



From Surviving to Thriving

**The seven drivers of well-being for
children in care and care leavers**

Full report and Technical Appendix

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December 2025

coramVoice)))
getting young voices heard

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the people who helped to make this work possible including:

- The Hadley Trust whose generous funding enabled us to produce this report.
- Our Care Experienced Consultants - Alfie, Chloe, Valerie, Jamie, Ed, Thaiquan and Jade - the young people who brought their lived experience of care to help us explore the findings and how best to present them.
- Professor Julie Selwyn, University of Oxford, who developed the Bright Spots programme with Coram Voice and provided helpful advice and feedback on early findings.
- All the local authorities who have partnered with Coram Voice over the years for their commitment to engaging with and listening to their children and young people, helping us amplify the voices of young people nationally through reports such as this.
- The children and young people who responded to the Bright Spots surveys over the last 10 years giving us a rich insight into their lives, sharing their thoughts, hopes and worries.

A note on language

The care system is full of acronyms and terminology that can feel alien to children and young people who already face being treated differently because of their care experience. Coram Voice Care Experienced Consultants (young people aged 16–25 with lived experience of care who support our work through paid opportunities) helped review the language in this report.

Language matters: we have tried to avoid terms like *placement* (using *home* instead) and *contact* (using *time with family*), though some terms remain for clarity. We know some young people question phrases like *care leaver*, feeling they did not leave care, but that care left them. Our consultants raised this point, and we considered alternatives such as *care experienced young people*.

The Bright Spots surveys focus on children and young people in care and those supported by leaving care services—a specific group often referred to as *children in care* and *care leavers*. We avoided *looked after children* because of negative associations with its acronym but retained *children in care* and *care leavers* for accuracy. We did not use *care experienced children and young people* as this includes a wider group, such as those who have returned home or been adopted, which is beyond the current Bright Spots programme. However, exploring their well-being in future would be valuable and we will look to take this forward as part of the research strategy of the Coram Institute for Children.

Safeguarding and trigger warning

Throughout this report, we have used children and young people's own words to reflect their experiences. Some of what they share is upsetting and highlights difficult moments in their lives. The Bright Spots team is very mindful of this when conducting the surveys. We brief the adults who support children and young people on how to respond if concerns arise. We also signpost all survey respondents to sources of advice and support should they need it. In addition, the Bright Spots team reviews all responses and flags any safeguarding concerns to the local authorities we work with.

1 Foreword

Well-being is something everyone talks about, for care-experienced people, it is not just about feeling happy it is about having stability, safety, and people who listen. Growing up in care, I learned early on how to survive, not how to feel. There were times I had to hide my emotions just to get through the day.

That is why it is so important we talk about well-being. For care-experienced young people. Conversations like this remind us that we are not alone and that it is okay to put our well-being first. It is a way to break the silence that the system sometimes leaves us with, and to start changing how care is seen and delivered.

Talking about well-being helps build spaces where honesty and hope can exist side by side. It gives people like me the chance to show that even after everything, we can still grow, heal, and make a difference.

Well-being matters, because people in care deserve more than survival, we deserve to live a normal life!

Alfie-James Waring; Care Experienced Consultant

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2 Introduction

This report is produced by the Coram Institute for Children, the first Independent Research Organisation dedicated to children to mark the 50th anniversary of Coram Voice as the leading national charity for the voice of the child in care and care leavers.

Over 10 years, the Bright Spots programme has been an important part of our work making sure young voices are heard and inform decision-making by capturing how children and young people themselves feel about their lives and informing both local and national policy.

Developed in partnership with Professor Julie Selwyn at the University of Oxford, the Bright Spots surveys were co-produced with children and young people to measure what they felt made their lives good and has been made possible by The Hadley Trust.

To date the *Your Life Your Care* (for children in care) and *Your Life Beyond Care* surveys (for care leavers) have heard from thousands of children and young people aged 4 to 25 and over. This report draws on 27,000 of those responses from across more than 70 local authorities gathered between 2015-2024, with a particular focus on the most recent data from 2021-24 (11,104 responses).

This is not a study of care system outcomes, which are reported in government data such as educational attainment. Nor is it a commentary on child protection priorities that led to children and young people entering care. Instead, this study is distinctive for its explicit focus on the views of children and young people—what matters most to them in their lives—its scale relative to the numbers in and leaving care, and its perspective over ten years.

This full report and technical appendix setting out the in-depth analysis and methodology is complemented by a shorter ‘Key findings and Recommendations’ report that summarises what we found. There is also a visual summary of findings and a brief executive summary.

2.1 What is well-being?

Well-being is about “how we’re doing” as individuals, communities, and as a nation. It encompasses both objective indicators and subjective experiences. Subjective well-being, which we capture in the Bright Spots surveys, focuses on how people themselves feel – whether they are happy in their lives and with their lives.

2.2 Well-being matters

Well-being isn’t just a ‘nice extra’ or something that feels good—it has lasting effects that shape life outcomes throughout a person’s life. Compared to people with low well-being, individuals with higher levels of well-being generally experience better physical and mental health, stronger immune systems, quicker recovery from illness, and greater productivity at work. Conversely, low well-being is associated with stress, absenteeism, and poorer long-term health outcomes (WHO, 2020; Bevan, 2010; Steptoe et al., 2015).

Evidence shows that children’s well-being has a direct impact on their educational outcomes, with higher levels of life satisfaction strongly linked to improved academic performance (Suldo et al., 2015). And in later life, children’s emotional health has a stronger influence on their life satisfaction in adulthood than either academic attainment or income (Layard et al., 2014; LSE, 2015).

2.3 Measuring children and young people's well-being

There is no single agreed definition of well-being means, nor a universal way to measure it. Several national and international research programmes have sought to better understand the well-being of children and young people. In the UK, notable examples include the Children's Society's Good Childhood index¹ and annual Good Childhood Reports and the BeeWell programme² and data published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS)

Many surveys including the ONS adult personal well-being measures includes four key questions (ONS, 2025), which have been used in many other surveys, each capturing a different dimension:

- **Positive and negative feelings (Affect):** How **happy** and how **anxious** people felt yesterday
- **Sense of purpose (Eudaimonia):** whether people feel **the things they do in life are worthwhile**.
- **Life evaluation:** **How satisfied people are with their life overall**.

The ONS Child well-being dashboard (ONS, 2024a), includes life satisfaction, sense of purpose, happiness yesterday, and happiness with appearance among the measures of personal well-being. Many well-being measures also explore different domains of children and young people's lives such as their happiness with their relationships and where they live. people's

When measuring children's well-being, it is essential that questions make sense to them and relate to what matters in their lives. For children in care and care leavers, well-being is influenced by their care experience.

The Bright Spots programme worked with children in care and care leavers to develop the *Your Life Your Care* and *Your Life Beyond Care* surveys to measure what they felt made their lives good. We found that, whilst many of the questions used in surveys of the general population were relevant to them, there were also experiences and influences on their well-being that were unique to them.

2.4 The big data gap

Official outcome measures are incomplete, relying on objective data and adult assessment rather than children and young people's views. Their voices and experiences are largely missing from current data systems. As a result, the measures used to guide policy decisions at the local and national level reflect what professionals deem important – or what is easiest to collect – rather than what matters to children and young people themselves. Put simply, national and local government do not have sufficient data to understand children and young people's daily lives and well-being (OECD, 2021).

2.5 No voice without action

"I'm able to function but I'd like to do more than function I'd like to thrive. I want to get to where I want to be but often obstacles that are near impossible stop me which is very difficult." (Care leaver)

Placing subjective well-being at the centre of children's social care policy and practice allows for a more meaningful assessment of success – does the care system support children and young people

¹ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/good-childhood-index>

² <https://beewellprogramme.org/>

to thrive? Focusing on subjective well-being means exploring how children and young people feel about their lives, not just what they think about services. The best measures explore what children and young people themselves feel make their lives good and allow us to meaningfully evaluate whether services genuinely improve their lives.

“Our Councils are there to support us and give us the best life and to do that they need hear about issues that we are facing.” (Care experienced ANV Ambassador cited in LGA, 2024)

Data should not be collected in isolation—especially when capturing children’s voices. Asking how they feel is an important part of realising their right to be heard as set out in Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). But listening alone is not enough. To truly realise this right, we must act on what children and young people tell us.

Without action listening becomes tokenistic and there is a risk that children and young people stop sharing their thoughts and feelings. Data collection must be embedded within an engagement framework that supports ongoing dialogue. This includes involving children and young people in interpreting the data and identifying actions in response

In Children’s Social Care, it is especially important that children and young people are heard at every level of decision-making—personal (individual care), operational (services that support them), and systemic (national policy, legislation, and structures).

2.6 The Bright Spots Programme

The Bright Spots Programme, developed by Coram Voice in partnership with Professor Julie Selwyn at the University of Oxford, reframes how success in children’s services is measured - by asking children directly about the things they felt were important – e.g., do they feel happy, safe, and connected.

The Bright Spots programme provides a well-being measurement and improvement framework for local authorities that addresses the data gap. Using surveys co-designed with children and young people it provides robust evidence about what life is like for children in care and care leavers.

Running for over a decade, the Bright Spots programme has helped local and national decision makers focus attention and action on what truly matters to children and young people. The Bright Spots programme has conducted 242 surveys across 71 local authorities, enabling national-level insights and benchmarking.

While the primary aim of each survey is to understand children and young people’s lives and improve services in each local authority that the team works with, the scale of the programme means it can inform the care system as a whole.

This report is the latest in a series of national publications and academic article that explore the learning from the programme, drawing on the views and experiences of thousands of children in care and care leavers.³

³ For more publications, case studies and resources go to the Bright Spots Resource Bank <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/brightspots/>

3 Methodology and sample

3.1 What did we do?

The Bright Spots Programme collected survey responses from children in care and care leavers between 2015 and 2024. Quantitative data from recent years (2021–2024) was compared with earlier data (2017–2020) using statistical methods such as MANOVA, chi-square tests, and logistic regression to explore well-being outcomes. Qualitative responses from 2015–2024 were analysed using AI tools to identify key themes and illustrative quotes, with outputs validated against human-led analyses. Additionally, seven Care Experienced Consultants (CECs) contributed to the interpretation and presentation of findings through thematic workshops, feedback sessions, and co-facilitation of a seminar, ensuring the report reflected lived experiences and was accessible to a wider audience. More detail on our methodology is set out in the Appendix 7.1.

3.2 Who is in our sample?

Since the Bright Spots programme started, we have collated thousands of responses from children in care and care leavers across the UK. In this report we draw on around 27,000 of these responses from more than 70 local authorities.

The most recent data from 2021-2024 provides an insight into children and young people's views about their well-being since the pandemic and our last major report on well-being (Selwyn & Briheim-Crookall, 2022). We use this sample of 11,104 responses to describe the current state of well-being for children in care and care leavers.

Where we report on progress over time, we compare this with data from the three years between 2017-2020 (n=9,675). Data collected in 2020-21, which was most affected by the Covid pandemic, has not been used for comparison.

The qualitative data analysis included all written comments collected between 2015-2024. This was over 100,000 different comments from care experienced children and young people aged 4 to 25+.

In 2021-24 the overall response rate was 37%. Children in care and care leavers responded in 43 local authorities from 11 regions across England, Scotland, and Wales. Except for an initial consent question, all questions in the surveys are optional.

Of the children and young people who responded to our demographic questions:

- 52% were boys/male and 47% of girls/female. 1% chose to define themselves in another way.⁴ In official statistics 54% of children in care are male.
- 73% of respondents were white⁵. The same percentage of children in care are white in Department for Education statistics⁶. 6% were Asian, 10% black, 8% mixed ethnicity and 3% 'other' ethnicity.

Around half of the sample were children in care and half were care leavers. A third of survey responses were from young people of secondary school age (n=3,605, 32%), with 20% (n=2,182) of

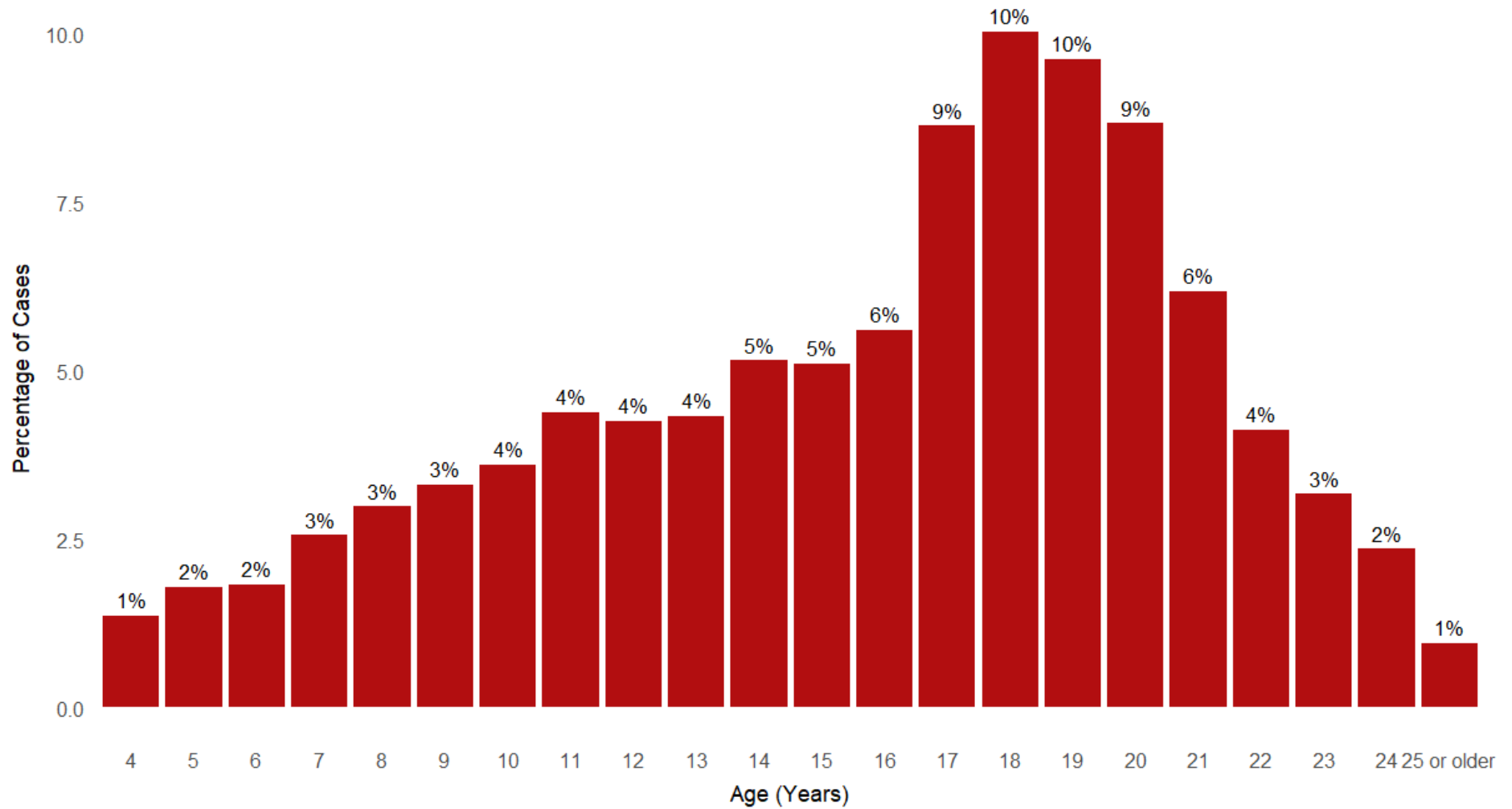
⁴ Percentages excluding 'prefer not to say' and missing responses.

⁵ Percentage excluding 'prefer not to say' and missing responses.

⁶ Taken from Department for Education's Children looked after in England including adoptions dataset for years 2021, 2022, and 2023.

responses from primary school aged children. The age distribution of children and young people is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of responses by age (n=10,811)



- Children in foster placements were slightly underrepresented in our sample compared with national data in England in the same period of time – 69% of children were in foster placements (compared to 60% in our sample) and 10% were in secure homes, children’s homes, or residential care homes (compared to 12% in our sample).
- Almost half of care leavers were living independently in a flat or house that they rent. The next most frequent category was living in supported accommodation. A similar proportion of care leavers lived with either their parent(s) and family, or with their foster carer(s).
- Overall, 17% of 4–18-year-olds had been in care for less than a year, 29% 1-3 years and 54% for more than 3 years⁷. In the care leaver group a small proportion (6%) had been in care for less than a year. The rest were roughly equally split between 1-3 years (32%), 4-7 years (31%) and more than 7 years (31%).
- Almost half of children aged 11-18 had experienced between 2 and 4 placements. Just over a third of respondents had only experienced one placement (i.e., no change/move).⁸
- 3 out of 10 care leavers reported that they had a disability or long-term health condition. In the general population a lower proportion (16%) of 16–25-year-olds report a disability or long-term health condition (ONS, 2020).
- Just under half of care leavers had a partner (42%).
- 17% per cent of care leavers were parents, and 3% were either pregnant or their partner was pregnant, meaning that a fifth (20%) of care leavers either had or were expecting children.

Further details on the sample and representativeness are available in Appendix 7.2.

⁷ Percentages excluding ‘I don’t know’ and missing responses.

⁸ Our data reflects the number of placements that the children and young people had during their whole time in care. Official statistics record the number of placements over 12 months (DfE, 2024). During one year around 1 in 10 children experienced high placement instability (3 or more placements) About two thirds (69%) of children in care national experience 1 placement in a year under a third (29%) experience between 2 and 4 placements in a year

4 Findings: What do we know about the well-being children in care and care leavers?

4.1 Measuring personal well-being

The Bright Spots surveys use standardised subjective well-being questions that are used in a range of international surveys and by the Office for National Statistics. They explore life satisfaction, happiness yesterday, whether you feel the things you do in life are worthwhile, by asking children and young people to rate themselves on a scale from 0-10. 0 was 'not at all', 5 'OK' and 10 was 'completely'. For care leavers we also include a question about anxiety. We do not use this for children in care as the young people we developed the survey with did not like this question. Instead, we ask them how positive they are about the future.

| On all scales except for anxiety: | For the anxiety scale: |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 0-4 is low• 5-6 medium• 7-8 high• 9-10 very high | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 0-1 is very low• 2-3 low• 4-5 is medium• 6-10 is high |

For young people aged 11-18-year-old low well-being was calculated using the four well-being scales: overall life satisfaction, happiness yesterday, doing things in life that have meaning, and positivity about your future. Young people who scored low (0-4) on any two of the four scales were classified as having low well-being. Young people who scored 9-10 on any two of the four scales were classified as having very high well-being. We defined well-being like this to ensure that a high or low rating on one scale did not unduly influence the percentage we then categorised as having high or low well-being'.

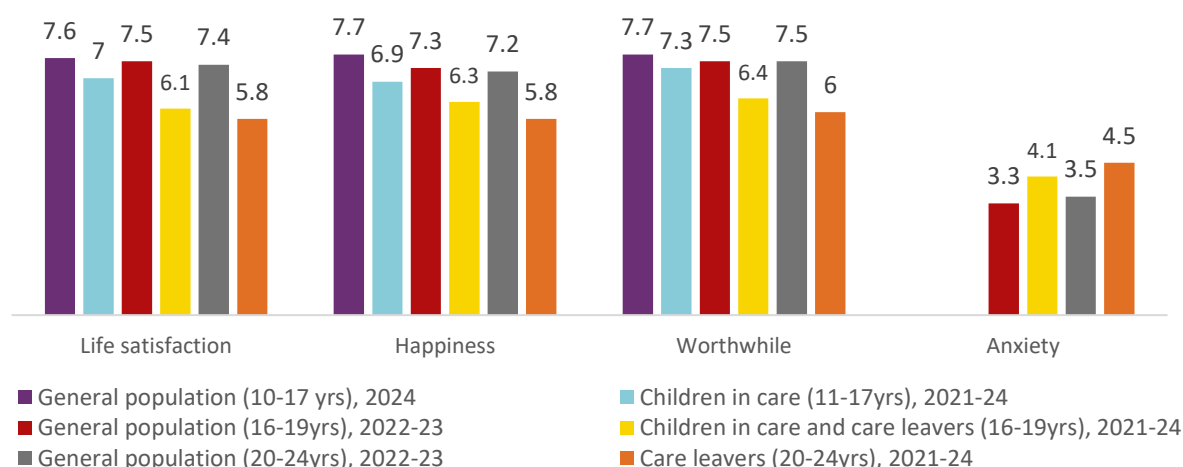
For care leavers, low well-being was calculated using four well-being scales: overall life satisfaction, happiness yesterday, doing things in life that have meaning, and feelings of anxiety. Care leavers who scored low (0-4) on any two of the four scales (for anxiety the equivalent was scoring high, 6-10) were classified as having low well-being and those who scored 9-10 on any two scales (for anxiety the equivalent was scoring low, 0-1) were classified as having very high well-being.

4.2 Overall personal well-being

When we explore the lives of children in care and care leavers, there is often a focus on the challenges that they experience. The Bright Spots data also shows that many children and young people thrive in care. On average children in care (11-18-years-old) score 7 or above (high well-being) on life satisfaction (7.0), feeling the things you do are worthwhile (7.3) and positivity about the future (7.3). 39% of children in care (11-18) and 22% of care leavers have very high well-being, rating themselves as 9 or 10 out of 10 on at least 2 of our 4 personal well-being measures.

2 in 5 children in care and 1 in 5 care leavers have very high well-being.

Figure 2: Average well-being scores of children in care and care leavers compared with children and young people in the general population⁹



Yet we also found that both children in care and care leavers have lower well-being than their peers in the general population. The difference is particularly stark for care leavers.

There is a significant minority of young people, especially among care leavers, who struggle. Across all age groups of children in care (age 4-18) 9% have low well-being. Looking only at 11-18-year-olds 13% of have low well-being. 13% of children in care (11-18) and 32% of care leavers have low well-being, scoring themselves below the midpoint on at least 2 of our 4 well-being questions.

1 in 8 children in care and 1 in 3 care leavers have overall low well-being

Table 1: Proportion of secondary school aged children in care (11-18 years) and care leavers who had low and very high well-being in 2021-24 (n=8,438)

| Age group | % Very high well-being | % Low well-being |
|--------------|------------------------|------------------|
| 11-18 years | 39% | 13% |
| Care leavers | 22% | 32% |
| Total | 29% | 25% |

4.2.1 Life getting better

"It makes me better because of the food, the bed, and they make me happy because I have a better life" (4-7-year-old)

Children and young people in care aged 8-18 years are asked, 'Is your life getting better?' with the answer options 'Much better', 'A bit better', 'no change', 'A bit worse', 'A lot worse'.

⁹ Source for general population data: 10–17-year-olds (The Children's Society, 2024), 16–24-year-olds (ONS, 2023)

84% of children in care aged 8-18 report that life is getting better

The high proportion of children in care (8-18-years-old) that report that life is getting better has remained consistent over the last 10 years, suggesting that care does make a difference to many children and young people.

