but the big picture requires bigger strokes as well as a global-local adoption of the whole piece and not just its parts. At the core of the initiative is the inherent right of the female care leaver that must give space to the woman who the family disinherits through unequal share in all that is owned, managed and controlled by people who will benefit the most with the transformation that this strategy set promotes.

The pandemic has thrown a spotlight on our societies, it has shown the need for serious attention on our present, and our future. The young adults are our future, but they are also today's citizens. They have poignantly demonstrated in focussing the state's attention on the urgent need to tackle the challenges exacerbated by economic and pandemic crises. This is the appropriate time to understand that what is a better opportunity than now to seize the time, place it under the microscope and review our approach towards assisting Youth Care Leavers to emerge safely and confidently into adulthood.

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