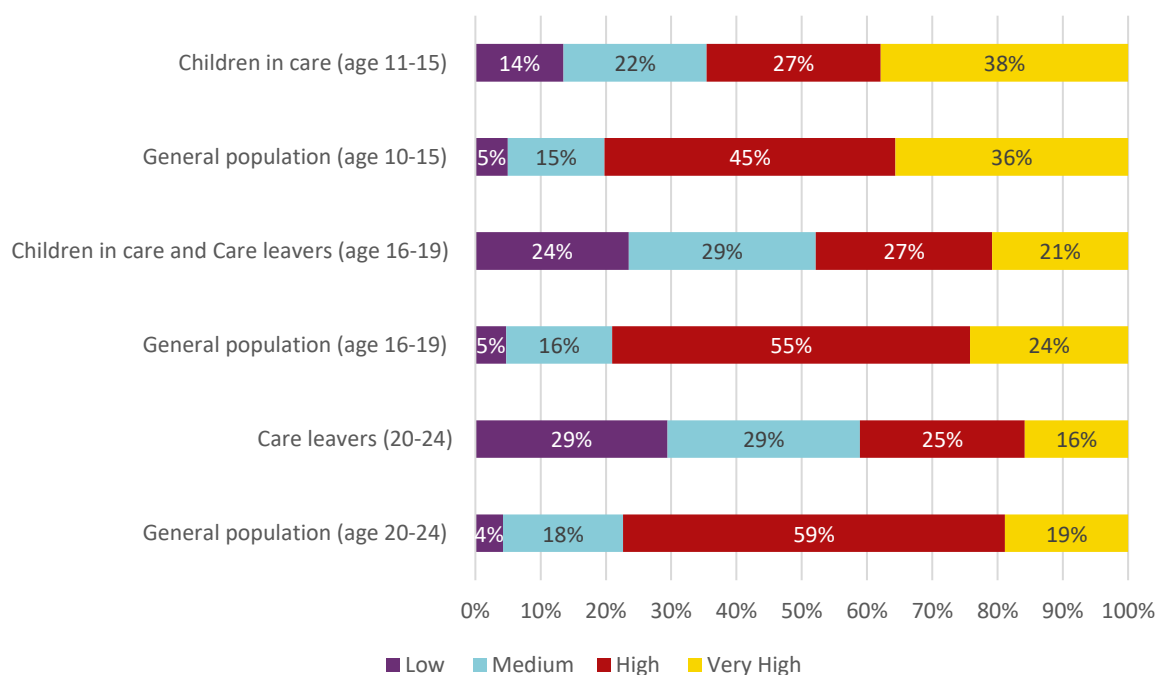
“Since being in care it has changed my life around as a whole to much more positivity and more achievements and successes. I have achieved so many things which I never thought of achieving. They have found the perfect family for me. Now I don’t want to leave. If I had the chance, I would stay there my whole life. I see my foster carers as my real parents. Even my social workers as family. Overall, being in foster care is fantastic.”
(11-18-year-old)

4.2.2 Life satisfaction

Secondary school aged children and young people in care (11-18 years) and care leavers were asked ‘How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?’ and asked to respond on a scale from 0 (‘not at all satisfied’) to 10 (‘completely satisfied’). A breakdown of life satisfaction by age is available in Appendix 7.3.

In the general population around 1 in 20 children and young people report low life satisfaction, 3 times as many children in care and 6 times as many care leaver report low life satisfaction.

Figure 3: Children and young people’s ratings of their overall satisfaction with their life¹⁰



¹⁰ Source for general population data: 10–15-year-olds (ONS, 2024) Worksheet 1.1, table 1.1c, percentage estimates for May to June 2023; 16-24-year-olds: (ONS, 2023) year ending March 2023, Table 1

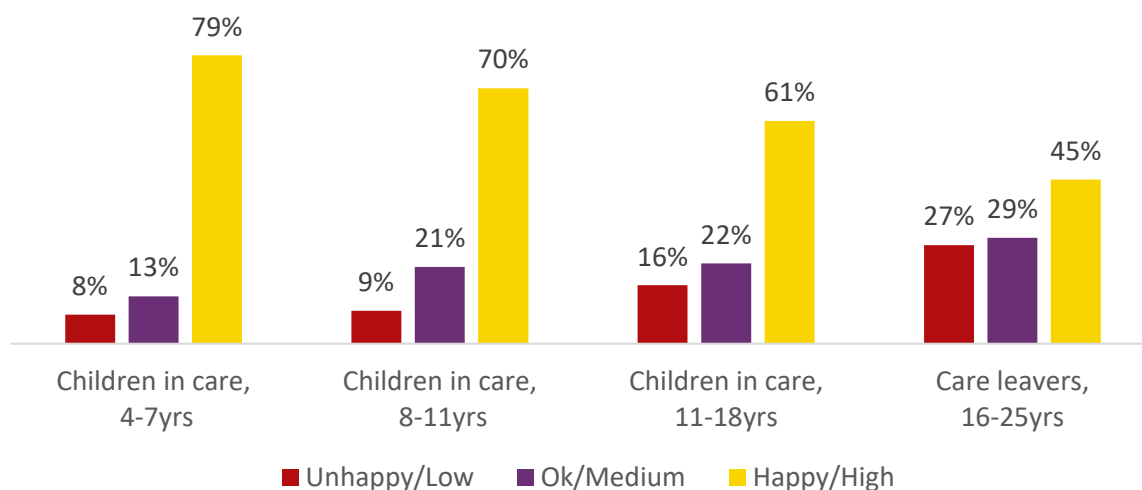
4.2.3 Happiness yesterday

"I went to the circus yesterday with school and it was so much fun." (4-7-year-old)

In the *Your Life, Your Care* survey, primary school aged children (4-7 years and 8-10 years) are asked how happy they were the previous day, using a 5-point scale ranging from 'very unhappy' to 'very happy'. Secondary school aged children (11-17 years) and care leavers were also asked this question but were asked to respond on a 11-point numbered scale from 0 ('not at all happy') to 10 ('completely happy'). For all ages scales were accompanied by appropriate emojis to aid comprehension.

Happiness decreased by age so that by the time they had left care only 45% of young people reported high happiness yesterday.

Figure 4: Happiness yesterday for children in care (CIC) and care leavers (CL) by age group (ages 4-25+)



Children and young people's comments reflected how sometimes the things that happen on a given day affect our happiness in the moment.

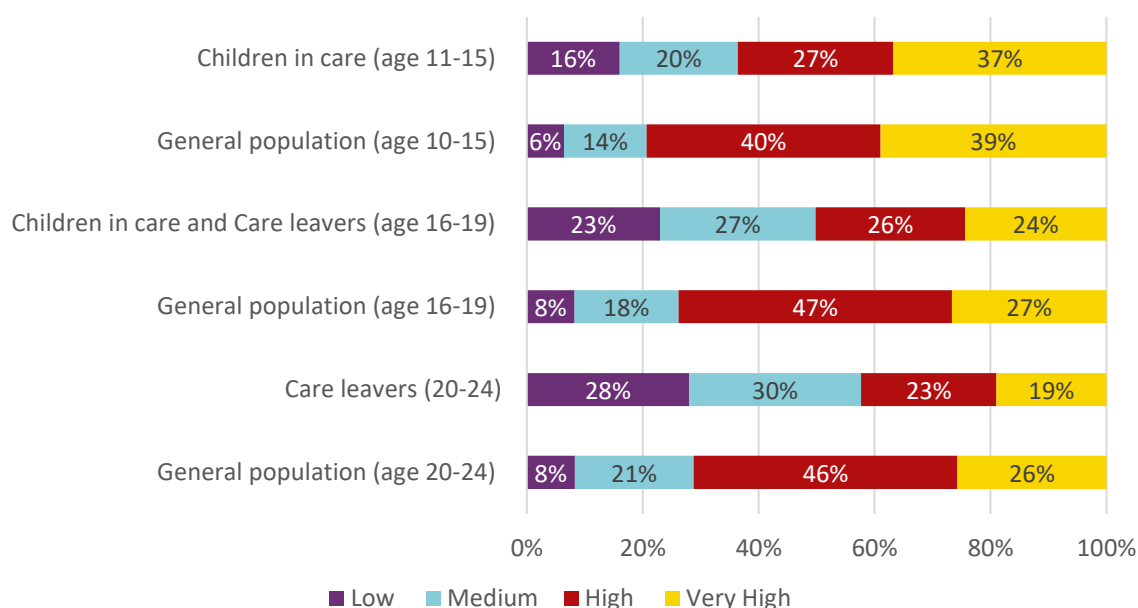
"I was sad yesterday because I hurt my knee at school and because I could not watch the emoji film" (4-7-year-old)

"I wasn't happy yesterday as I didn't see my mother on Mother's Day." (11-18-year-old)

"I was only unhappy yesterday because I was at a funeral" (11-18-year-old)

Most children aged 4-7 (79%) and 8-10 years (70%) felt happy yesterday ('quite' or 'very happy'). 8% of children aged 4-7 years and 9% of children aged 8-11 years were either 'quite' or 'very unhappy' yesterday. Three fifths of children aged 11-18 years (61%) scored in the 'high' or 'very high' range on the happiness yesterday scale. Just over half of care leavers (45%) scored in this 'high'/'very high' range.

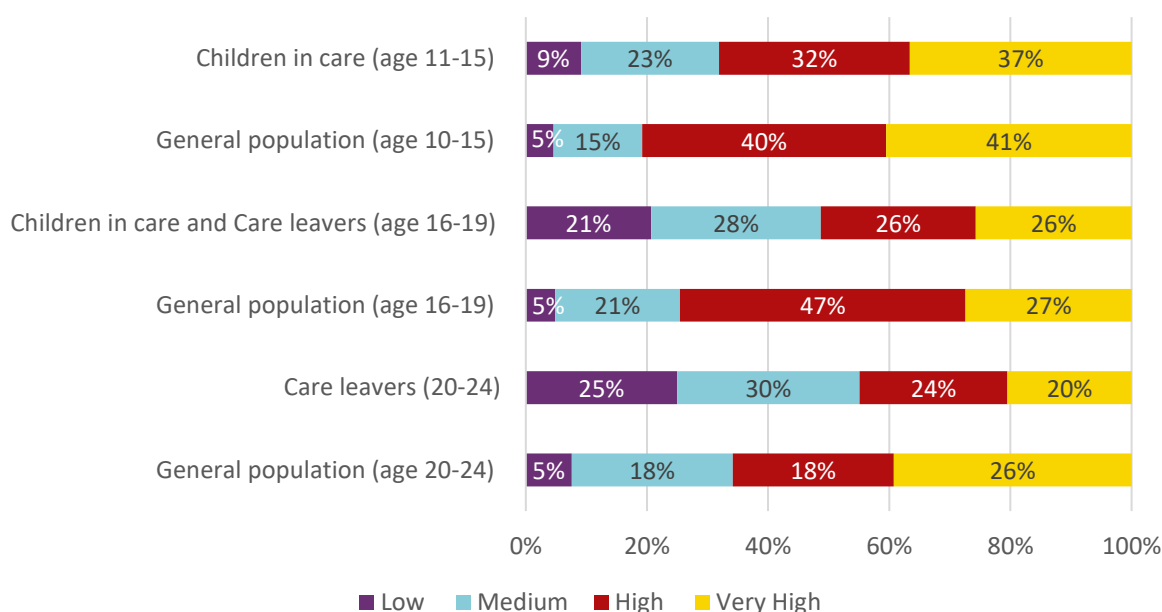
Figure 5: Children and young people's ratings of their happiness yesterday¹¹



4.2.1 Things you do are worthwhile

To explore their sense of purpose, 11-18-year-olds in care and care leavers were asked 'Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?' and asked to respond on a scale from 0 ('not at all') to 10 ('completely worthwhile').

Figure 6: Children and young people's ratings of how worthwhile the things they do in life are¹²



¹¹ Source for general population data: 10–15-year-olds: ONS (2024a) Worksheet 1.3, table 1.3c, percentage estimates for May to June 2023; 16–24-year-olds: ONS (2023) year ending March 2023, Table 3

¹² Source: Children's well-being data (10-15): ONS (2024a) Worksheet 1.2, table 1.2c, percentage estimates for May to June 2023. Young people's well-being data (16-24): ONS (2023) well-being data year ending March 2023, Table 2

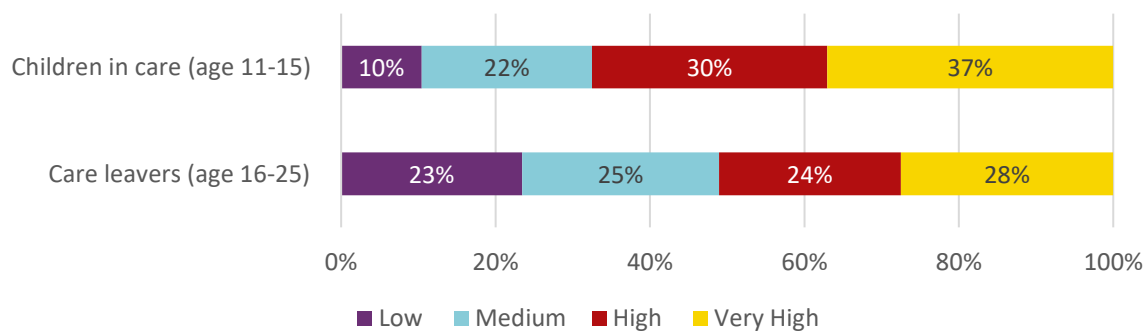
4.2.2 Positivity about future

“I am happy and looking forward to better future” (Care leaver)

Secondary school aged children and young people in care (11-18 years) and care leavers were asked ‘How positive are you about your future?’ and asked to respond on a scale from 0 (‘not at all’) to 10 (‘completely positive’).

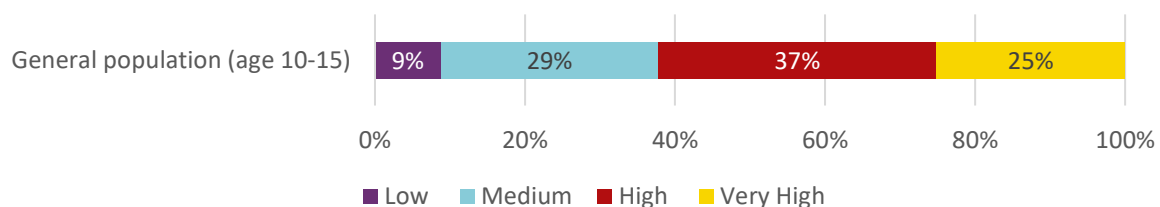
Two thirds of children in care have high levels of positivity for the future.

Figure 7: Positivity about the future of children in care and care leavers



The ONS (2024a) report on a similar question included in the Children’s Society’s Household survey, which asks 10–15-year-olds how happy they are with what may happen to them later in their lives (in the future).

Figure 8: Children in the general population’s happiness with what may happen to them later in life (in the future)¹³



4.2.3 Anxiety

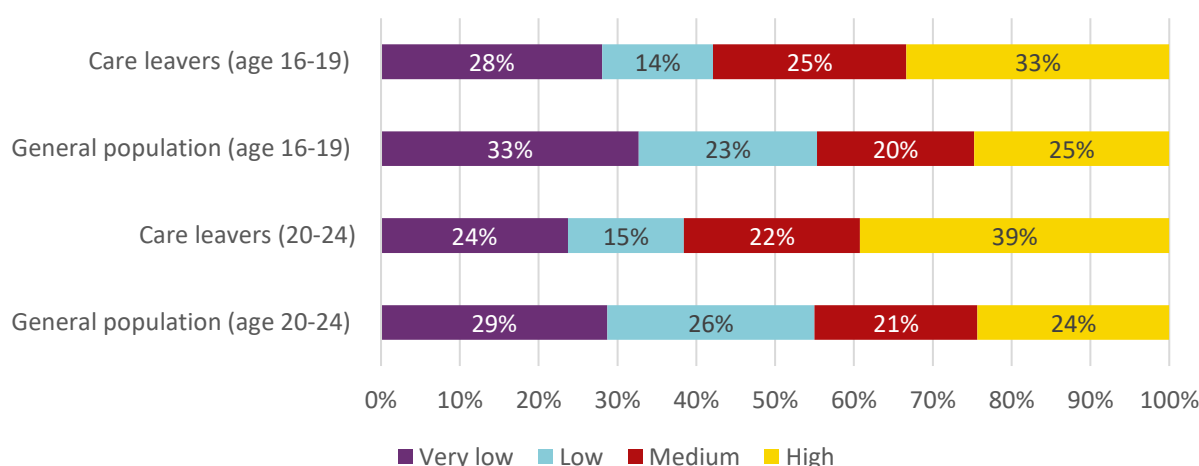
“It’s not about yesterday but I feel anxious about how my life is and how it’s going to be.” (Care leaver)

Care leavers were asked ‘How anxious did you feel yesterday?’ and asked to respond on a scale from 0 (‘not at all anxious’) to 10 (‘completely anxious’).

3 in 5 care leavers experience high levels of anxiety.

¹³ Source: Children’s well-being data (10-15): ONS (2024a)

Figure 9: Young people's ratings of their anxiety yesterday¹⁴



4.2.4 Happiness with appearance

Care leavers who helped design the survey said how young people feel about their looks affects their confidence and sense of identity.

A third of care leavers are unhappy with the way they look compared to 15% of teenagers in care

The logistic regression showed that how children and young people felt about the way was the factor most strongly associated with both high and low well-being. 11–18-year-olds who were not happy with their appearance had 7.44 times higher odds of low well-being and care leavers had 4.11 greater odds.

“Well, I have 0 confidence in myself and my appearance. I hate everything about me and my body.” (Care leaver)

- Care leavers reported lower levels of happiness with their appearance compared to young people age 11-17 still in care. A third of care leavers (33%) are unhappy with the way they look compared to 15% of teenagers in care
- In the general population 12% of 10–15-year-olds reported low happiness with appearance in 2023 (ONS, 2024).
- As in the general population girls and young women were less happy with how they look than boys/young men. (21% vs 15% with low happiness)
- Care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition or who were parents were more unhappy (45% and 38% had with low happiness with how they looked)
- Less than 1 in 10 Black children in care are unhappy with how they look compared to 2 in 10 White children in care.

Some young people who commented on their appearance highlighted struggles with mental health challenges or the impact on pregnancy on how they looked.

¹⁴ Source: General population young people's well-being data (16-24) (ONS, 2023) Table 4

"I struggle with an eating disorder so I often don't like my appearance" (Care leaver)

"I am happy and have been for a long time and only reason I'm not at 10 on the happy with the way I look is I'm almost 36 weeks pregnant and can't fit into my nicer stuff and stretch marks galore Hahaha" (Care leaver)

"Feel extremely low and suicidal at the moment, hate the way I am, the way I look and who I am (Care leaver)"

Some reflected on the need to address issues for themselves, but others highlighted how more freedom to make choices or support to access services could help them.

"I'm going to change the way I look; I will be starting swimming and gym" (Care leaver)

"I struggle with self-confidence and I am not always happy with the way I look however I know these are personally issues I need to fix for myself." (Care leaver)

"I would like to be able to make my own decisions about my appearance and the way I want to look, whether it is a piercing or getting my hair cut. Than to have to wait before a social worker agrees or disagrees!" (11-18-year-old)

"Some days I have a hard time with the way I look, but I have been referred to therapy to help with this" (Care leaver)

4.2.1 Overall well-being change over time

Subjective well-being among young people in the UK has declined over the past decade, with notable dips during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent data show persistent concerns around happiness, life satisfaction, and anxiety. Girls and disabled young people consistently report lower well-being than their peers. (The Children's Society, 2024; DfE, 2020).

For care leavers, rates of well-being have dropped in recent years, with significantly lower overall well-being scores in 2021-24 compared with 2017-20¹⁵. 29% of care leavers had low well-being in 2017-20, rising to 32% in 2021-24. This change over time appears to be driven by feelings of anxiety¹⁶, that things in life were worthwhile¹⁷, and feeling satisfied with life¹⁸, whereas the difference was not significant for happiness yesterday ($p=0.19$)¹⁹.

For children in care, patterns of overall well-being scores are consistent between 2017-20, and 2021-24²⁰. 14% of children in care aged 11-18 years had low well-being in 2017-20, compared with 13% in 2021-24. There were small differences in feeling satisfied with life ($p=0.01$), how happy they felt yesterday ($p=0.01$), and feeling positive about the future ($p=0.007$)²¹, whereas scores on feeling that things in life were worthwhile remained consistent ($p=0.12$).

Figure 10: Mean well-being scores for children in care (11-18-years) and care leavers (16-25+ years)

¹⁵ Pillai's Trace = 0.003, $F(4, 7,847) = 5.73$, $p<0.001$

¹⁶ ($p<0.001$)

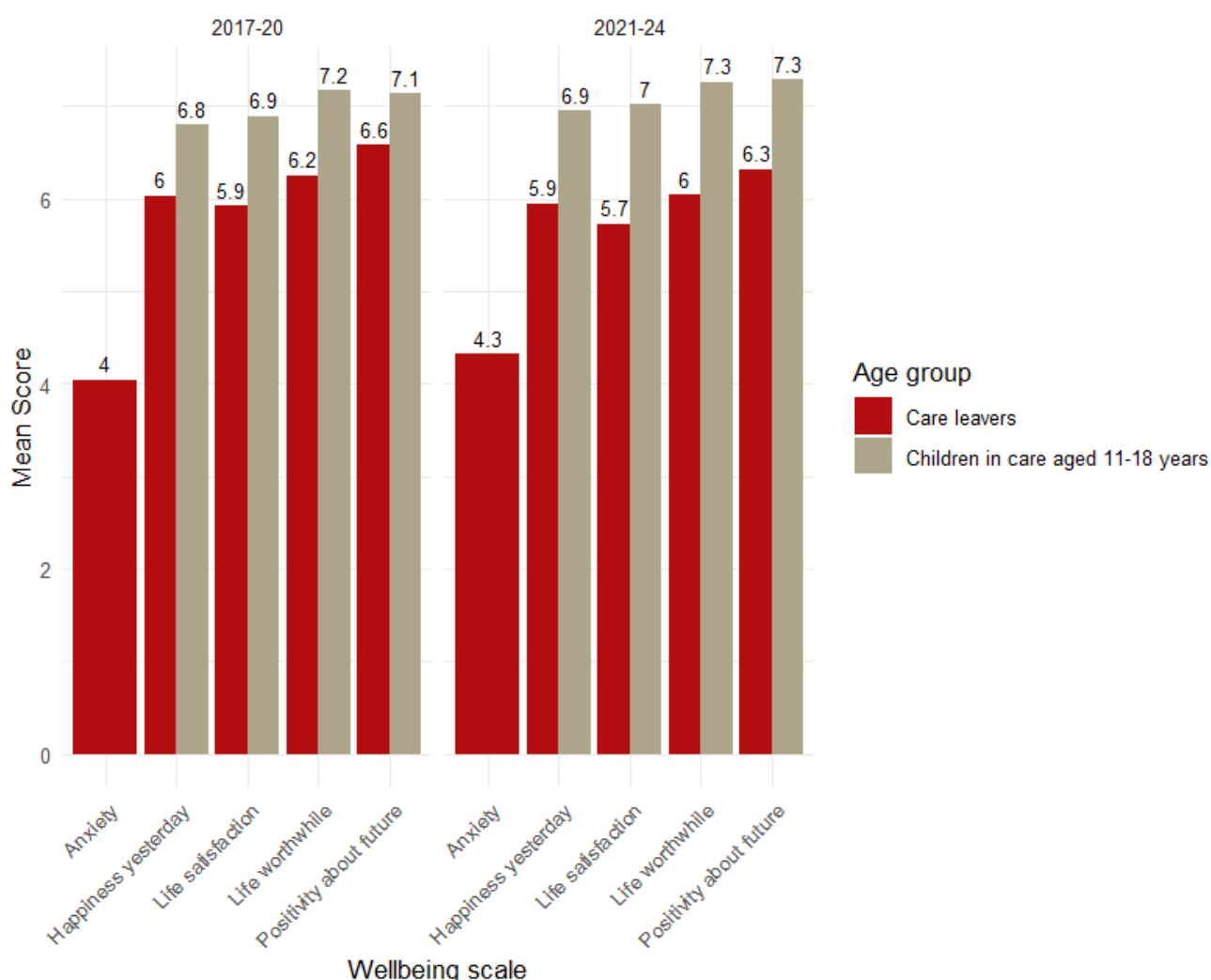
¹⁷ ($p=0.001$)

¹⁸ ($p=0.002$)

¹⁹ Please note that the magnitude of these differences was very small (partial η^2 ranging from 0.001 to 0.002).

²⁰ Pillai's Trace = 0.0016, $F(4, 6,704) = 2.75$, $p = 0.03$, compared to Bonferroni corrected p value of $p=0.001$.

²¹ Again, whilst these differences were statistically significant, the magnitude of the differences was very small (partial $\eta^2 = 0.001$).



2017-20 was also a period where the highest level of personal well-being were recorded in the general population. As in our sample of care leavers, a higher percentage of adults reported low well-being in 2021/22 and 2022/23 than in 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20. Further analysis of change over time in personal well-being, including general population data is available in Appendix 7.3.2.

4.3 Drivers of well-being

All the questions we explore in the Bright Spots surveys cover aspects children in care and care leavers told us makes their lives good. However, by using statistical analysis we can explore the areas that are most strongly linked to well-being.

In this section, we have updated previous analysis (Selwyn & Briheim-Crookall, 2022; Briheim-Crookall et al, 2020) to explore what is most closely associated with well-being for both children in care and care leavers in the latest data. We used logistic regression models to explore factors that increased the odds of low and very high well-being among care-experienced children and young people.

Some survey questions could not be used in the analysis:

- For younger children, some questions were not asked consistently across age groups.
- For older children (11–18) and care leavers, some questions were left out because they were too closely linked to well-being itself.
- Some questions were excluded because they caused technical issues in the analysis, e.g. overlapping too much with other questions or having too many answer choices that could not be grouped easily.
- Age was treated differently in one model because the usual method did not work well.

A summary of what we found is included below with further findings and description of the method in Appendix 7.5.

4.3.1 Children in care: 4–10-year-olds

The youngest children are only asked one personal well-being question – how happy they were yesterday. This question on its own is not necessarily a measure of low well-being, as you could have a good life overall, but something happened that momentarily affected your happiness, such as falling out with a friend. However, looking at the factors associated with unhappiness gives us a sense of what is important to the youngest children’s well-being.

The odds of being **unhappy yesterday** were higher for children in care (4-10 years) who:

- Did not feel safe at home – 2.56 times higher
- Did not like school - 2.49 times higher
- Did not have a good friend – 2.07 times higher
- Did not live with adults who notice how they are feeling – 1.87 times higher
- Did not know their social worker – 1.68 times higher
- Did not feel settled at home – 1.61 times higher

4.3.2 Children in care: 11–18-year-olds

The odds of having **low well-being** are higher for young people (aged 11-18 years) who:

- Are not happy with their appearance – 7.44 times higher
- Did not like school - 2.68 times higher
- Did not know that they can speak to their social worker on their own - 2.48 times higher
- Did not get an opportunity to show they can be trusted – 2.29 times higher
- Did not feel settled at home – 2.20 times higher
- Did not feel involved in decisions - 2.13 times higher
- Do not have an adult that they trust – 1.96 times higher
- Were female – 1.86 times higher
- Talked to their carers infrequently - 1.78 times higher
- Did not trust their carer - 1.78 times higher
- Had been in care for less than one year - 1.54 times higher
- Did not feel safe at home - 1.53 times higher
- Had more than one placement or didn’t know how many placements they had - 1.48 times higher
- Did not often get outdoors in nature - 1.47 times higher
- Felt that their contact arrangements with their siblings were wrong - 1.45 times higher
- Were older – 1.14 times higher for each year in age

The odds of having **very high well-being** were higher for young people (aged 11-18 years) who:

- Were happy with their appearance - 6.89 times higher
- Felt safe at home – 2.70 times higher
- Felt settled at home – 2.66 times higher
- Like school – 2.24 times higher
- Trust their social worker – 2.15 times higher
- Have a good friend – 2.06 times higher
- Regularly talk to their carers – 1.95 times higher
- Know who their social worker is – 1.96 times higher
- Were younger (11-14 years) – 1.51 times higher
- Were male – 1.40 times higher
- Did not feel afraid to go to school due to bullying – 1.38 times higher
- Were White - 1.25 times higher

4.3.3 Care leavers: 16–25-year-olds

The odds of having **low well-being** were higher for care leavers who:

- Were unhappy with their appearance - 4.11 times higher
- Were lonely – 3.12 times higher
- Were finding things difficult financially – 2.28 times higher
- Did not have someone who believed they will be a success – 1.82 times higher
- Who were not parents – 1.82 times higher
- Did not feel safe in their neighbourhood – 1.63 times higher
- Who were disabled – 1.58 times higher
- Did not feel safe at home – 1.54 times higher
- Did not feel where they lived was right for them - 1.43 times higher
- Were not in employment, education, or training - 1.30 times higher
- Were not involved in their pathway planning - 1.29 higher
- Who were White – 1.26 times higher
- Did not trust their leaving care worker – 1.23 times higher
- Had either two or more, or no leaving care worker – 1.20 times higher

The odds of having **very high well-being** were higher for care leavers who:

- Were happy with their appearance - 4.20 times higher
- Felt safe at home – 2.83 times higher
- Were not lonely – 2.06 times higher
- Were comfortable financially – 1.96 times higher
- Were parents – 1.87 times higher
- Were involved in their pathway planning – 1.51 times higher
- Were in education, employment, or training - 1.25 times higher
- Were not disabled – 1.24 times higher

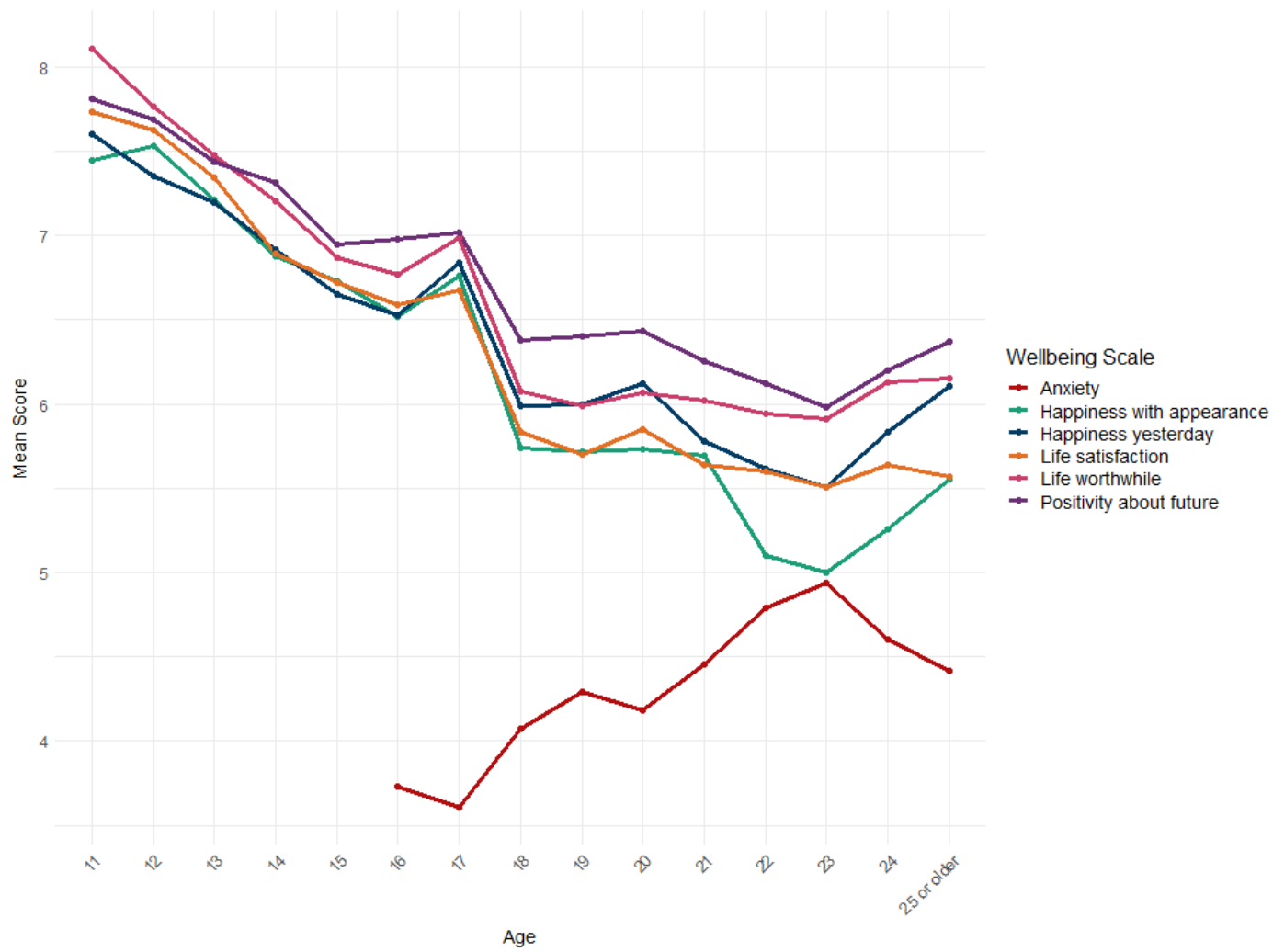
4.4 Personal characteristics and circumstances

Both the logistic regression and analysis of our personal well-being indicators showed that certain characteristics or circumstances were linked to high or low well-being.

4.4.1 Age

The odds of low well-being for children in care (age 11-18) were 1.14 times higher for each year in age. As shown in Figure 11 personal well-being decreased with age, with lower averages scores on happiness, life satisfaction, feeling things you do are worthwhile, and positivity about the future, and higher rates of anxiety as young people get older.

Figure 11: Mean personal well-being scores by age for 2021-24



4.4.1.1 Drop off in well-being at transition points

There is an especially sharp decline in well-being between 17 and 18 years of age, when most young people leave care. At 18 most young people's status changes from a child in care to a care leaver (although for some this happens even sooner).

The lowest well-being was recorded by 23-year-olds. The Your Life Beyond Care survey is used to explore the well-being of young people who are in contact and engaging with leaving care services. The latest Department for Education data suggest that whilst over half of 22-year-old care leavers request and receive support, by 23 this has declined to 40% and by 24 to 31% (DfE, 2024). This should be borne in mind when interpreting the data. As services post 21 are optional it is possible that care leavers who are struggling are more likely to request ongoing support, whereas those doing well at this age were no longer in contact with services. At the same time, it is also possible that young people who do not engage with services have additional challenges and lower well-being.

4.4.1.2 Declining support

Young people's comments also suggested that for some support declined as they got older. A few children and young people felt that younger children were shown preferential treatment or given more support by carers or social workers.

"The younger children in the placement are prioritised - being older I'm not as included." (11-18-year-old)

"Foster care was better but it felt as I got older, she done less and just wanted me gone by the time I was 18." (Care leaver)

"When I was in foster care, she didn't understand me. As all of us at foster placement felt as we got older, we were not really wanted. There were 5 of us there we were treated different I am not sure why. When I seen her again she ignored me." (Care leaver)

Many written comments stressed the challenges of leaving care. For some, leaving care was characterised as an abandonment by the system, cut off from support at 18 or even younger. Some felt that their needs were disregarded and some young people saw the transition as precipitating a decline in their mental health.

"I was thrown out of care far too early when I had far too many emotional and care needs, especially where my disabilities were concerned. My experience would have been better had they kept me under care until at least the age of 18... When I was thrown out of care I went through so much more trauma and abuse, nobody had prepared me for the adult life nor warned me about those who will use and abuse you..." (Care leaver)

"You are literally left to find yourself in the big bad world at the age of 16 years old with no help or support from the people who always said 'we're here to help' 'we only want to best for you' etc. More needs to be done for care leavers to ensure that they are fully ready and got the proper support plan behind them so that they don't feel abandoned all over all again!" (Care leaver)

"At the time of leaving care I was assumed to be on my own, financially, physically and mentally, my foster family was told to cast me out and at the time I was incapable of supporting any aspect of my life, I couldn't function and this led to a severe mental breakdown, I believed I would be homeless, disabled, depressed and alone. Care services didn't believe in my disabilities and forced me into situations I couldn't

understand or handle, if it wasn't for the compassion [of] my Foster carers [they] had to let me stay another year and me having to stay in hospital I wouldn't be here today, I know I would have died in one way or another..." (Care leaver)

Young people commented on leaving care being marked in particular by the withdrawal of sources of supportive relationships they had come to rely on. In some cases, this left young people feeling alone and unsupported; some felt that they had no-one to go to. Even in instances where new support staff were available, some young people struggled with the change in staff.

"Having a sense of knowing that there will be support around you takes the stress off when leaving care and I did not feel like I had much, I was left to my own devices, as my foster carers were not my parents, so they rarely visited." Care leaver

"...The connections I had made with all the people who helped me while in care was instantly cut off and I can't speak to anyone anymore - which I'm sure you know destroys all the work done helping me. I feel lonely, useless, unfulfilled and 'dumped at the side of the road'. It's as if I was simply on a conveyor that ended the day, I turned 18, ready to pick up the next helpless child to repeat the cycle" (Care leaver)

"Leaving care is difficult and it does take a lot of adjusting to. I think the main difficulty I had leaving care was the changeover of different people involved in my care like my social worker, CAMHS turning into a PA, CMHT. I don't like change so it was hard and also the jump to being independent was hard. I think it would be helpful for care leavers to have a slower transition if possible and more help building more of a solid plan on their future to keep them hopeful and feeling secure." (Care leaver)

As supported by other research (Stein, 2006), some young people were clear that the leaving care process should have been much more gradual and extended. Stein coined the phrase “accelerated and compressed transitions” to describe how young people leaving care face adult responsibilities—such as housing, employment, and parenting—at a much earlier and faster pace than their peers. Young people felt that with more time they would be able to consider the options that were open to them and process what was going to happen. They also wanted to be supported well ahead of time to develop the skills they would need for independent living.

"Leaving care is horrendous, one day you're 17 under care the next you're 18 and we're meant to know it all, there should be a period of readjustment as we don't have a family to teach us about adulthood." Care leaver

"My leaving care experience wasn't great. There was no plans made as it was all last minute. I was basically thrown into being a care-leaver. I had no support and the last day of being in care was very stressful. My mental health got worse as I had no connections or support to help me. I feel like there should be more plans made for when young people end up leaving care. Like with housing, finances, and other bits like that. I feel like that young people should get more support with being a care leaver as well, like sometimes more finances or support with mental health or connecting with those around them that aren't friends/family" Care leaver

"Leaving care is scary, personally everything for me has been pretty good, the only thing I would say is that the sudden feeling of being 'dropped' into adulthood was a huge change, suddenly I have control and budgets and stuff I need to do whereas the day before I was still classed as a child. This could be difficult for someone who doesn't have a nice home and family and is struggling. Maybe a slow build up to that day would be good, such as being told how to do certain things and being provided with

information on how to do things, such as cook, clean, taxes bills etc would be good and helpful for some of us who can't stay put or have unstable households" (Care leaver)

Some young people wrote about cliff edges as they age out of support, not just at 18, but also at 21 and 25 as legal entitlements to support change, in sharp contrast to young people who live with their families and continue to get support well into adulthood. Young people described both the challenges as support drops off, but also the worries and stress of thinking about upcoming changes.

"I turn 25 in 3 months and I'm a thousand miles from where I want to be. I have had no help with getting a passport as promised since 18, I have had no help getting off the streets into long-term social housing. I have yet to find a true place to call home. In 3 months from now I'll find myself no longer a care leaver with no passport and in entrenched homelessness. I am currently living in a tent and I have had no support with being on the right band of [social housing register] ... waking up at 3 am cold leaves me drained throughout the day. In 3 months from now my life will come to an end" (Care leaver)

"I am scared that as soon as I finish education everyone will leave and I'll have no more support. I have so much trauma as a child and I'm 21 now, I look like not a priority as I rent privately in university and job but I am stressed. I want a family I can go to and just be at their house in case of emergency but I don't get that. Everyone else does. I feel alone" (Care leaver)

"I have had [my leaving care] worker for years now and she is so wonderful. She helps me all the time. ...She is the best support worker I have ever had, and I will be gutted to lose her when I turn 25 next year." (Care leaver)

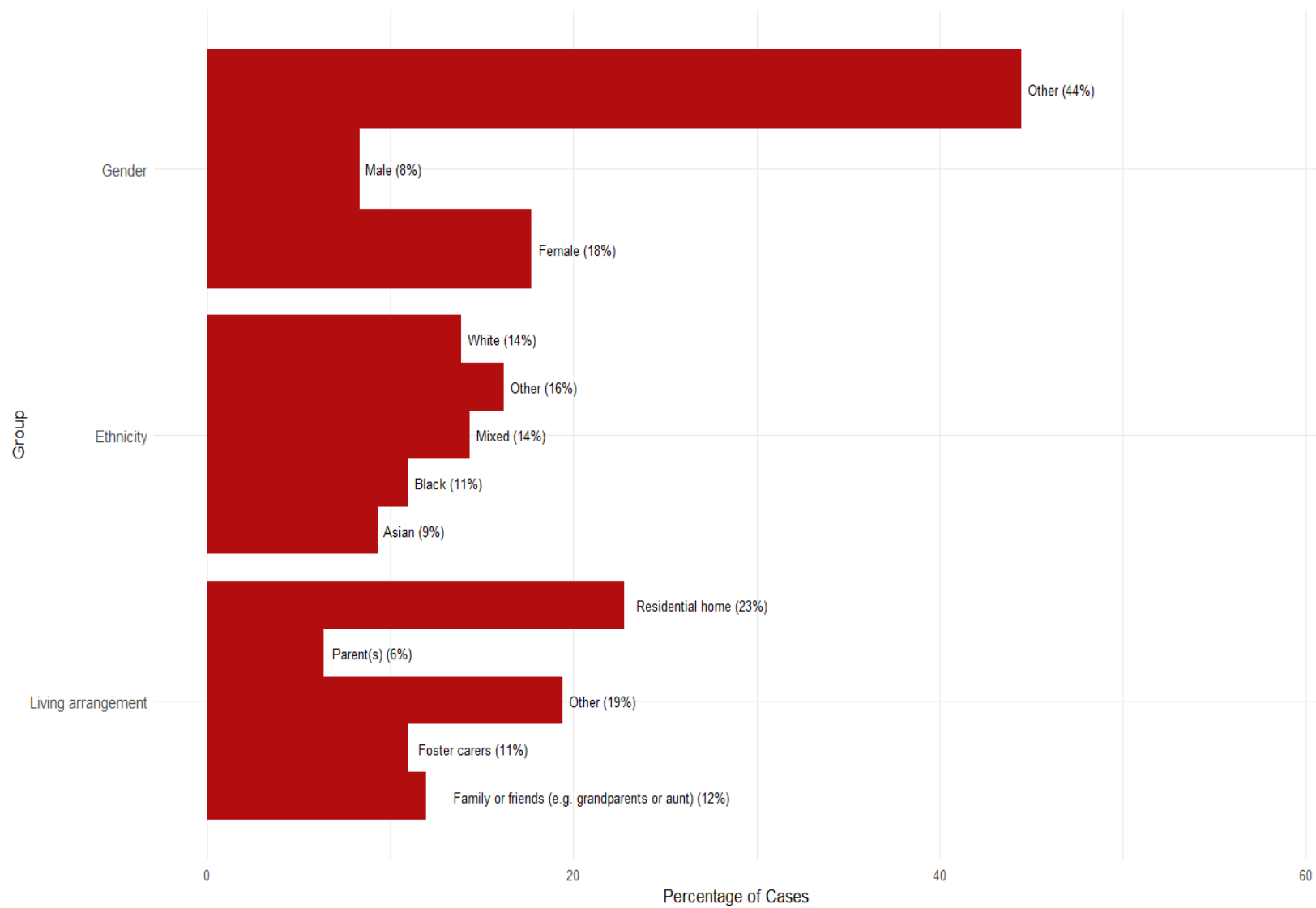
"At 21 you should not be forced out of the place that you are living in, people that live with their parents do not leave at 21. Feels that making the age of leaving of 25 would be much better. There is a lot of pressure of living on your own and worries about being kicked out." (Care leaver)

4.4.2 Girls and young women or young people who define gender another way

Across all well-being measures girls and young women tended to have lower well-being than boys and young men. Those that described themselves in another way or preferred not to answer the gender question had even lower well-being. This mirrors findings in the general population. Girls in the UK consistently report lower levels of subjective well-being than boys, particularly in relation to appearance, school, and overall life satisfaction (the Children's Society, 2024). Teenagers in the UK who identify as transgender, non-binary, or other genders consistently report significantly lower levels of subjective well-being than their cisgender peers. (BeeWell Programme, 2022)

In our analysis girls in care (11-18-year-old) who had 1.86 times greater odds of low well-being and boys in care had 1.40 times higher odds of very high well-being.

Figure 12: Proportion of children in care (11-18 years, 2021-24) with low well-being by gender, ethnicity, and living arrangement



4.4.3 Disability or long-term health problems

3 out of 10 of care leavers reported that they had a disability or long-term health condition (n=1,428 of 4,806), this compares to 16% of young people aged 16-24 years in the general population (ONS, 2020). This group had lower well-being on average and greater odds of low well-being. The odds of low well-being were 1.58 times higher for care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition.

47% of care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition had low well-being, compared with 25% of care leavers who were not disabled.

As in the general population (ONS, 2023), care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition had lower average personal well-being on all indicators (Figure 13, see also, Baker & Briheim-Crookall, 2024).

Young people's comments gave some insight into how their disabilities or health conditions impacted on their lives:

"My mental health, mainly the medication I'm on makes me very sleepy and disorientated and my disability also stops me from going outside" (Care leaver)

"Hard to manage due to disability, bad memory but PA helps and other people around me." (Care leaver)

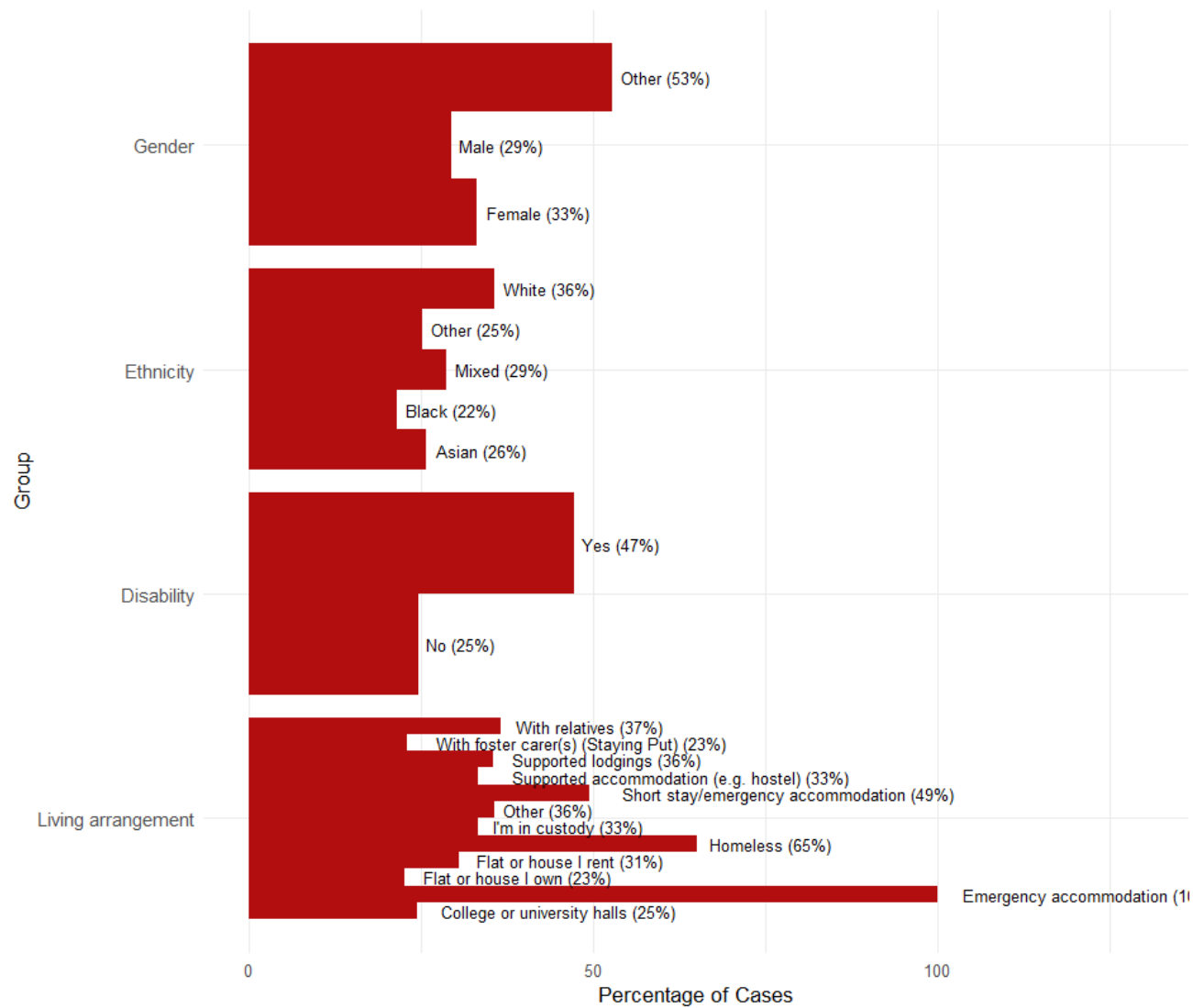
"It's not a physical disability, it's more of a mental disability. I have agoraphobia and an anxiety disorder. But it does affect day to day meaning that I can't go out." (Care leaver)

"My disability effects my day-to-day life, however I'm still grateful to be here and be healthy and alive" (Care leaver)

"My disability stops me doing the stuff I want to do" (Care leaver)

"It's been more than 3 years doctors investigating what illness I've got but they can't find out and I've lost 20,25 kg weight. I lost so much weight which I've got too much pain and I had back surgery which it come back again and don't know what's gonna happen to my back. Emotionally and physically not good but thanks to my GP referred me to mental health which they going to give me psychologist and I'm on medication too. I had bad life in past, loads of bad memories, which most of the times it hard for me to cope with it." (Care leaver)

Figure 13: Proportion of care leavers (2021-24) with low well-being across gender, ethnicity, disability, and living arrangements

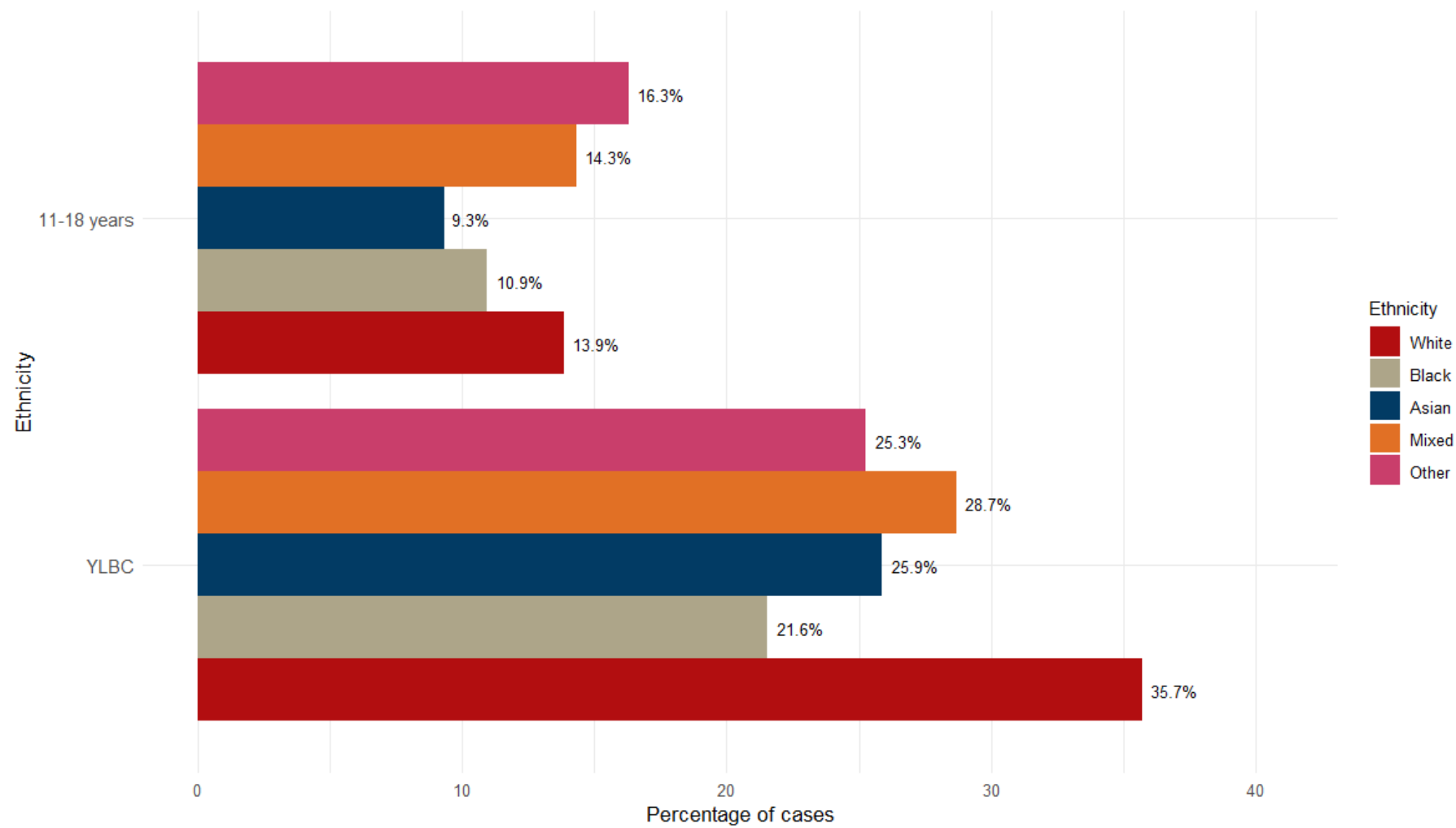


4.4.4 Ethnicity

As shown in Figure 14, the relationship between ethnicity and well-being is complex. For example, white care leavers had the highest rates of low-well-being out of all ethnic groups. However, this was not the case for white children in care (11-18 years); children in care who described being from other ethnic groups had the highest rates of low well-being.

For the purposes of our logistic regression on the predictors of low and very high well-being, we used categories of white and globalised majority (black, Asian, mixed, and other) ethnic groups to help with model complexity and group sizes. However, this approach means that we may have lost some granularity in these findings, by masking complex differences between ethnic groups. We recommend interpreting these findings with caution.

Figure 14: Proportion of children in care (11-18 years) and care leavers with low well-being by ethnicity (2021-24)



4.4.1 Where children in care and care leavers live

Children in care who lived in family-based arrangements (including foster care, with family or friends or with parents) had higher well-being than those in residential care or 'other' forms of accommodation (mostly supported accommodation). The forest plots below (Figure 15 and Figure 16) use error bars to show bootstrapped confidence intervals to illustrate the estimated uncertainty around the observed means.

Around two thirds of children in foster care or living with family had high life satisfaction compared to less than half of children in residential or other accommodation.

Care leavers who lived with former carers, parents or in supported lodgings reported higher well-being.

Care leavers who were 'Staying Put' (living with former foster carers) scored highest on all well-being measures.

Lower well-being was reported by care leavers that were homeless or lived in temporary or emergency accommodation.

Figure 15: Forest plot showing well-being scores by living arrangement for children in care (2021-24) with 95% bootstrapped confidence interval (1000 reps)

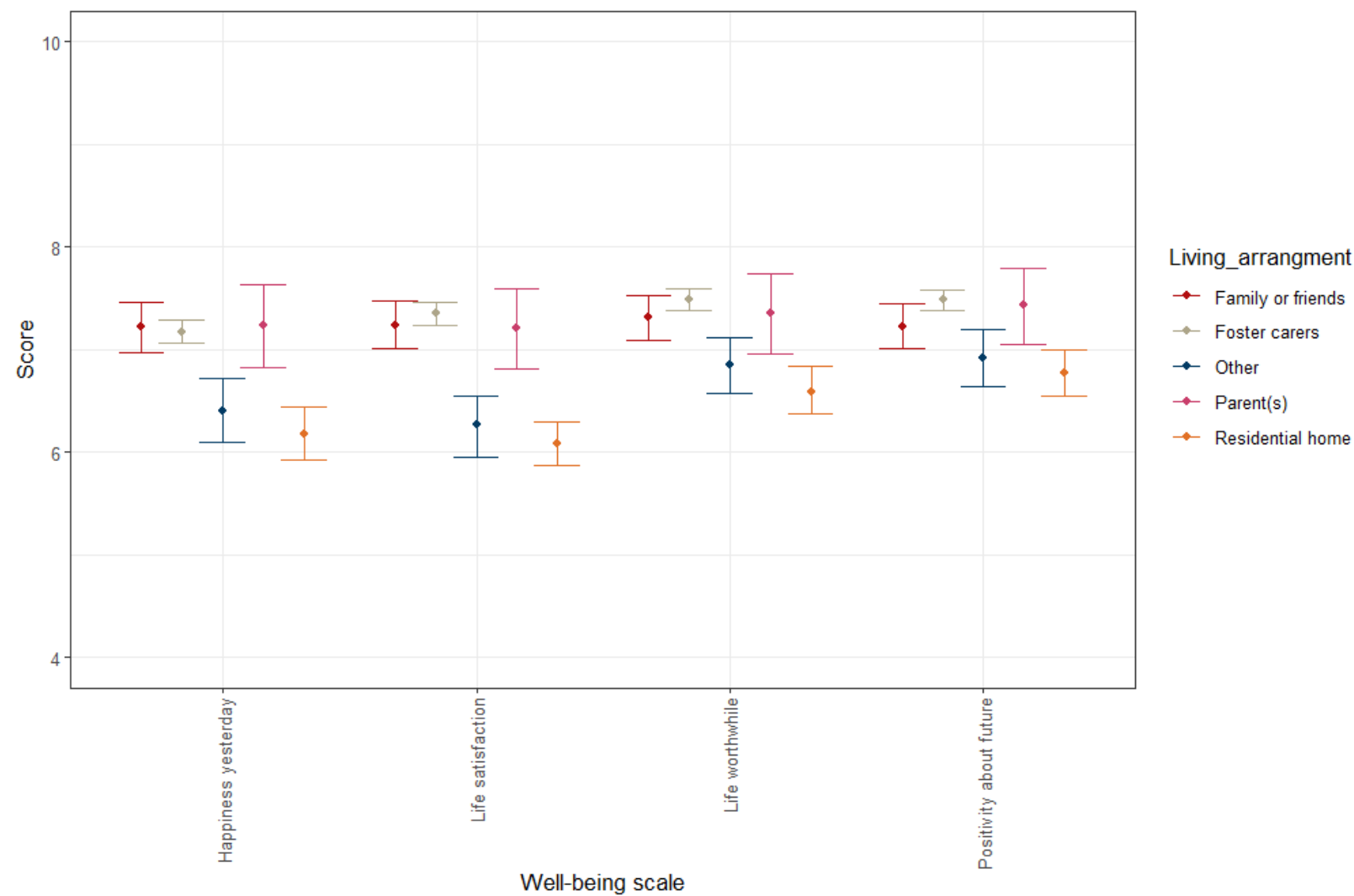
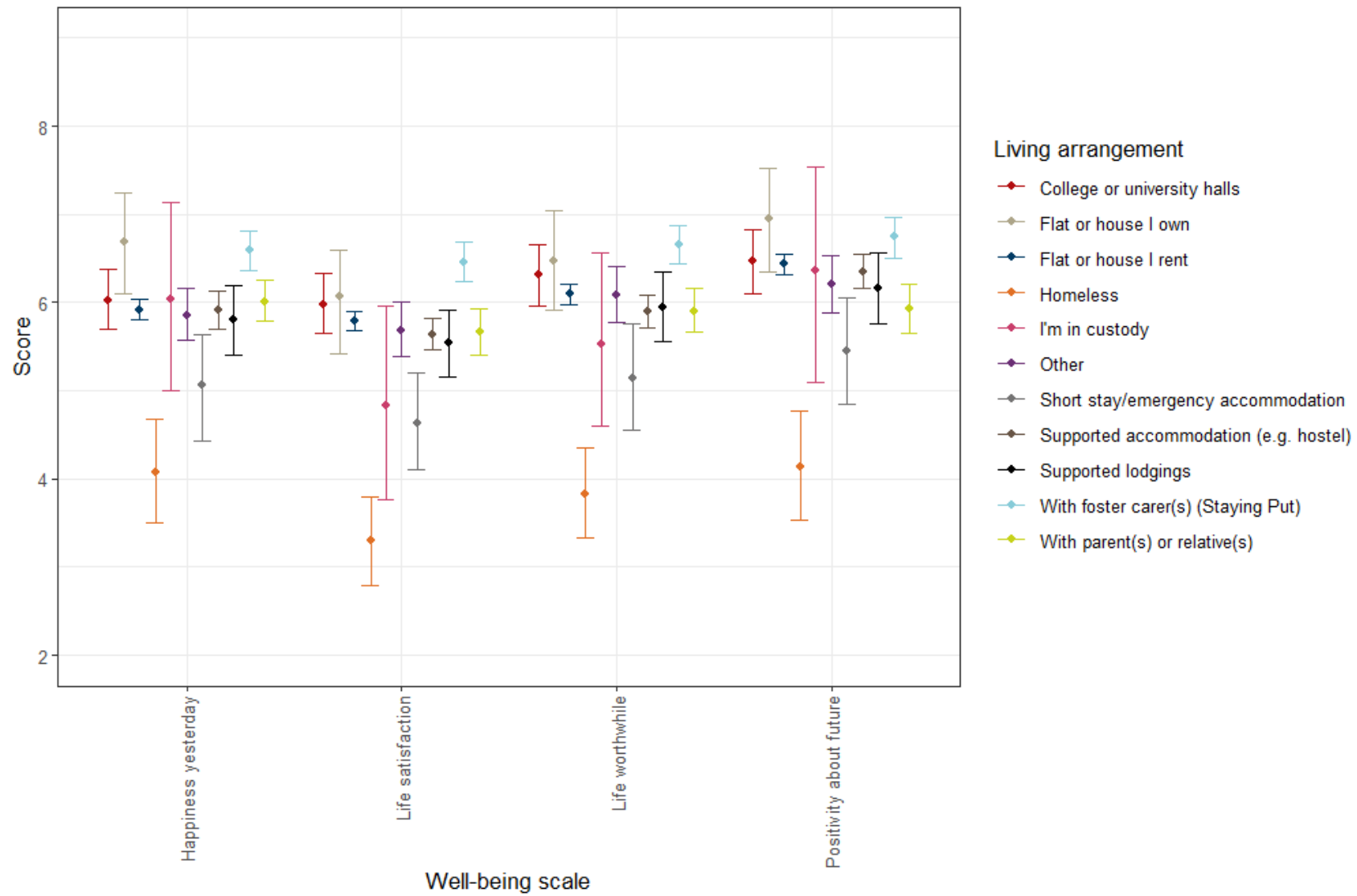


Figure 16: Forest plot showing well-being scores by living arrangement for care leavers (2021-24) with 95% bootstrapped confidence interval (1000 reps)



4.4.2 Length of time in care

Entering care represents one of the most profound disruptions in a child's life, often involving separation from primary caregivers, the loss or fragmentation of key relationships, and relocation away from familiar communities. Research consistently highlights the impact of such changes on children's sense of stability, identity, and belonging. For many, entering care entails not only the loss of familial bonds but also disconnection from peers and schools too (Care Inquiry, 2013).

We found that the odds of low well-being were 1.54 times higher for young people (11-18-year-old) who had been in care for less than a year.

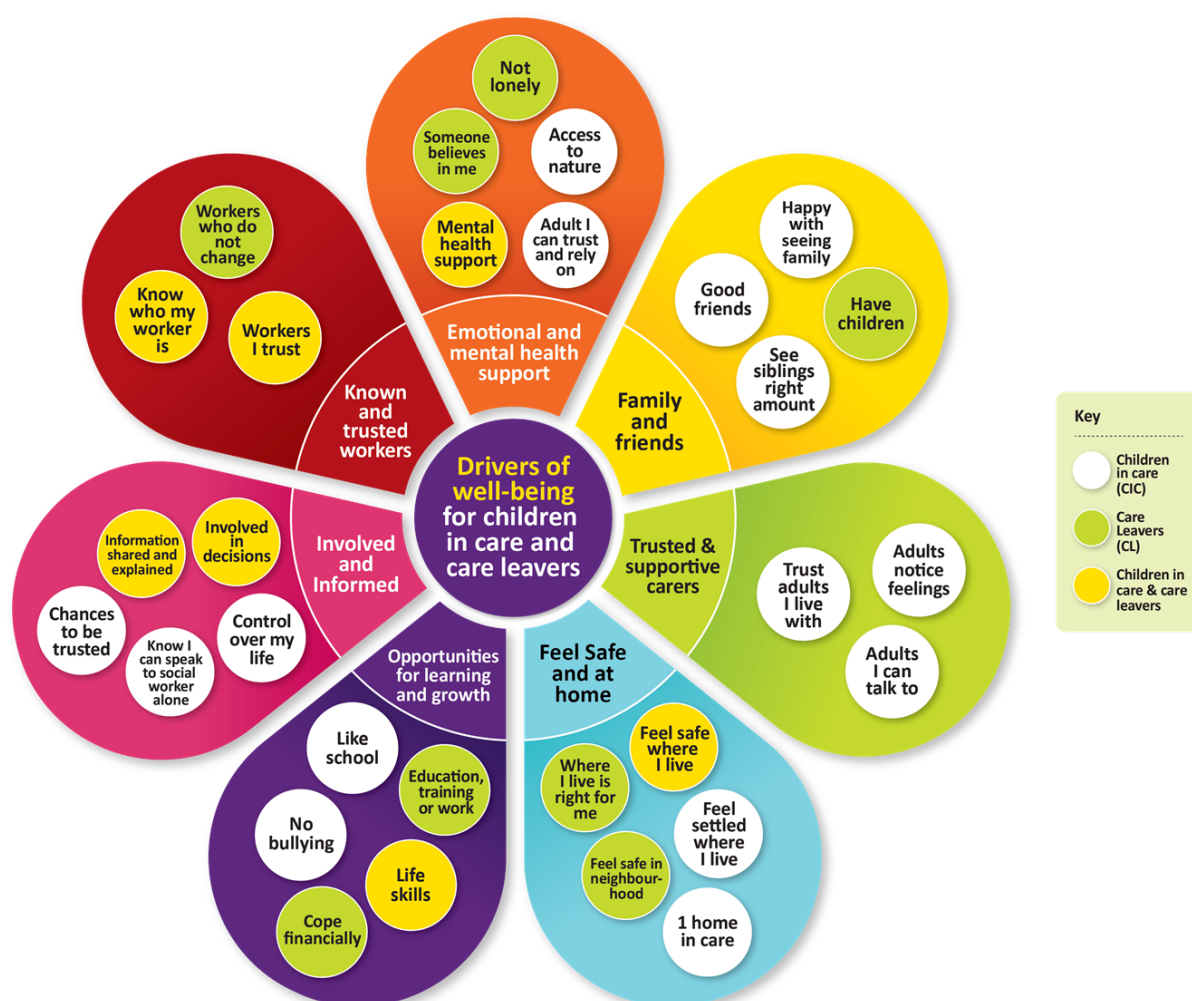
5 Seven drivers of well-being

We found that the key drivers of well-being for children and young people's well-being can be grouped into seven areas:

1. Emotional and mental health support
2. Family and friends
3. Trusted and supportive carers
4. Known and trusted workers
5. Feel safe and at home
6. Involved and informed
7. Opportunities to learn and grow

As children and young people grow older their understanding and circumstances change - and the Bright Spots surveys reflect that. Some questions are asked across all surveys, while others are tailored to older children in care or care leavers. This affects which factors show up as important for each group. In our visual summary (Figure 17) of the drivers of well-being below, we use white to show factors that affect for children in care, and green for care leavers. Yellow are drivers important to all children and young people. In the following sections we explore each of these drivers.

Figure 17: Visualisation of the seven drivers of well-being



5.1 Emotional and mental health support

“[Mental health] should really come like first to be fair, because it is the root of everything...” (Care experienced consultant)

Mental health and well-being are two related but distinct concepts. As a well-being survey the Bright Spots survey does not explicitly seek to identify children and young people with mental health problems, although some of the questions (e.g., about anxiety and worries about feelings and behaviour) explore elements related to mental health. We also know from qualitative responses that some of the young people with a disability or long-term health condition are experiencing mental health problems. It was clear from the analysis of children and young people’s comments that emotional and mental health support was very important to both children in care and care leavers.

“My foster carer helps me with my big feels. I have started therapy and learnt I’m good, sometimes make no so good choices.” (8-11-year-old)

Our Care Experienced Consultants reflected that mental health support was integral to many of the other drivers of well-being.

“If you don’t have a trusted adult, your mental health will dip. If you don’t have the right funding, your mental health will dip. If you are not involved and informed in your life, your mental health will dip.” (Care experienced consultant)

As we can see from our care leaver data (Table 2), who provides you with emotional support differs from person to person.

Table 2: Care leavers sources of emotional support

| Who gives you emotional support? | n | % |
|--|-------|-----|
| Friend(s) | 3,473 | 66% |
| Leaving care worker | 2,359 | 45% |
| Partner | 1,704 | 32% |
| Mum | 1,426 | 27% |
| Brother(s) or sister(s) | 1,367 | 26% |
| Pet(s) | 956 | 18% |
| Other relatives | 913 | 17% |
| Foster carer(s) | 884 | 17% |
| Dad | 827 | 16% |
| Counsellor/ mental health professional | 440 | 8% |
| Education professional | 391 | 7% |
| Residential home staff | 348 | 7% |
| Own child(ren) | 276 | 5% |
| Other care leavers | 206 | 4% |
| Other | 435 | 8% |
| I don’t have anyone | 322 | 6% |

6% of care leavers have no one that provides them with emotional support

Although the indicators are different between children in care and care leavers, what appeared important to both groups was having people who were there for them. For children in care a trusted adult is important, whereas for care leavers not being lonely and having someone who believes in you is linked to well-being.

"Nobody understands me or how my thoughts work my brain is complicated because of past experiences I find it extremely hard to make new friends and my old ones are long gone and I find it hard to communicate how I feel because no one can relate and everyone tells me I'm in the wrong or I'm the bad person, I have been labelled as someone I'm not and judged immediately on my past no one sees me for who I am as a person inside only what gets written in reports and I have tried so hard to be heard but no one is listening." (Care leaver)

The Care Experienced Consultants that helped us explore the data grouped trusted relationships into three groups – family, friends and professionals. To them family referred to lots of different types of relationships, including foster carers. Our Care Experience Consultants noted that seemingly incidental relationships can be important – e.g., a taxi driver that takes you to school each day or a sports coach – this underscores the need to listen carefully and ask children about who they say is important to them.

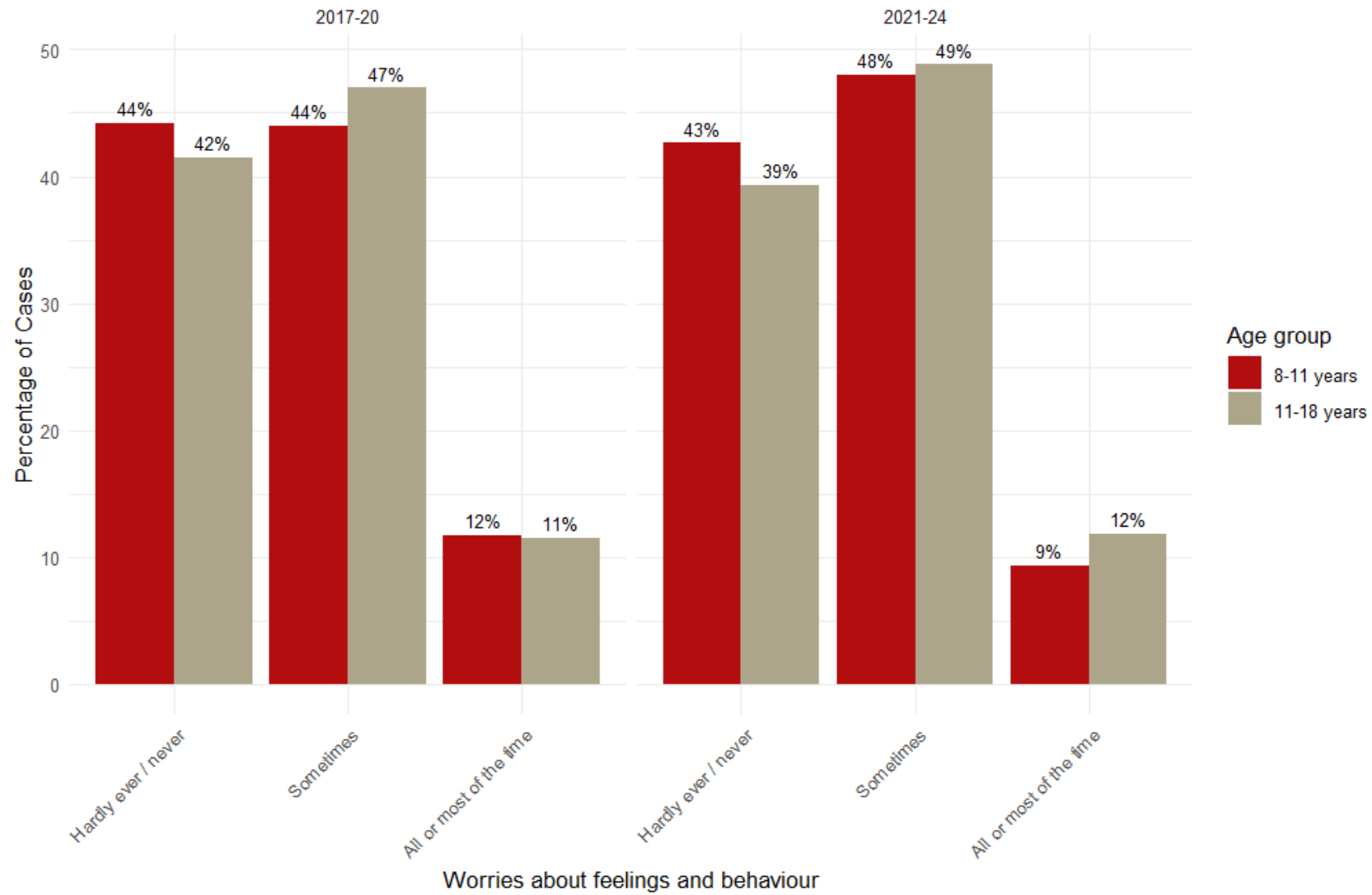
5.1.1 Worries about feelings and behaviour

6 out of 10 children in care worried about their feelings and behaviour

Children and young people aged 8-18 years are asked if they worried about their feelings or behaviour with answer options of 'all/most of the time', 'sometimes', 'hardly ever' and 'never'. If they responded 'all/most of the time', or 'sometimes', the follow-up question asked if they felt they got help with those worries with a yes/no response.

As shown in Figure 18, the proportion of children in care who worried about their feelings and behaviour were similar over time. But promisingly, in 2021-24 83% of children in care who worried about their feelings and behaviour were getting support from an adult, compared with 79% of children in 2017-20.

Figure 18: Children in care by the extent to which they worried about their feelings and behaviour in 2017-20 (n=5,458) and 2021-24 (n=4,885)



5.1.2 Access to mental health support

For some care-experienced children and young people, experiences of abuse, trauma and neglect - alongside a lack of adequate support - left a lasting impact on their mental health. As well as adverse childhood experiences, some were affected by traumatic experiences after entering care.

"I feel doomed. I feel trapped in a cycle of depression. I so badly want to get better but because the problems are never ending and another traumatic thing happens which adds to all the other PTSD, I just feel like I am drowning." (Care leaver)

"I deal with a lot of trauma, depression, BPD and autism all of which severely impacts my day-to-day life" (11-18-year-old)

"I wish I could get myself out more on my own. My anxiety makes it almost impossible most of the time" (Care leaver)

"I have been raped several times and could not tell Social Services, I am depressed and cannot tell them." (Care leaver)

In general, some young people wanted more support with their mental health. They wanted more opportunity to talk about their mental health. They also felt that mental health should be considered more - for example in housing or employability support.

"I'd like to talk to more people about my mental health as I struggle with this." (11-18-year-old)

"To really think things through and understand that mental health is important and to help to very best standards when someone is struggling with mental health" (Care leaver)

"More supported housing for care leavers with mental health issues" (Care leaver)

"I think as someone who is going to be leaving care, social workers need to be better and more up on their game. Some are good, some are slow. A few years ago, I needed counselling, it took a year to be done when it should have taken a month. Some people have worse mental health than me and if it took that long they could have killed themselves." (Care leaver)

Some young people needed support from specialist mental health services. They were not always able to access this help. A few young people suggested that there should be more active methods of referral for care-experienced children and young people.

"I would like to have some therapy." (Care leaver)

"I think leaving care people should be able to self-refer to the mental health team because most doctors refuse the referral" (Care leaver)

"I believe there should be a worker designated to mental health that sees every single young person Leaving care to evaluate the things that would have been missed: someone that could make referrals for such problems is needed" (Care leaver)

Some children and young people noted the positive impact of the support they had received within the care system on their mental health.

"I think being in care has changed my life massively and has helped improve my mental health by a huge amount as I feel a lot more loved and I don't feel as useless as I used

to... being in care helped me realize that I am not useless and that my life actually has meaning to it.” (11-18-year-old)

As we note in 4.4.1 transitions within the care system—whether entering, moving between placements, or leaving care—can impact on children and young people’s mental health. Other transitions—such as changes in living arrangements, schools, or key relationships—can be equally destabilising. These shifts frequently involve the loss of trusted adults, peer connections, and familiar environments, all of which are critical to a young person’s sense of safety, identity, and well-being. Across these changes, leaving care, in particular, is often experienced as a “cliff edge,” with abrupt withdrawal of support (Baker,2017).

“Better mental health support offered. I got kicked out of kinship and then got made to feel like I should be fixed. I never got the right mental health support and I'm still struggling to this day” (Care leaver)

“I think more attention needs to be dealt with when it comes to children's mental health moving is very difficult and social services don't seem to see the effect as they move children constantly from place to place.” (Care leaver)

“Leaving care is a significant transition, and there are a few things that could make the experiences better... having access to mental health support and counselling can help navigate any challenges that may arise. Ultimately, it's about creating an environment that promotes growth, independence, and well-being.” (Care leaver)

Based on their written comments, for many children and young people the support they received within the care system was not sufficiently sensitive to their needs or trauma-informed.

“I was trapped against my will and expended every emotion to escape. By the time they finally listened, I had already sat in a pit of helplessness and hopelessness. When I left this broken system, I hadn't realised how mentally damaging it was and only found out after I had abandoned everything I cared about... While there were ups and downs, it consistently showed that it lacked any understanding on how to recognise and treat certain mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety. They also don't realise how certain insensitive treatments for the sake of "safety" can actually fuel these problems. If you want to improve this broken system, carers and foster parents both should receive proper training in regards to recognising the signs associated with poor mental health” (Care leaver)

“My placement broke down at 17 with my foster family due to my impulsive actions and anger management issues... Everyone knew I wasn't ready to live independently at all, I was thrown into a hostel in [Place], barring mind I was a CSE risk when I was younger... As soon as I reached 18, 9 months after I was thrown into a hostel keep in mind after being with a family environment the exact same one for 6+ years, the social workers from the LAC department were so quick to pass me onto the leaving care service. Their workers aren't equipped to deal with some of the problems care leavers face in adulthood due to childhood traumas so they can't actually help” (Care leaver)

Some young people commented on the benefit of increased staff awareness of issues affecting specific groups of children and young people - such as transgender young people, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or new parents.

“More support... it would be great if people were taught about trans issues and how to support young transgender people. I was in a lot of emotional pain for years because I

was not allowed to transition in care. It would have been ideal to do so as well because that's when I had the most support" (Care leaver)

"Support with mental health and more stability. YP Refugees and asylum seekers arrive with a lot of stress and trauma and the thing that made it worse was moving around a lot. It is important that a young person can find a community around them and feel safe and adapt more. Therapy should be provided and explained better. SWs must understand that therapy isn't something a lot of YP understand (because of age and culture) and YP are not used to talking about their feelings" (Care leaver)

"I am feeling depressed, I think I may have PSD after having my baby. I'm hoping it is just a phase and that the mental health team will help now that they are involved" (Care leaver)

Young people described being turned away or facing long waiting lists to access support.

"I have had a fairly good experience being in care and also as a care leaver. I am very lucky to have/ had great relationships with foster carers. But sometimes when I have asked for some help, I am often told there is no funding to help me. I.e., I requested to have counselling after I lost my foster carer to breast cancer, my mother also died from breast cancer, and this was quite a traumatic experience to go through twice. I was told there was no funding through social services because I am over 18." (Care leaver)

"I have suffered from abuse with family members which is the reason why I came into the care system after I tried to commit suicide. I was offered counselling when I first went into care but I think because of my age at the time and how fresh those memories were, I was not ready to talk to someone. But now I am a bit older and I am now facing some mental health problems, I have requested to have counselling, but unfortunately, I was told there no funding for me to have counselling because I am over 18" (Care leaver)

"Mental health services. I have been on a waiting list for trauma-focused CBT for a long time now and I can't seem to get it for a while now. The therapy is slowing down my development I can't do things my Friends my age do e.g., get busses or a job." (11-18-year-old)

"I feel like a lot of my problems are a result of my mental instability. Unfortunately, I do not know where to turn to talk about my feelings. I have been on the waiting list for a psychologist from CAMHS for months now. Talking to a school counsellor wasn't helping anything as I felt like I was only digging up childhood trauma and the counsellor wasn't doing anything to help me deal with that. All she did was listen and even tear up on some occasions which made me rather angry, I don't need sympathy, I need help. After two years of counselling, I simply stopped turning up." (11-18-year-old)

5.1.3 Trusted person in your life

Having a trusted person, someone you could rely on, is important children and young people.

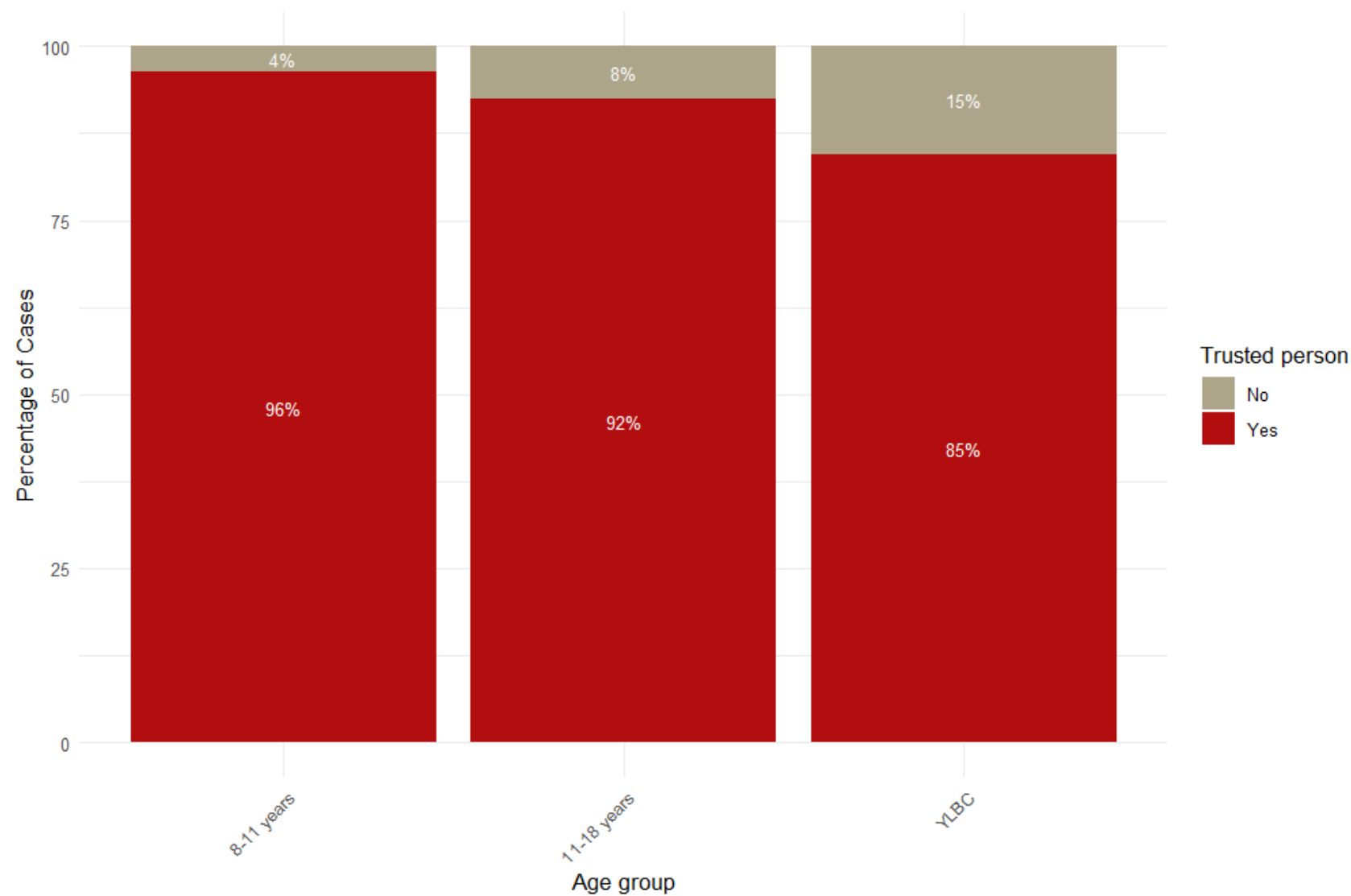
"I don't mind being in care. I have close friends that are also in care and others that aren't but know about it are really supportive of me. I have adults to talk to and friends as well." (11-18-year-old)

The Bright Spots survey ask children in care whether they have an 'adult who you trust, who helps you and sticks by you no matter what' and care leavers whether they 'have a person who you trust'.

The odds of low well-being were two times higher for children in care who did not have a trusted adult. Overall, 94% of children in care (8-18) report that they have 'an adult that they can trust, who helps them and sticks by them no matter what'. The percentage was highest among those children who lived with foster carers, kinship carers or parents. The percentage who had someone they could trust and rely on declined by age – 85% of care leavers had a person they could trust.

1 in 5 of children in care who live in other accommodation (e.g., supported accommodation) did not have a trusted adult.

Figure 19: Whether children in care and care leavers have a trusted adult or person in their lives (2021-24, n=10,147)



5.1.4 Someone who believes in you

"I feel alone and at a time which I should be supported and encouraged about my future I feel let down and disappointed." (Care leaver)

1 in 8 care leavers report not having someone who believes in them. For care leavers with a disability this is almost 1 in 5.

The odds of low well-being was two times as high for care leavers who reported that they did not have someone who believed in them. Young people's comments suggested that they would benefit both from professionals and their wider support network showing that they believed in them, by encouraging them and celebrate their successes.

"I had negative experiences in care. Maybe a bit more explanation about the different resources available and what the Virtual School can provide me. During my GCSEs and afterwards the Virtual School were preparing me for failure. I was being treated like worst case scenario and it wasn't aspirational. Vast difference between what school were preparing me for which was Oxbridge pathway and the Virtual School who were preparing me for failure like a statistic" (Care leaver)

"...the only contact I have with my family is when they want money for drugs or to berate me and tell me how great they are and how I am nothing over the phone in a drunken stupor, I have never once said anything suggesting I think I am better than them and all I have ever done is support them despite this. I have never been told by a single person in a non-professional setting in my life that I have done and am doing well and that I have achieved something to be proud of. ..." (Care leaver)

Care leavers who reported a disability or long-term health condition were significantly²² less likely to have someone who believes in them (82%) compared with care leavers who did not self-report disability (91%).

5.1.5 Loneliness

Not being lonely increased the odds of high well-being for care leavers.

1 in 5 Care leavers feel lonely often or always compared to 1 in 12 in the general population

19% of care leavers felt lonely often or always. In the general population 8% of 16–29-year-olds reported feeling lonely often or always (ONS,2024a).

²² $\chi^2(1, 4,359) = 25.47, p<0.001$

Table 3: Care leavers levels of loneliness (2021-24)

| Feel lonely | Number | Percentage |
|--------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Often/Always | 1007 | 19.44% |
| Some of the time | 1542 | 29.76% |
| Occasionally | 1123 | 21.68% |
| Hardly ever | 848 | 16.37% |
| Never | 661 | 12.76% |
| Grand Total | 5181 | 100.00% |

A few young people noted that they felt different and isolated from others as a result of their histories. They felt others did not understand them. This could be a barrier to friendships.

"I live alone in [Place]... I generally feel lonely. I feel unloved most of the time. I have to travel out my way to see people, and sometimes it's awkward seeing mates now I live away. They don't always know how to speak to me or understand me" (Care leaver)

Some young people noted that their mental health was a barrier to them forming close relationships. They struggled with anxiety, depression, and a lack of confidence.

"I struggle with nearly everything on this list due to my anxiety, depression, and low mood. I also have been frequently suicidal in the past year so don't really leave the household." (Care leaver)

"I struggle to sustain relationships due to my mental health; I am often alone and feel as though I have nobody around me or supporting me. It's hard to explain to others." (Care leaver)

5.1.6 Access to nature

"[What would make care better?] Going to different places more often like the beach." (8-11 years)

In our analysis, children in care who had regular access to the outdoors, places like parks, beaches or woods, had increased odds of high well-being. In the general population 5% of 8-15-year-olds never spend time outdoors (Natural England, 2023), but for children in care the same age 9% did not spend time outdoors²³.

Teenagers in care who did not often get outdoors had 1.5 higher odds of low well-being.

"I like going outside to play and having hot chocolate and marshmallows and whipped cream." (4-7-year-old)

"I like living with my foster carer. When I was at dad's I used to be on my phone all day and I used to have long lies and be late for school. Now I wake up early so I can go to school. I never used to get out in nature." (8-11-year-old)

²³ Answer options for different age groups are different. This includes those that answered 'never' or 'not at all'

Table 4: Frequency of children in care (11-18-year-old) spending time outdoors

| Response | 8-11 years | 11-18 years |
|--------------------------|------------|-------------|
| All or most of the time | 30% | - |
| Sometimes | 43% | - |
| Hardly ever | 16% | - |
| Never | 11% | - |
| Every day | - | 34% |
| More than once this week | - | 44% |
| Once this week | - | 15% |
| Not at all | - | 8% |

5.2 Family and friends

As we have already seen, trusting and supportive relationships are essential for children in care and care leavers. While professionals play a vital role, family and friends are not paid to be there—they choose to be. They offer opportunities for shared experiences now and a connection that can last well into adulthood.

5.2.1 Seeing family

One of the most common things that children and young people comment on in the surveys is their views on how much they see their families. More detailed analysis is available in Lewis and Selwyn (2022). Family can encompass parents, brothers and sisters, but also extended family members (such as cousins and grandparents). In their written comments children and young people often had clear and specific ideas about who they would like to see, not see or see more of.

"I want to see my mum more because I want to spend time with her. And spend time with my brothers, cousins and nieces. I never see my dad and I don't know why. I miss my dad. He said he put my presents to the social worker and it never came." (8-11-year-old)

"I don't want to see my Mum and Dad anymore. I live with 2 of my sisters and get to see one of my brothers for just the right amount. However, my younger brother and sister were adopted and I don't get to see them and I want to see them." (8-11-year-old)

There were also many who were happy with current arrangements, including those who had chosen not to see some family members.

I am happy now that I get to see my family as this didn't happen in my last placement. (11-18-year-old)

I don't want to see my mum; she has let us down too many times. [name] will still talk to me about mum every now and then to see if I have changed my mind. He does encourage me to see her but he doesn't make me because I really don't want to see her anymore. she makes me sad and I am always happy, so I don't like being sad. I have all the family I need living with my nanny. (8-11-year-old)

5.2.1.1 Parents

More children in care felt they saw their mum the right amount (41%) than their dads (23%). More than half did not see their dads and 3 in 10 children in care did not see their mums.

Table 5: Proportion of responses for parent contact questions

| Age group | Mum | | | | | Dad | | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|----------|------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------------------|----------|------------|-------------|-------------------|
| | Just the right amount | Too much | Too little | Passed away | I do not see them | Just the right amount | Too much | Too little | Passed away | I do not see them |
| 8-11 years | 19% | 4% | 26% | 5% | 19% | 27% | 2% | 18% | 5% | 48% |
| 11-18 years | 39% | 2% | 20% | 6% | 33% | 23% | 1% | 13% | 10% | 52% |
| Total | 41% | 3% | 22% | 6% | 29% | 24% | 1% | 15% | 9% | 51% |

In written comments children often wanted to see their parent(s) more or return to live with them.

"I have contact with my mum and sisters once per month and that is too little for me. I have a 4-year-old sister and that is worse for her." (11-18-year-old)

"I want to go back to my Mummy's house." (4-7-year-old)

Some comments reflected the pain children and young people felt at these separations.

"I wish that I could see my mum and brother my family mean the world to me I feel cold all of the time without them in my life anymore." (11-18-year-old)

Some children and young people did not have contact with parents. This included those with parents who had died. In our sample 9% reported their father had died and 6% that their mother had.

"I don't see mom or dad, dad died and mom live away but she sends me stuff." (8-11-year-old)

"My dad, mum and sister died in [country]." (11-18-year-old)

Although children and young people are not asked about their immigration status in the survey, some young people's comments suggested that they had come from abroad with limited or no contact with family.

"My mum is now in another country in a refugee camp ... I tried to contact her by the camp number every week... most of the time they are not willing. So, I hardly speak with my mum". (11-18-year-old)

Other young people noted that they were unable to see their parents due to their parents' mental health problems or substance misuse preventing contact visits.

"I would like to see my mum more often. However, she's had knock-backs that she made herself see us less. There also could be more help with the parents in a way they could have more support and how they could help them". (11-18-year-old)

A few children wrote that they wanted to see a parent or their parents less. A small number noted feeling unsafe during contact or found the meetings difficult.

*"I feel like every time I see them, I come back generally upset or in some sort of negative mood. I feel I need to see them a little bit less to help me with my emotions".
(11-18-year-old)*

*I feel uncertain about seeing my Mum. Sometimes she embarrasses me when I see her.
(8-11-year-old)*

Our Staying Connected report (Lewis and Selwyn, 2022) found little evidence that parents were being supported to ensure that contact went well or that relationships were re-established. Some comments suggested need for more support to reconnect.

*"More effort needs to be put in with helping me gain a relationship with my father."
(11-18-year-old)*

Children also wrote that they felt rejected when parents did not turn up for contact. Some children and young people did not wish to see their parents at all as they felt let down or felt emotional impact of seeing them was too great.

My mum doesn't come. I don't think she cares. (8-11-year-old)

I choose not to see my Mum and Dad because it makes me sometimes feel sad, angry, and confused. (8-11-year-old)

5.2.1.2 Brothers and sisters

Being unhappy with how often you saw your brothers and sisters increased the odds of low well-being for children in care. Although many young people wrote about wanting to see their siblings more, some were unhappy with how often they saw them because they felt they saw them too much, the key factor in relation to well-being was whether children in care felt they saw them the 'right' amount for them.

A quarter of children in care feel they see their brothers and sisters too little

5% of children in care (8-18yrs) did not have brothers and sisters. Of those that did 24% felt that they saw them too little, 45% just the right amount and 9% too much. 17% reported they could not see them.

2 in 5 children in residential care feel they see their brothers and sisters too little

There was variation in how satisfied children felt about seeing their brothers and sisters, dependent on where children lived (Table 6). Around half of children in foster or kinship placements feel they see their brothers and sisters the 'right' amount compared with less than a third of children in residential and other accommodation

Table 6: Proportions of responses for contact arrangements with siblings for children and young people in care aged 8-10 years (n=1,306) and 11-18 years (n=3,441, 2021-24)

| Placement type | Too much | Just the right amount | Too little | I do not see them | I do not have brothers or sisters |
|------------------------|----------|-----------------------|------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Foster carers | 7% | 48% | 23% | 17% | 5% |
| Family/friends/parents | 22% | 50% | 17% | 6% | 5% |
| Residential home | 3% | 32% | 40% | 19% | 6% |
| Other | 4% | 27% | 23% | 40% | 6% |
| Total | 9% | 45% | 24% | 17% | 5% |

In written comments, many children and young people noted wanting to see siblings more.

"I want to see my big brother more" (4-7-year-old)

"When I'm in the car on the way to school or going into the playground I feel sad because I'm thinking about my mum and my brother" (4-7-year-old)

Siblings are often split up in care due to the size of the family, children entering care at different times, or younger children being placed for adoption. Children and young people noted wanting to see more of the siblings they didn't live with.

"Too much because I live with them, not enough for the ones I don't live with." (11-18yrs)

"I'd like to know about and see my brother who has been adopted. I don't have a photo or know how he is." (8-10yrs)

Some children and young people also resented being separated from their siblings and felt that this should not have happened to them. Some called for better facilitation of contact with siblings they did not live with.

"Recognise that separating siblings is cruel... It is too late for me now but I am going to uni in September to study Soc Work, and when I finish uni, I will try to make a difference to siblings in care" (Care leaver)

"My youngest sibling is adopted from age 3 and although I get twice yearly letters and pictures, I feel it is unfair that due to not his or the other children's fault we are now separated and have no choice to see him and we are left with memories we cannot share with him and this makes me so sad." (11-18-year-old)

"Keep siblings together, or at least facilitate regular and consistent contact if it is in their best interests." (Care leaver)

Sometimes family members prevented siblings seeing each other.

"I want to be able to see my siblings again. Their dad has stopped contact between us." (11- 18yrs)

Other children and young people were unable to see their siblings because they were too far away (sometimes abroad), or because siblings had been adopted.

"I want my brothers and sisters to come to the UK - I have asked but I haven't got an answer yet - this makes me very sad." (11-18-year-old)

Comments from children and young people who reported seeing their siblings "too much" included those living with siblings, sometimes sharing bedrooms. As noted in *Staying Connected* (Lewis & Selwyn, 2022), some children may feel bullied or scapegoated, which can be more common among siblings who have experienced domestic violence or abuse themselves (Linares, 2006). These dynamics may also reflect typical sibling challenges, such as rivalry and arguments, which often coexist with strong positive feelings (Pike et al., 2009).

"I live with and share a bedroom with my sister and feel that I see her too much." (8-11)

"I don't feel safe alone in the house with my brother. He hurts me. My brothers annoy me." (11-18-year-old)

5.2.1.3 Extended family

Outside of immediate family (parents and siblings) many children and young adults highlighted other important people with whom they would like increased contact.

"My mum, my brother, my granda, my grandma, my Auntie, my uncle, my auntie are all special to me. My step dad" (8-11-year-old)

"I want to see my aunt and cousins, that would be nice." (11-18-year-old)

Some children and young people also wrote about wanting to spend time with pets they had left behind in the family home or in previous placements.

"I would also like to see the dog again [in the previous foster placement]." (4-7-year-old)

"My mum doesn't come [to contact visits]. I miss my cat." (8-10yrs)

More detailed analysis about children and young people's experiences around staying connected is available in Lewis & Selwyn (2022) and recommendations for how to support children and young people to stay connected in the accompanying key findings and recommendations report (Lewis, Selwyn & Briheim-Crookall, 2022)

5.2.2 Being a parent

Around a fifth of care leavers were either parents, or they or their partners were pregnant (n=999, 19%). Many studies have shown that parents often have lower well-being than non-parents (Glass et al, 2017). However, the young people in our surveys bucked this trend.

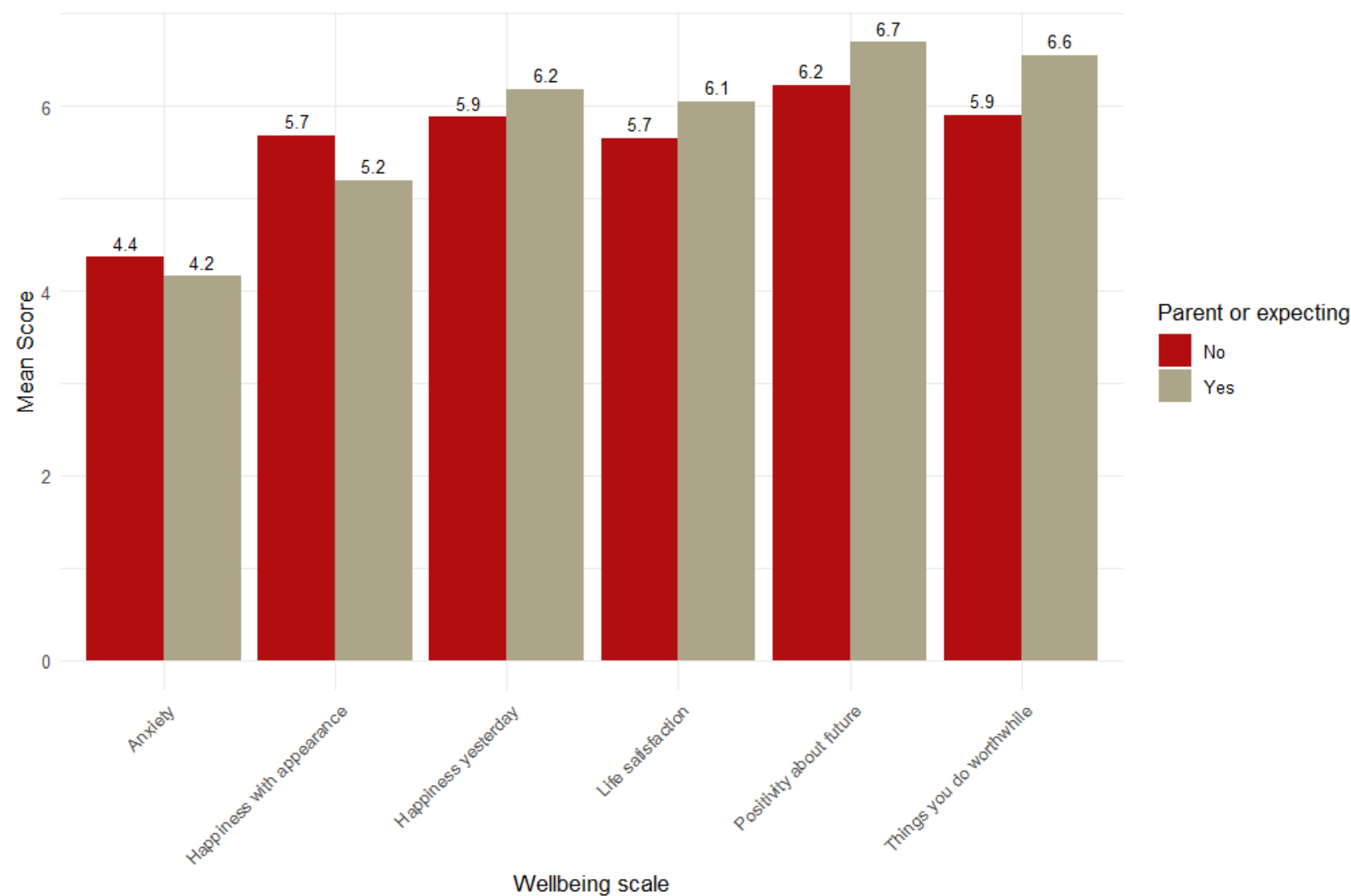
27% of parents or those who were expecting had low well-being, compared with 34% of care leavers who were not parents or expecting.

The odds of high well-being were 1.82 higher for care leavers who were parents or expecting than those who were not. Care leavers who were parents reported higher average scores across all personal well-being indicators (see

Figure 20). The largest difference was in responses to whether they felt their lives were worthwhile, suggesting that parenting may provide young people with a stronger sense of purpose. Similarly, research by Hudde & Jacob (2025) has shown that in many European countries' parents report more meaning to their lives. Unlike our care leavers though (see Figure 20) generally parents do not report higher life satisfaction, except where parenting is 'less intense or less challenging' – as experienced by fathers, those with higher education, and those living in countries with supportive welfare states'.

More than half of care leavers (52%) who were parents felt the things they do in life are worthwhile compared with 44% of care leavers who were not parents.

Figure 20: Mean average well-being scores by whether care leavers are parents/expecting or not



Comments from young people who had children spoke to the positive impact of parenting, but also recognised that it was not without challenges.

"My son is, and always will be, the reason I try my best in all I do. He has saved and changed my life in so many ways and it's because of him I now love life and face every challenge with a smile." (Care leaver)

"There's a lot going on at the moment that affects my mood but got to just be happy for my baby... Looking after a baby is quite time consuming, wouldn't change it for the world but would like to have a bit more freedom." (Care leaver)

"The most important person in my life is my baby boy." (Care leaver)

"I now have a child of my own and work and study through college, so I think maybe I'd like to be able to make time for myself ... but it's not a massive issue. I'm happy and so is my child so that's what matters to me more." (Care leaver)

5.2.3 Good friends

Friendships play a central role in children's development and are consistently identified as a key driver of emotional well-being and identity formation. They offer vital opportunities for learning empathy, managing conflict, fun and building self-worth. (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2025).

For care leavers friends are the most common source of emotional support. 66% of care leavers reported their friends were a source of emotional support. We also found that children in care who have a good friend have two times greater odds of high well-being.

1 in 8 children in care and care leavers don't have a good friend.

Overall, 12% of children and young people reported that they did not have a good friend. The proportion who report that they have a good friend declined as children got older.

- 94% of primary school age children have a good friend
- 89% of 11-18yr olds have a good friend
- 84% of care leavers have a good friend

In 2021 YouGov found that 2% of 16-24 did not have a good friend.²⁴ This compares to 15% of care experienced young people (16–24-year-olds) in our surveys. In the general population, the 2020 Good Childhood Report found that 97% of children and young people aged 10-15yrs had at least one close friend.²⁵ This compares to 91% for the same age group in our survey.

The odds of very high well-being were 2 times higher for children in care who had a good friend

²⁴

²⁵ Good Childhood Report 2020 (p.65)

Some children and young people commented on the support they received from friends. They talked about friends knowing them and understanding them, being reliably there for them, and looking out for their interests.

"They are all amazing especially my two best friends (one of which is a care leaver). They both support me, believe in me and are always there." (Care leaver)

"My friend is a big help and his mum as they push me to dig deeper in the things I do as they know things for me can be kind of lonely" (Care leaver)

Some young people mentioned not having friends, or feeling lonely.

"I have no supports at all and no matter how many times I've asked no one will help me. I've fallen into debt, self-harmed, failed multiple years of college courses, have no friends, no social life and my flats in disrepair." (Care leaver)

"Sometimes it's really lonely. I remember when I went into care when I was younger it was extremely lonely and I felt like I was just 'dumped' but now it's not so bad but still lonely." (11-18-year-old)

A few young people talked about having care-experienced friends who could understand their experience. They noted the benefits of connecting with others with similar experiences.

"I only have one friend who shows me this kind of support. She's also a care leaver and sometimes she is going through things that I support her with. But sometimes it's lonely and I wish I had more people in my life." (Care leaver)

"When I was part of the care leavers group, I found that other people had a lot to say, they wanted to be heard and I wouldn't have minded going to groups where we shared stories. As a care leaver or a child in care, you rarely fit in or have someone to relate to. Having that group actually opened my eyes to realising I'm not the only one suffering and I actually found out there was help out there for me." (Care leaver)

A few children and young people noted wanting more support with making friends:

"I would like to be able to meet with other children that are in care also and make new friends with them as they understand what it is like and maybe go out on nice trips." (8-11-year-old)

"Life gets boring and lonely, I wish there was more work put on supporting us to develop healthy friendships." (11-18-year-old)

[Completed with assistance] "[Young person] stated she would like more access to a variety of activities that she can access and meet new people. More opportunities to make new friends." (11-18-year-old)

Comments from some children and young people the impact of being in care on friendships, such as the disruption caused by changes in placements and schools.

"It's hard because I don't know if I can stay living with my foster carers. It's hard to change schools and lose friends and make new friends" (4-7-year-old)

"I would like to stay in touch with the children of my foster carer when I leave, because they are my friends and they also make me happy and we have lots of fun." (8-11-year-old)

"The care system made sure I couldn't have any relationships. You took me away from my family and friends aged 13 and shipped me all across the country, from farms in [Place] to literal tents in [Place]. I wasn't allowed to go to school so I was completely isolated with no phone either - for 4 years. At 17 I then got dropped in semi-independent in [Place]. I don't know anyone. I'm so lonely because of care." (Care leaver)

Another barrier to their friendships were the restrictions placed on them in care – such as limits on sleepovers, social media or spontaneous outings - that prevented them from doing similar things to their friends. This was an issue that the children and young people who helped us develop the survey highlighted and therefore we included a question for secondary school children in care on whether ‘outside of school or college do you get the chance to do similar things to your friends’ (Table 7).

Table 7: Number and proportion of children in care (aged 11-18) who ‘do similar things to their friends’

| Do similar things to their friends... | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|--------|------------|
| All or most of the time | 1448 | 41% |
| Sometimes | 1388 | 40% |
| Hardly ever | 387 | 11% |
| Never | 285 | 8% |
| Grand Total | 3508 | 100% |

1 in 5 children in care could not do similar things to their friends.

These included rules and checks needed to visit friends, have friends to visit or have a sleepover. A few children and young people were upset that they were unable to see their school friends outside of school. Some felt that restrictions on their access to phones and social media also impacted on their friendships.

"Being in care is hard for me as I am in my last year of primary school and I don't get to hang out with my friends without having to ask my social worker." (8-11-year-old)

"Be able to stay at my friends' house without my foster carer calling them and asking if they can come and look at their house." (11-18-year-old)

"Not having time restrictions so that I can feel more normal, as I will be able to do more with my friends. Being able to have more freedom with staying out late or round friends' houses. Overall, it is okay, my only concern is time restrictions as I feel isolated and unable to make plans with people or go out with other people because they will have to get me back for a certain time." (11-18-year-old)

"I would love to be allowed 'WhatsApp' - to be included in a group chat with my friends. Make it easier to have sleepovers." (11-18-year-old)

5.3 Trusted and supportive carers

Across all age groups, care-experienced children and young people highlighted the central importance of their relationships with their carers, and made explicit the link to their well-being. As

our care experienced consultants stressed, for many they become family too. When children and young people develop trusting and supportive relationship it contributes to feeling looked after.

"It's lovely to be in care. I have the best foster carers in the world." (8-11-year-old)

"Nothing would make being in care better for me. For all those going into care they need to find the right person because if they do not find the right person, they won't live a happy life and we want everyone in care to live a happy life." (8-11-year-old)

"...all the credit of how I have been raised and all the skills and support I have received is from [Name] who is my foster carer because without a good foster carer, a child in foster care will never be able to feel confident in adults supporting them or even feel looked after." (11-18-year-old)

When the relationship is difficult it can contribute to a negative experience of being in care.

"I am not happy with my carer so I run away" (11-18-year-old)

"I am really happy with my carers now but when I first went into care, I was really sad because the carer was mean to me. She always told me I was a naughty girl and I didn't like it, but then my school and social worker got me moved and it was really, really good." (4-7-year-old)

5.3.1 Trust adults that you live with

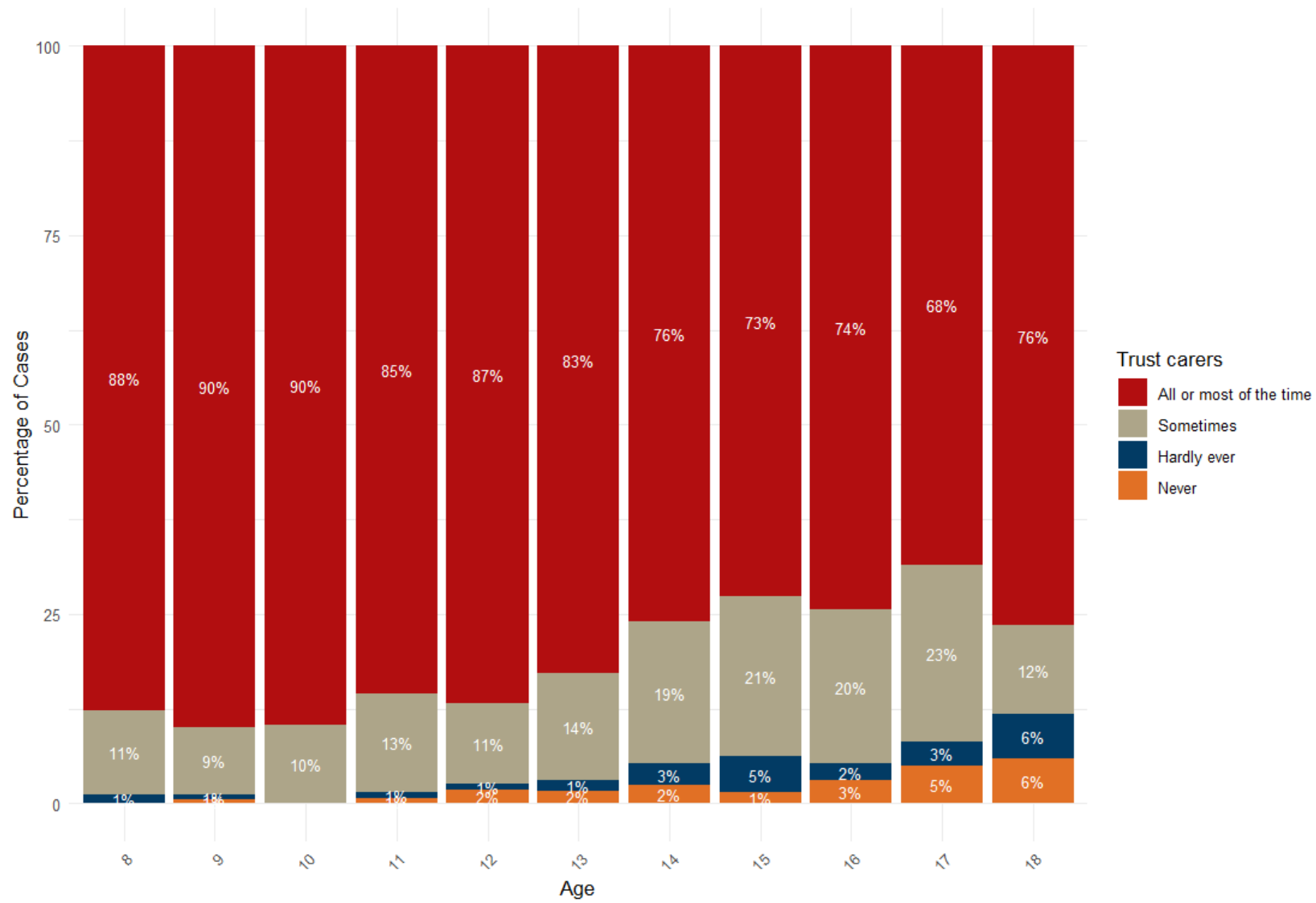
The people that children live with are central to their lives. A loving stable home can be the foundation for a child to flourish. Most children in care report that they trust the people they live with.

96% of children trust their carers at least some of the time.

"I have a very good relationship with my foster carer as we have been able to understand each other and trust each other throughout experiences while me being in care. She has helped to support me when I have needed it and help me through difficulties during my time in care" (Care leaver)

However, the proportion who report that they hardly ever or never trust their carers increases with age.

Figure 21: Proportion of children and young people in care who trust their carers by age (n=4,783)



The odds of low well-being were 1.8 times greater for 11–18-year-olds who did not trust their carers. In their comments young people also emphasised the importance of being trusted by their carers (see also 5.6.3):

“it’s hard sometimes and my foster carers can misunderstand me sometimes they also don’t trust me and think I steal and lie which is hurtful to me because I don’t and it isn’t in my nature to lie or steal” (11-18-year-old)

Our data suggest that although some relationships endure, care leavers’ relationships with carers do not always stay strong into adulthood. When we asked care leavers about who provides them with emotional support a higher percentage of care leavers report that their pets provide emotional support (18%) than their foster carers (17%).

Fewer care leavers reported that their foster carers provided them with emotional support in 2021-24 (17%) than in 2017-20 (25%)

Worryingly, a significantly²⁶ lower proportion of care leavers report their foster carers provide them with emotional support in recent years than previously (17% in 2021-24 compared with 25% in 2017-20). This is not necessarily a reflection of a decline in the relationship with individual carers, but could be explained by a reduction in young people who have foster carers, i.e., more young people living only in residential or supported accommodation before they leave care. Department for Education data (DfE 2024 & 2021) shows that in England the proportion of care leavers who are living with carers when they turn 18 and eligible for Staying Put has declined from 32% in 2018 to 28% in 2024. Bright Spots surveys do not ask care leavers about where they lived when in care so it is not possible to identify to analyse whether this made a difference. However, what our findings, suggest is that young people who may have benefited from strong relationships with carers are not developing these. This does not only have implications for their time in care, but impacts on their support networks in early adulthood.

Staying Put in England and equivalent schemes (*When I am ready*, Wales; Continuing Care, Scotland) did appear to make a difference to care leavers. Three out of five care leavers (60%) who were still living with their foster carers aged 18 or older (Staying Put) felt their carers provided emotional support, compared with 12% of all other care leavers.

“My ex foster carers who I live with are really lovely - they encourage me in everything I do.” (Care leaver)

5.3.2 Adults you live with notice feelings and talk to you

The *Your Life, Your Care* surveys ask all children in care *whether ‘the adults you live with notice how you are feeling’* and secondary school age children how often they *‘talk to the adults you live with about things that matter to you’*.

The analysis showed the importance of feeling seen and heard by carers. In the logistic regression we found that for the youngest children living with adults who noticed their feelings was among the factors most strongly associated with happiness. 4–11-year-olds odds of feeling happy increased 1.9 times if they lived with adults who notice how they are feeling.

²⁶ $\chi^2(1, 8,228) = 75.53, p < 0.001$

Relationships with carers change over time and the proportion who feel that adults notice their feelings decline with age.

Two thirds of 8-year-olds report that carers notice how they are feeling all or most of the time compared with just over half of 17-year-olds.

In written comments, across all age groups, some children and young people highlighted the central importance of their relationships with carers, and made explicit the link to their well-being.

"My foster family [are] amazing people, they make life worth living." (Care leaver)

11–18-year-olds that regularly talked to carers about the things that matters to them had 2 times greater odds of very high well-being and similarly feeling that you could not talk to carers increased the chance of low well-being 1.8 times.

Two thirds of young people in care talk to the adults they live with about things that are important to them at least once a week.

Table 8: Frequency of children in care (11-18-year-old) speaking to the adults they live with about things that are important to them

| Frequency | Number of young people | Percentage |
|-----------------------|------------------------|------------|
| Most days | 1494 | 45% |
| More than once a week | 768 | 23% |
| Less than once a week | 499 | 15% |
| Hardly ever | 585 | 17% |
| Grand Total | 3346 | 100% |

Children and young people noted the impacts of having supportive carers; they sometimes contrasted this to their previous experiences. For those with positive relationships carers were a source of stability and emotional support - children and young people could feel like they had unconditional support regardless of their behaviour, and they acknowledged how carers did not give up on them. Several children and young people highlighted the emotional sensitivity of their carers, and carers' attention to their feelings, knowing their likes and dislikes. They described how adults they lived with would listen to them and allowed them to talk freely and openly. They had someone to support them when they had a bad day at school, or were feeling low. They were able to have fun with their carers. They felt cared for and loved - and some specifically noted the impact on their well-being and mental health.

"It is nice because you get loved a lot." (4-7-year-old)

"My foster carer has been really supportive of me and doesn't give up easy" (Care leaver)

"She always gives me my favourite food. She is always beautiful. she always always always looks after me in the danger. She always makes me excited when there is so many prizes on my birthday. She always, always, always lets me play on my tablet." (4-7-year-old)

"My Foster Carers are the best! They help us with our emotions all the time if I am worried or if they tell by my face and expression towards things. They care about me a lot and they love me. They help me to understand why being in Foster care is important, and we have little chats about it when the time is right." (8-11-year-old)

In contrast other children and young people did not describe a loving and caring experience with their carers. Some wrote about carers who they felt did not provide a safe space for them to talk about their feelings and others did not like it when carers shouted.

"I would like to change to a nicer foster carer... I don't feel I can talk to my foster carer about my worries or if I'm upset as she is always on the phone." (8-11-year-old)

"I would like my foster carers to understand how I feel and not make fun of how I feel." (8-11-year-old)

"My foster carer needs to listen more to my feelings." (11-18-year-old)

"I feel like a lot of my problems are a result of my mental instability. Unfortunately, I do not know where to turn to talk about my feelings... Talking to my foster parent is difficult as I am scared that she will be angry at me for feeling this way or think that I am ungrateful, I feel like she doesn't really understand me. She often says I have no real problems to be worrying about which is far from the truth. She calls me childish and sometimes I even have my phone confiscated if I am in a bad mood e.g. I'm not smiling and I feel like crying. That leaves me with only my friends that I can speak to. I feel like my foster mother should understand me, she is a mental health nurse after all but this isn't the case. I do not want to change foster home since this is the closest thing I've ever had to a proper family and moving would most certainly ruin my life." (11-18-year-old)

"I would like my foster carers to listen to me more. Sometimes I get shouted at and I haven't done anything. I would like to be told why they are shouting at me for." (8-11-year-old)

"I don't like when my foster mum shouts and swears cause I have done something wrong but then I shouldn't of done something wrong but I don't like the swearing it makes me feel worried and scared!" (8-11-year-old)

Some young people suggested that their carers needed more support and training.

"I don't think that some of my foster carers in the past have been fully trained to look after teens and older kids." (11-18-year-old)

"At the beginning, I'd say that there were quite a few adults that did not fully understand/cultivated the skill of empathy or understanding. Though I was a foreigner and by that, it was already hard to understand an individual like me as the adults did not understand how a mixed-Asian family worked. Or individual such as me. My thoughts are, - People/Carers/Adults need to learn a-lot more about empathy and understanding." (11-18-year-old)

5.4 Feel safe and at home where we live

We want all children to feel safe and settled where they live. This is no different for children growing up in care or those who have left care (many of whom live on their own much earlier than other young people). A stable home plays a key role in supporting well-being during the move into adulthood. Our findings show the importance of feeling safe and at home where you live.

"Everything is ok. I'm very happy where I live." (8-11-year-old)

Children in care who lived in family-based placements (foster care, kinship foster care & parents) had higher well-being than those in residential care or 'other' forms of placements (mostly supported accommodation). Care leavers who lived with former carers, parents or in supported lodgings reported higher well-being. Lower well-being was reported by care leavers that were homeless or lived in temporary or emergency accommodation.

5.4.1 Feel safe

"Nothing because I feel more safer and they are so kind and lovely. Just love them so, so, so, so much... What else I want to say is that I would never go anywhere else because I know I am loved and cared for where I am" (4-7-year-old)

We ask children in care and care leavers 'Do you feel safe in the home you live in now?'. Overall. Three quarters of children in care and care leavers felt safe where they lived but there were important differences between different groups of children and young people.

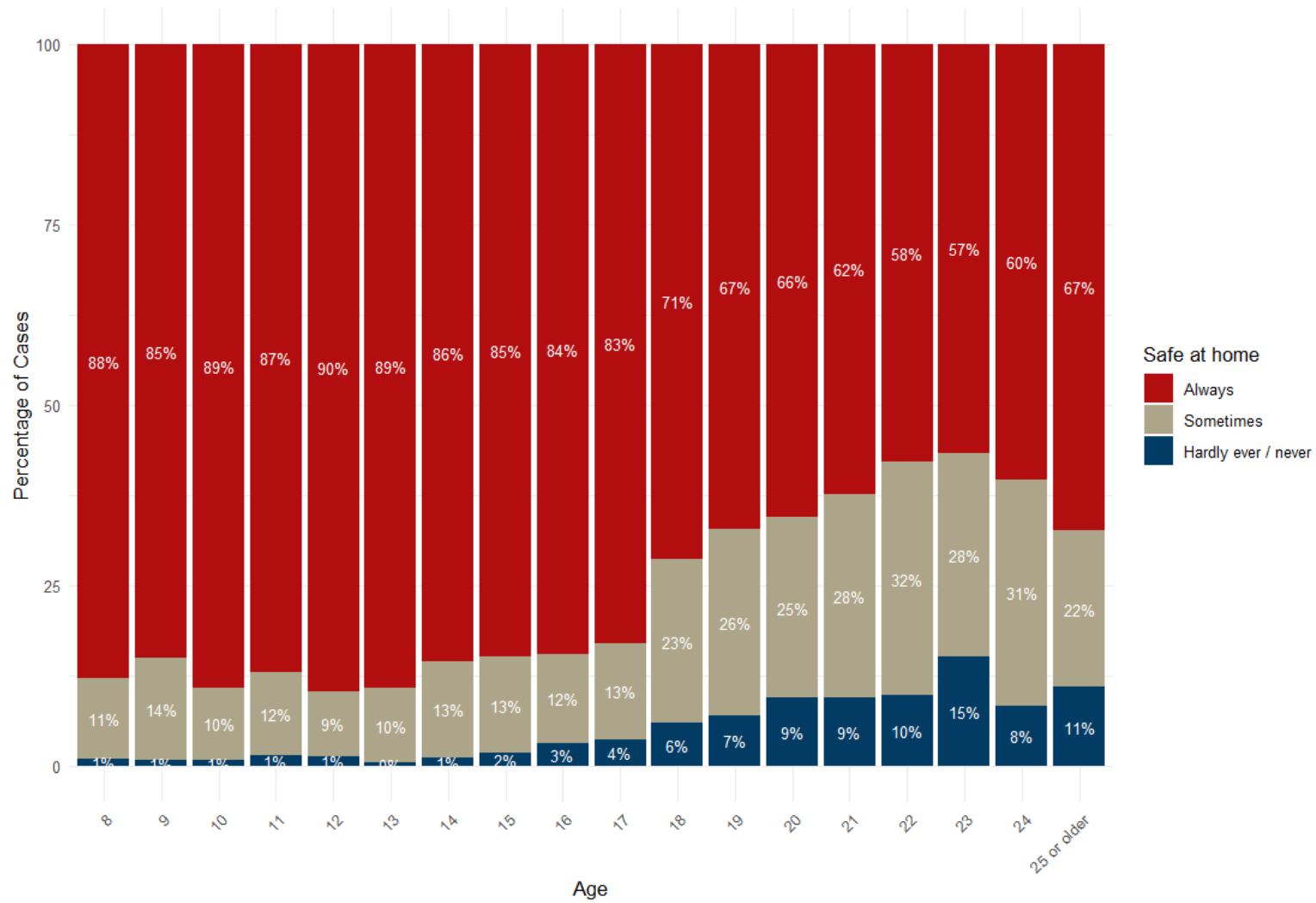
Feeling safe where you live stood out as the one factor consistently linked to well-being across all age groups. Its presence supports high well-being, while its absence increases the risk of low well-being.

Feeling safe where you live changes as you get older. Significantly²⁷ more of children in care (8-18 years) always felt safe at home (87%), compared with care leavers (65%).

Two thirds of care leavers always feel safe at home

²⁷ $\chi^2(1, 10,152) = 616.27, p < 0.001$

Figure 22: Feeling safe at home by age for children in care (8-18 years) and care leavers (2021-24, n=9,902)



Unfortunately, care-experienced children and young people felt significantly less safe²⁸ in recent years, compared with earlier years.

76% of children and young people always felt safe at home in 2021-24 compared with 80% in 2017-20.

Other factors were associated with care-experienced children and young people feeling safe at home.

- Female care experienced children and young people (8-18 years and care leavers) were significantly²⁹ less likely to feel safe at home (73%), compared with males (79%).
- Children and young people in care that live in residential home were significantly³⁰ less likely to always feel safe at home (67%), compared with children and young people living elsewhere (90%).
- Care leavers' living arrangements also seems to be associated with feeling safe at home. For example, care leavers 'Staying Put' with their foster carer(s) (89%) were significantly more likely to feel safe at home compared with those in supported accommodation (59%)³¹ or in emergency or short stay accommodation (35%)³².
- Care leavers who self-reported disability or long-term health problems (54%) were significantly³³ less likely to feel safe at home compared with care leavers who were not disabled (72%).

1 in 3 girls don't always feel safe where they live compared with 1 in 4 boys aged 11-18 years.

²⁸ $\chi^2(1, 18,458) = 49.65, p < 0.001$

²⁹ $\chi^2(1, 9,676) = 51.70, p < 0.001$

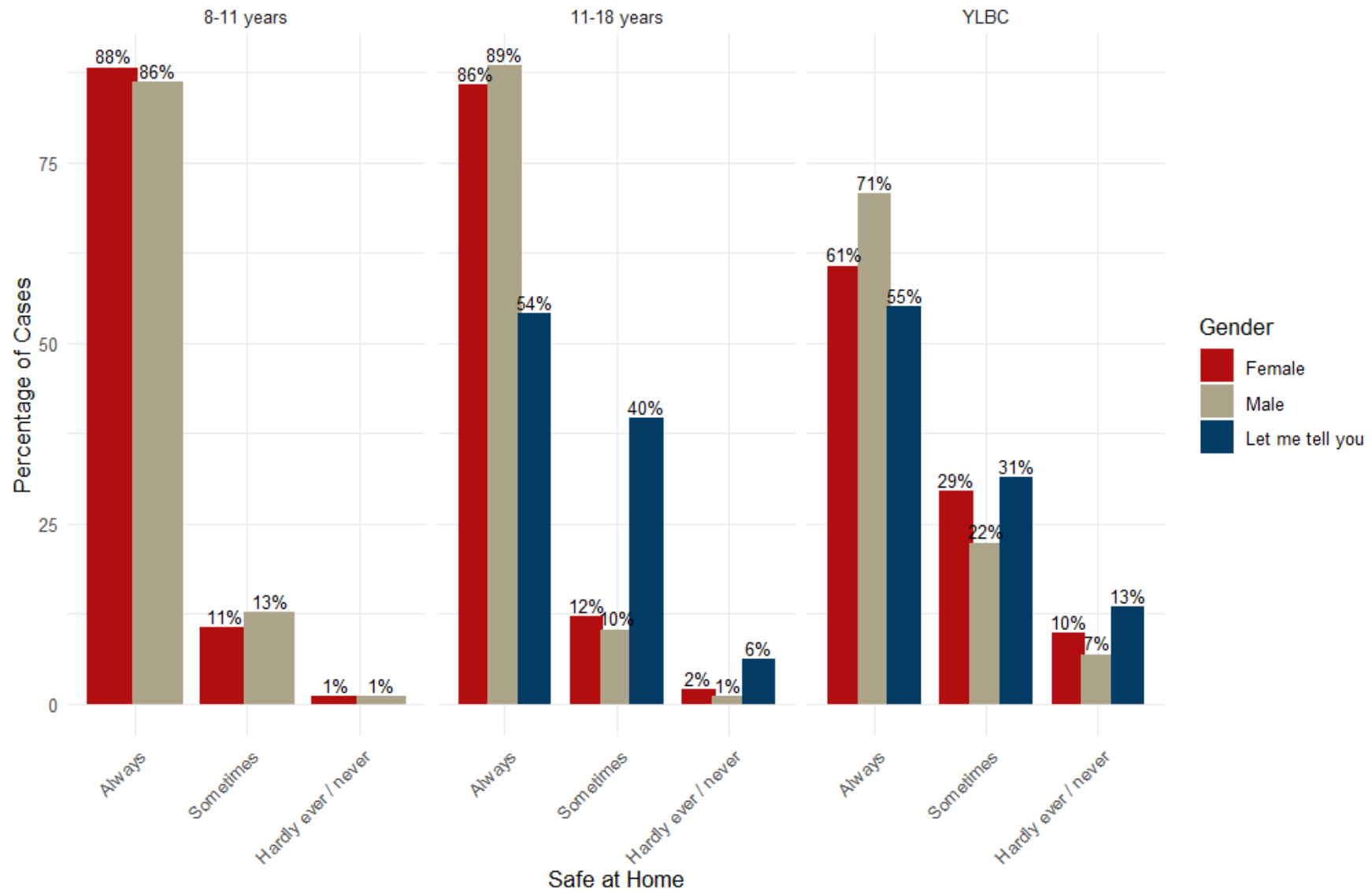
³⁰ $\chi^2(1, 4,913) = 242.47, p < 0.001$

³¹ $\chi^2(1, 1,345) = 144.59, p < 0.001$

³² $\chi^2(1, 647) = 162.48, p < 0.001$

³³ $\chi^2(1, 4,756) = 153.88, p < 0.001$

Figure 23: Feeling safe at home for children and young people in care and care leavers by gender (2021-24, n=9,994)



In their comments, children and young people made clear that their relationships with their carers were a key factor in how they felt about where they were living. Some children felt safer being away from trauma experienced with their birth families. Others emphasised the emotional support of carers in helping children feel safe and settled where they were living.

"Being in care is better than living with my parents because I feel safe being in care and I live with nice people that I can talk to." (11-18-year-old)

"Carers should have more one-on-one time. Carers need to assure kids they are safe. I felt I couldn't talk in case I got moved again. Need to make the child feel extra safe being in the home." (11-18-year-old)

In a few cases, children and young people experienced described experiences of abuse or neglect where they lived, from adults in the care system that were meant to be caring for them.

"My first placement was probably the lowest point in my life. It was a terrible experience where I didn't eat much and I really struggled with my mental health. The carer was extremely rude and disrespectful and she didn't meet my needs at all. She neglected me and my siblings and wouldn't provide me and my siblings with food, water and basic sanitation. At one point she asked us not to flush the toilet and to use it a couple times and then flush. It was a really appalling experience for me and my siblings and I'm still extremely traumatized. However, I am very pleased with my current placement, they care and nurture me all the time and I am very happy to be with them." (11-18-year-old)

"I left care in circumstances around my carers being abusive and was told I wasn't believed and wasn't supported through anything. Everything I have done I've done on my own, and my care experience was absolutely terrible" (Care leaver)

"My time in [Name] care home was appalling, they didn't treat me well at all, I was going to get an apology but I never got it. Since then, I have been in better supported accommodation." (Care leaver)

"People actually caring about me and treating me as a human instead of an object... People in care are treated poorly. They are the vermin of society. Putting people in secure [accommodation] does not help as the staff that work in these places are bullies and abusers." (11-18-year-old)

"The staff, they hit me and rinse my mouth with soap." (11-18-year-old)

In this context, a few children and young people called for better screening of carers and safeguarding of children and young people in the care system. They emphasised the importance of being listened to and taking action to tackle abuse and neglect.

"Make sure that abusive people aren't allowed to become foster carers so the kids can actually feel safe. And believe the kids for once instead of listening to the lies the carers tell social services and then the kids have to go through it for years like me." (11-18-year-old)

"Better screening of foster families is needed. I was placed in a family with someone who was sexually abusive towards me. I was 15 and he was 52. I was blackmailed into not saying anything. In this placement, I was also made to do all the cleaning and household chores. I was also kept in isolation as a form of punishment. There was also a camera in my bedroom. I told the police safeguarding about this but nothing was

done... I wish that the Leaving Care Team and social services had listened to me more."
(Care leaver)

"I would urge staff of all kinds to be vigilant about what is happening to young people both in and outside of their homes. Physical, sexual, emotional, institutional abuse, neglect is still happening in all homes including foster homes, children's homes, independent units from other young people and staff. Be vigilant and observant, be aware of any bullying, and do not hesitate to intervene should anything be suspected."
(11-18-year-old)

Other children and young people they were living with could also influence how safe they felt, including siblings or those they shared accommodation with. Other young people were afraid of neighbours or people in their community. The actions of the providers of accommodation for care leavers could also impact how safe they felt.

"I feel unsafe as I live with my brothers. They have bad tempers and they pull my hair."
(4-7-year-old)

"I'm scared where I live there's 3 people I'm scared of." (Care leaver)

"The shit accommodation they put me in from [location authority] Council it's not suitable for me... all men living here and I'm vulnerable. I am the only girl in this property. There's too many wrong things that going on getting harassed. Can't use the facilities and they taking time and slow to do something about it." (Care leaver)

"I feel not safe the landlord goes into my privacy, he opens my letters, enters my room in my absence" (Care leaver)

"I don't feel safe, I would love to move out. I have strangers knocking and kicking at my door at really early hours, it's giving me anxieties and sleepless nights. My property got damaged; the police were involved. I just don't feel safe and would love to move out."
(Care leaver)

"I live in [Place] I like [Place] but the place I live in I just don't feel safe, have not felt safe for about a year because someone knows where I live - someone I don't want to know. The police knows about him and also me and my friend got assaulted by this guy. He punch me in the face and hit my friends head ... he knows exactly where I live and he's only like five minutes away from me" (Care leaver)

Some older young people reported experience of antisocial behaviour, noisy neighbours, criminality, and drug use.

"It is really negative, I'm scared to go out because of people dealing drugs or violence in the streets or the garden. I always have to check my windows to make sure they haven't been smashed when I get home. I had to move my baby's cot away from the window in case it got smashed." (Care leaver)

"I accepted the property as it was my 2nd chance and they said if I refused it, they would assign me a property and I wouldn't be able to pick myself. I live near city centre where there's constant crimes and bad people and I live high up and have actually witnessed crimes and police appear. It sets my anxiety off and also the community inside of my high-rise is not the best there are a lot of addicts and aggressive people."
(Care leaver)

Some young people also wanted support to move away from people they were scared of, including abusive ex-partners.

"I want to relocate to be away from my daughter's father who was abusive. Although relocating is proving to be difficult." (Care leaver)

"My flat is very triggering I need to move soon as possible from all the memories of my abusive ex did to me, I can't stay here" (Care leaver)

"During the first few months I can't remember exactly when, I was threatened with sexual assault by my neighbour. He got off with a warning from the housing association. He now has a ring doorbell that points directly into my car and goes off whenever I leave the house - it makes me feel really uncomfortable." (Care leaver)

5.4.2 Feel safe in neighbourhood

In addition to being asked about whether they felt safe at home, care leavers are also asked how safe they felt in their neighbourhood.

1 in 10 care leavers never felt safe in their neighbourhood.

Care leavers had greater odds (1.63 times higher) of low well-being when they did not feel safe in their neighbourhood.

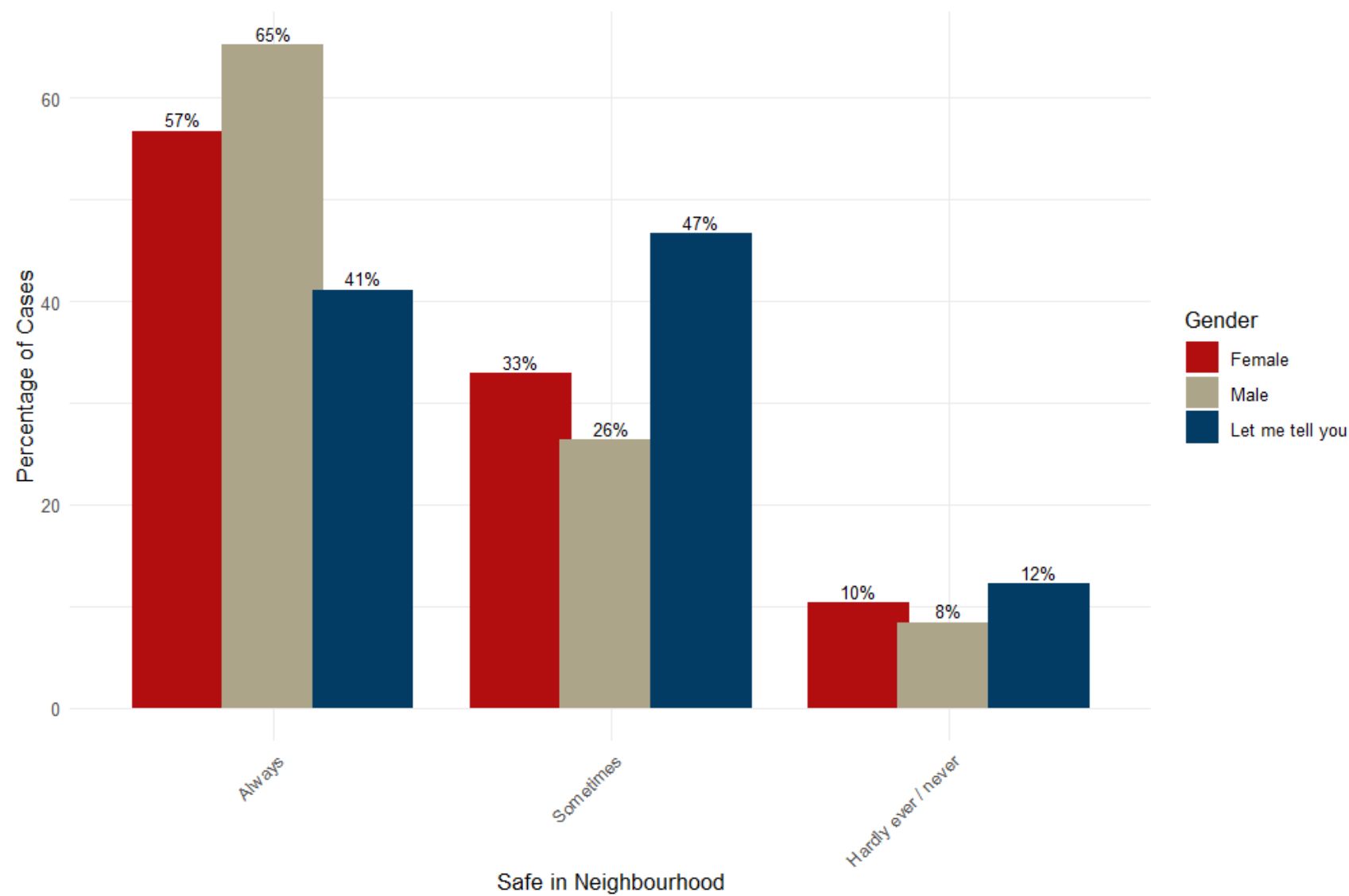
A higher proportion of young women and young people who defined themselves in another way did not always feel safe where in their neighbourhood (Figure 24). Although the questions are slightly different this mirrors other research (ONS, 2020) where young women report feeling less safe walking home alone after dark than men (74% women feel safe vs. 86% of men).

Young people reported violence and crime that made them feel unsafe.

"I live in a troublesome area; I live above some shops. Last week a shopkeeper was attacked by knifepoint. I am suffering racial abuse from a young male, who racially abuses me at the bus stop. I am frightened to go out by myself." (Care leaver)

"I live in a studio flat rented from the council with a comfortable space in it. On a noisy main street, my neighbourhood is not very safe as I have had a couple of bad experiences. I was once attacked by a drunk stranger on the street while I was walking back home, ended up losing two of my front teeth, and another day some of the local boys from the neighbourhood tried to rob me with a knife but I managed to escape." (Care leaver)

Figure 24: Feeling safe in neighbourhood for care leavers by gender (2021-24, n=5,003)



5.4.3 Feel settled

"I was scared when I first moved into care as I thought that when I first moved in, I was going to hate it, but it is not that bad. I feel like I am included into the family as if I had always been a part of their life. being in care helped me realize that I am not useless and that my life actually has meaning to it." (11-18-year-old)

Children need to feel settled to develop a sense of belonging and feel secure.

Fewer children and young people felt settled in 2021-24 (64%) than in 2017-20 (71%)

Children and young people in care (4-18 years) and care leavers were significantly³⁴ less likely to feel settled³⁵ in recent years (2021-24, 64%) compared with in 2017-20 (71%).

In 2021-24 there was also a great degree of variation across local authorities. For children and young people in care aged 8-18 years, in one local authority just 54% of children and young people always felt settled at home, compared with another where 86% always felt settled. For care leavers, this ranged from 38% in one local authority, to 64% in another.

Feeling settled reduces as children get older - this continues up to age 24 (Figure 25). Nearly all (99%) of the youngest children (aged 4) always felt settled where they lived, but by the time young people had left care (turned 18) only around half always felt settled (54%)

"[What would make care better?] Staying at my new home forever and painting and having baths" (4-7-year-old)

For children and young people in care and care leavers, girls and women (63%) were significantly³⁶ less likely to always (or 'yes' for children aged 4-7 years) feel settled at always than boys and men (67%).

Care leavers who self-reported disability or long-term health problems (42%) were significantly³⁷ less likely to always feel settled at home compared with care leavers who were not disabled (56%).

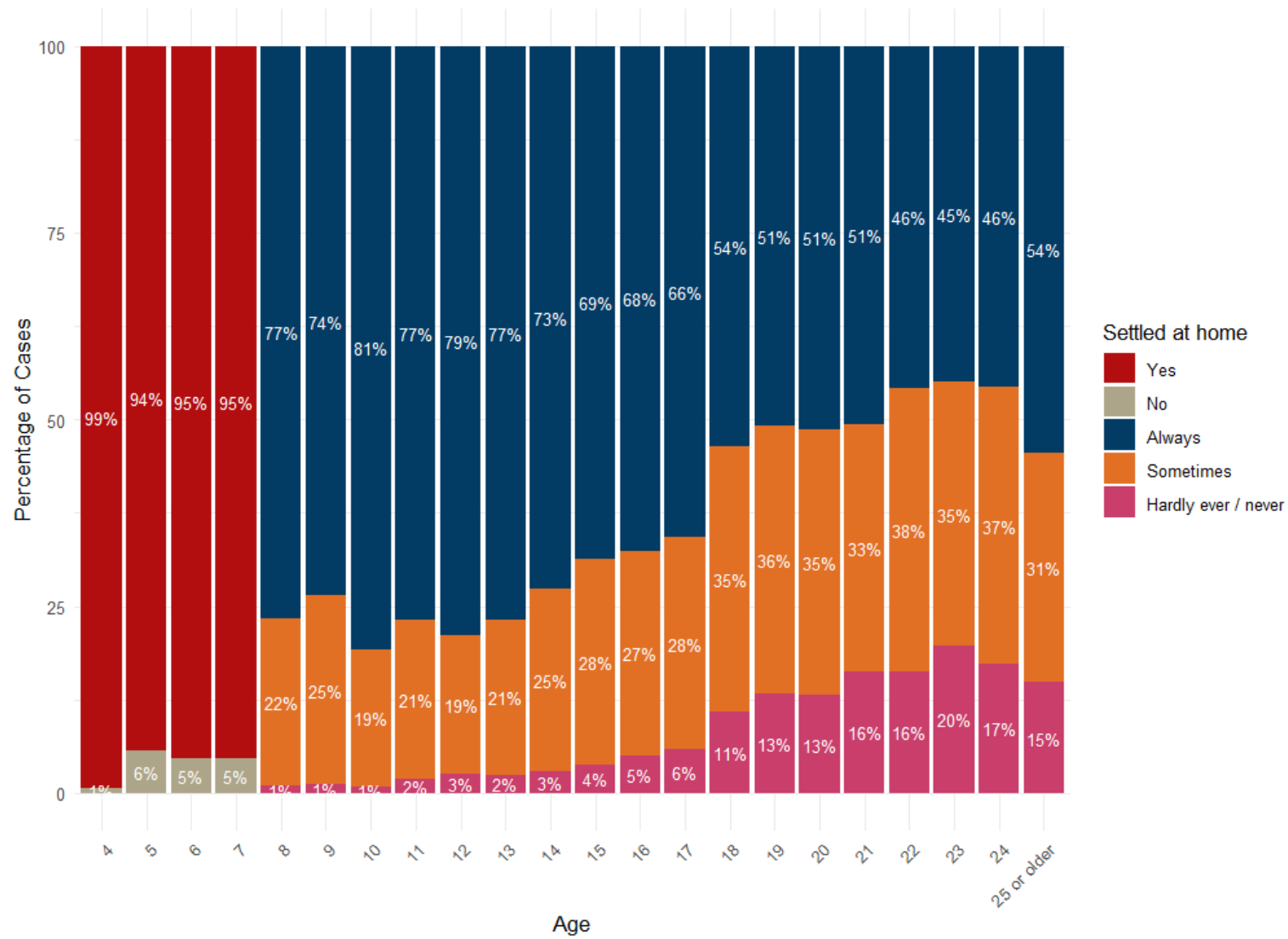
³⁴ $\chi^2(1, 20,484) = 107.14, p < 0.001$

³⁵ 'Yes' for children aged 4-7 years, grouped with 'Always' for all other respondents. 'No' for children aged 4-7 years, grouped with 'Sometimes/hardly ever/never' for all other respondents.

³⁶ $\chi^2(1, 10,499) = 22.80, p < 0.001$

³⁷ $\chi^2(1, 4,763) = 81.44, p < 0.001$

Figure 25: Feeling settled at home for children and young people in care and care leavers by age (2021-24, n=10,717)



As shown in Less than half of children in residential care felt settled compared with three quarters of children living elsewhere.

Table 9, children in care aged 4-7 years generally felt settled at home across all types of living arrangement. For children and young people in care aged 8-18 years, children and young people were significantly³⁸ less likely to feel settled at home in residential care (49%) as opposed to all other living arrangements (77%). For care leavers, the highest rates of feeling settled are reported by those who were 'Staying Put' with their foster carer(s) (with the lowest reported by those who were homeless (10%) or in short stay/emergency accommodation (18%).

Less than half of children in residential care felt settled compared with three quarters of children living elsewhere.

Table 9: Feeling settled at home for children and young people in care and care leavers by living arrangement and age group (20214-24, n=10,982)

| Living arrangement | Age group | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|----|------------|---------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|
| | 4-7 years | | 8-11 years | | 11-18 years | | Care leavers | |
| | Yes | No | Always | Sometimes / hardly ever / never | Always | Sometimes / hardly ever / never | Always | Sometimes / hardly ever / never |
| Foster carer(s) | 95% | 5% | 78% | 22% | 79% | 21% | 78% | 22% |
| Family (including parents) and friends | 97% | 3% | 76% | 24% | 79% | 21% | 55% | 45% |
| Residential home | 91% | 9% | 59% | 41% | 48% | 52% | - | - |
| Other | 100% | 0% | 67% | 33% | 58% | 42% | 48% | 52% |
| College/University | - | - | - | - | - | - | 56% | 44% |
| Short stay / emergency accommodation | - | - | - | - | - | - | 18% | 82% |
| Flat/house I own | - | - | - | - | - | - | 60% | 40% |
| Flat/house I rent | - | - | - | - | - | - | 51% | 49% |
| Homeless | - | - | - | - | - | - | 10% | 90% |
| In custody | - | - | - | - | - | - | 39% | 61% |
| Supported accommodation | - | - | - | - | - | - | 37% | 63% |
| Supported lodgings | - | - | - | - | - | - | 53% | 47% |

³⁸ $\chi^2(1, 4,877) = 224.55, p<0.001$

Relationship with carers is an important part of feeling settled and giving a sense of belonging. Many children and young people with positive relationship described carers as family.

"I love living with my foster carers they are a family" (4-7-year-old)

"I really love living with my mummy and daddy ([name1] and [name2] - foster carers) and I wish I had come to live with them a long time before because my mum thinks I was a cute as a baby." (8-11-year-old)

"I love it. Like I enjoy living here, it's boosted my confidence... I adore my carers and I think my carers are a part of my family now. I feel more at home here than my last care home. They didn't really know me and there's more stuff to do here." (11-18-year-old)

Some children and young people did not feel welcomed in their carers' houses. Some felt that their carers were only doing a job for money and did not care about them.

"I don't want to live with a family if they don't want to stick by me; I would rather live in some kind of children's home. People shouldn't pretend to care when they don't. If I can't live with my mum and dad I don't want to live with someone else's mum or dad... Foster carers give up on you." (11-18-year-old)

"If I didn't feel like I was subtly getting told by my carers to leave yet when I did, they kicked up a fuss saying they didn't want that but they made me feel so unwelcomed." (Care leaver)

"My experience was not very good as my foster carers did not seem to care or love me in a way they loved their own children, when I left, they did not even hug me and they avoid me now." (Care leaver)

"Sometimes my foster carers don't make me feel included." (11-18-year-old)

When we developed the Bright Spots surveys with young people, they reflected that their bedrooms were a place for being on your own in busy homes. Liking your bedroom is linked to safety, sense of identity and feeling a sense of belonging.

94% of children in care like their bedroom.

Several children - particularly the younger age groups - had specific ideas for things they wanted to change about their bedrooms which they felt would make them happy and more comfortable. This included changing the colour in their room, furniture, pillows or decorations.

"I want a rainbow on my bedroom door and more colour in my bedroom to make me happy" (4-7-year-old)

"I would like to have a wooden swing in my room, I have wooden box. I just need some rope, saw the box and then move things around in my room. I have it all planned. I am happy. I love my TV - I have my own TV as a Christmas present." (8-11-year-old)

A few children and young people did not have a bedroom at all.

"I don't have a bedroom. When we move house, I will get a bedroom" (4-7-year-old)

"I would like a house. There is not much space. I am sleeping in the living room and don't even have my own bedroom" (11-18-year-old)

Many children were sharing bedrooms with others - most commonly siblings - and many wanted their own space. They noted that those they were sharing with kept them awake, made a mess, or sometimes they just wanted more privacy or a less crowded space. For care leavers shared accommodation came with challenges of managing communal spaces together.

*"If we had another room for people. My bed is squashed in [Name]'s room by the chair"
(4-7-year-old)*

"I really, really, really want my own room. We need a house with one more bedroom but I don't really want to have to move house." (8-11-year-old)

"I'd like a bigger house as I don't have a bedroom and I have to share with my nephews who are 8 and 5 so it is very overcrowded." (11-18-year-old)

"Honest I am really disturbed in sharing house because there are others people lives as it dirty and nobody want to clean the kitchen or the house and I really want to have my own space like council house where I can live peacefully all alone" (Care leaver)

5.4.4 Where you live is right for you

"I am not living near family and support without having to travel for a long period of time, this is hard because I am disabled. Not to mention that I am living in fear of my birth mother approaching me in the streets because despite this town not being where I grew up, it is my local authority and therefore is the only place I have a local connection. I have lived here now for 4 years and have had several debilitating depression episodes (all lasting more than 6 months). And my anxiety has returned from my childhood and is quite severe too, my mental health has had a massive decline since living here but there's nothing I can do except hope and pray that I can get a mutual exchange out of here and closer to my family and support... I've been on the mutual exchange list for over 3 years and am not any closer to getting away from here." (Care leaver)

As part of pathway planning, an assessment of the quality of accommodation where the young person is living or any accommodation under consideration should be undertaken. The assessment should consider whether the accommodation meets the full range of the young person's needs and what steps might need to be taken to improve it (DfE, 2015). According to Government figures (DfE, 2024), 88% of care leavers (age 19 to 21 years) lived in suitable accommodation.

The Your Life Beyond Care survey asked care leavers if where they lived was right for them.

Government statistics suggest that around 9 in 10 care leavers are in suitable accommodation, yet only 7 in 10 care leavers report where they live is mainly right for *them*

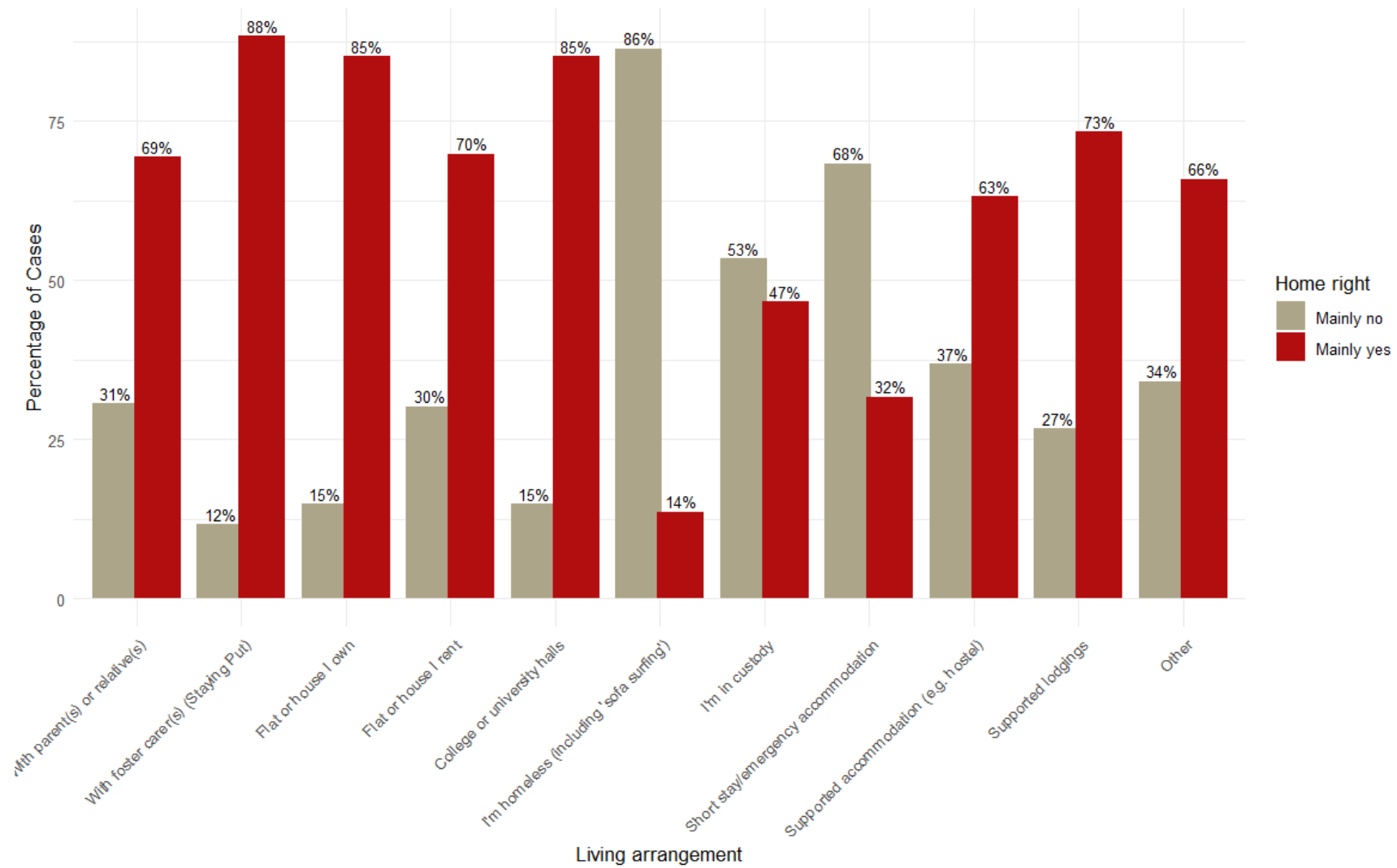
As shown in

Figure 26, the majority (86%) of care leavers who were homeless did not feel that their home was right for them, as did 68% of care leavers in short stay or emergency accommodation, and 53% who were in custody.

The highest proportion of care leavers (88%) who felt their home was right for them were those that were 'Staying Put' with their foster carers.

A sizeable minority (37%) of care leavers in supported accommodation did not feel their home was right for them.

Figure 26: Feeling home is right for you for care leavers by living arrangement (2021-24, n=5,140)



Significantly³⁹ fewer care leavers who self-reported disability or long-term health problems (63%) felt that their home was right for them, compared with care leavers who were not disabled (73%).

"It's a bit far from my friends and family and with my disabilities making it difficult for me to get around I don't always see people... Having pain conditions that make me need to use crutches sometimes is difficult when you have a maisonette because I can't get out as it's not safe to take the stairs. I have an overhead shower and it's hard to get into the bath without help." (Care leaver)

In written comments, some care leavers expressed their satisfaction with where they were living. They appreciated having their own space, or a sense of security; they liked the area or living near people they cared about.

"I love where I live, a place to call my own and I have done just that, I have all the facilities I need around me." (Care leaver)

"It's a really nice council flat which is out of the way and has a nice view." (Care leaver)

"The walks where I live are great because there is so much green. My home is my own because I have bought it and been able to do what I want to it including renovations. I love my home and where I live." (Care leaver)

Whether at the point of leaving care, or in subsequent housing moves, some young people felt that they were forced into accommodation which was not always suitable for them. Some felt rushed into taking inappropriate accommodation which was in disrepair or had other issues. Housing was sometimes chosen for them by local authorities and some young people subsequently felt trapped in these places. Young people called for more choice and control around where they ended up living.

*"When I turned 18, I had no say in where I moved too, and I was forced out into a horrible rat-infested s**t show. The repairs were never fixed. It took over a year to move." (Care leaver)*

"I felt very rushed into picking this property. I was pregnant at the time and my accommodation wasn't suitable for me and baby, so I felt like I had to take this property or risk being in a hostel for the first weeks or months of my baby's life which is not ideal. I have also experienced racial abuse at the property I live I live in which has been reported and often get disrupted by a family member. Birds have taken over my attic, and with a phobia of birds this is quite hard for me. I have completed another housing application but been turned down. I feel like the process to move should be easier for care leavers as it is often hard for us to feel settled, I would like somewhere that I feel at home even it's a bit further away." (Care leaver)

"I would like more help paying my rent arrears so I can move. I hate where I live and feel I was given this flat when I was told I had no choice. My neighbours keep abusing me and calling the police on me. I'm paying my arrears at £20.00 a week and in debt for £14000. I just want to move from here I hate it." (Care leaver)

"For me to have more say in what I want. As I did not want to move to [Place] but I was forced to." (11-18-year-old)

Even where choice was available, some young people felt that this was too limited. They wanted more accommodation options, including housing to meet their specific needs. Young people also

³⁹ $\chi^2(1, 4,704) = 41.04, p < 0.001$

wanted more say about the location of housing - for example, wanting to be housed closer to their support networks or in an area where they had connections.

"I would like more move-on options for me i.e., more open residential units in my home town, close to my family and friends" (Care leaver)

"Council properties suck and it's not the most disability accessible. It's hard to find one suitable for me at my age range with pets near my support network" (Care leaver)

"Make sure when a young person lives somewhere also gets housed there. Because I don't want stressful things that are happening in my life, happens to them regarding their house situation after care, which left me very disappointed. I lived in an area of [LOCATION] for over 5 years in care and now I'm being sent away outside the [LOCATION] a place where I never lived before, never met/had anyone and never happy to be which I find it difficult and stressful to even talk about it forget about living there. And I'm pretty sure that the negative impact of this will be long lasting. I'd urge [LA] to avoid repeating this on other young people who are under the same circumstances as me." (Care leaver)

For many, the experience of leaving care was a key transition point and a big change to housing arrangements. Many care leavers felt that this transition had been handled badly. Some felt that they had been forced out of their homes in ways that weren't best for them, and sometimes into accommodation that was inappropriate. In some instances, this had a significant detrimental impact on their mental health.

"Leaving care has been okay but stressful, my mental health would have been a lot better if I stayed in my foster placement and not went into an unsuitable mum and baby unit and an unsuitable permanent property. My housing has affected me on a very serious level" (Care leaver)

"It was very rushed for me, I had very little choice about when I left my foster home to move into an independent housing unit. I was depressed for months due to having to leave the family I had spent 3 years with out of the blue. The training in the housing unit wasn't very effective as a lot of my experience now is purely because I've had to witness it first-hand. Overall, I just think you need to take into consideration what the care leavers actually want. Give them a choice" (Care leaver)

Young people stressed the need for support to access the right housing for them. Some young people described system failures where they had been left without proper plans in place and inadequate or no support from the workers meant to help them. There were examples of young people left in unsafe properties that posed a risk to their help or without homes, forced into homelessness provision.

"More support and contact and help with better housing" (Care leaver)

"My friend was at risk of being evicted and she asked for support from the beginning of when the situation started happening. Her key worker didn't even contact her back until ONE DAY before she was due to be evicted and even then, didn't have much to say. This was upsetting and sad." (Care leaver)

*"[NAME - STAFF], completely f**ked my life up, having nowhere sorted for my 18th, meaning I had to go into a homeless shelter, my heads been f**ked since." (Care leaver)*

"I moved 6 times in a year whilst in the leaving care process. At the time I had no proper PA to support me and I couldn't make contact with her... I wished someone listened to me more at the time." (Care leaver)

"Not much support. No one has seen my flat or helped me with decorating it. I have so much mould and no one even cares" (Care leaver)

When it came to the quality of their accommodation, several young people mentioned problems - including problems with damp and mould. Others mentioned longstanding issues with damage and disrepair that had not been attended to.

"My flat has a mould and damp problem which has been ongoing for two years and it is very frustrating and not good for my health or well-being." (Care leaver)

"It's falling apart. I get no support with my flat. It's covered in mould and it's freezing which is not good because I'm anaemic. I hate my home but I try my best to make it look good even with the mould everywhere." (Care leaver)

"I had a house fire in March last year which destroyed my entire kitchen and other parts of the house. I received an incredible amount of support from the ENTIRE leaving care team at that time to replace most of the items, however my housing provider had insisted I clean up after the fire myself with no equipment and currently being in shock, I am still nearly a year later still walking into the kitchen to see a smoke-stained boiler, and windows which have not been replaced. Smoke-stained cupboards, fridge, tumble dryer and washing machine" (Care leaver)

Concerns about the quality of accommodation were compounded for care leavers with young children. Some of this group in particular questioned the suitability of their homes, including the restricted size.

"I live in a block with my child and I worry if a fire or anything happens, I might struggle to get down the stairs. Also, I am a university student my apartment is very small it couldn't even fit a study table where I could study. My baby doesn't have a space where she could play freely." (Care leaver)

Some young people called for better communication and preparation ahead of the move from care. They reported being unclear on what was going to happen and the abruptness of finding out about a major life change imposed on them at short notice. They felt that there should be a more extensive discussion of possibilities and more planning well ahead of time - including support for young people to develop relevant life skills. (We discuss these issues further in sections 5.6.2 Information shared and explained and 5.7.4 Life skills)

"I would have liked my housing to be sorted out before I turned 18 and it came as a shock to me when [NAME] told me that I was not going to get my own place. I would have liked that support to start sooner and the same with looking after my own money and appointments" (Care leaver)

"I think that overall, the care system is ok. There is work that needs to be addressed in terms of the support with after care. I feel like I've been thrown out my accommodation with being promised I would be found a new place and just left in the dust. My social worker has tried her hardest giving me the information I need however I feel like she isn't being given the appropriate information to do her job effectively, she needs to be able to have more contact and say with housing." (Care leaver)

Reflecting the need for a more gradual and managed transition, a few young people spoke about the specific appeal of training flats. They suggested this might be a suitably option for care leavers making the transition to more independent living.

"I think they should their own training flats for care leavers to live in to gain skills they need to live independently" (Care leaver)

"I had a month in a practice flat in my local area which gave me a clear understanding of how important it is to budget and to have a good network of people supporting me". (Care leaver)

5.4.5 Stability (One home in care)

[What would make care better?] "Staying at my new home forever and painting and having baths." (4-7-year-old)

A third of young people in care (aged 11-18) reported that they had remained in the same home since coming into care. 5% did not know and 16% had over 5 placements Figure 43 in Appendix 7.2.8 gives a full breakdown)

As shown above, moves can be positive and indeed necessary, especially when children and young people identify that they are unsafe or at risk in current arrangements. However, frequent moves contribute to the lack of stability in children and young people's lives impacting on their well-being and mental health (see 1.1.1). Children in care (aged 11-18) had 1.5 times higher odds of low well-being when they had more than one placement or didn't know how many placements they had.

Children and young people noted that being moved around made them feel unsettled. Some young people felt that the frequency with which they had been made to move was simply wrong, and a sign of systemic failure. Some felt that social workers didn't care, didn't listen to them, didn't meet their needs, and didn't understand the impact that moving had on them. They wanted to have more voice and agency in terms of their preferences for where they lived (and with whom). They wanted reassurance around the security of their housing.

*"It's a pile of s**t my care experience has been s**t when I first went into care the amount of social workers, I have had are unbelievable the amount of houses I got moved to are stupid don't get me wrong some places have been alright but most have been awful. You lot really need to change because you don't realise the kids that come into care end up having a shit life because you don't offer most things at the end of the day, we the kids have to do so much working when we leave care just to have a life but you lot don't care because we are just paying your bills." (11-18-year-old)*

"I went into a mental health hospital because I got kicked out so many times and although I know some were my fault and I'm responsible for some I am not responsible for all 43 places I've lived in" (Care leaver)

"I was made to move house too often when I was in care, so I would say listen to us more so at least what we say is taken seriously." (Care leaver)

In other cases, issues may have been a result of a mismatch between a carer and child or young person. Comments suggested that there could be more space made for children's voices in matching them with the right home.

"Care was the best place for me at the time but was moved about so much because social services never put me in the right place so ended up going through more trauma/

feeling more rejection... And feel like social services should strive to listen, support and assess every child/young person's situation while in care and make sure they are being put in the right setting to avoid extra trauma, as most children in care are often taken away from abusive/neglectful homes and can view carers who can't support them correctly as the child being rejected and this brings up more issues." (Care leaver)

"I find it hard to tell my foster carer that I don't want to follow their religion." (8-11-year-old)

Feeling settled can take time children's comments suggested steps could be taken to help make this easier, such as meeting carers in advance. Several children and young people highlighted the experience of having to move in to the home of a stranger they had never met.

"In my case it was I would have liked to meet my foster carer before I went to stay." (11-18-year-old)

"I feel like social services need to sort the selves out as when I was much younger and moving placements it was always a rush and I did not get to meet the foster carers before living with them." (Care leaver)

Some children and young people expressed worries that they were going to be moved again. Some feared the loss of homes and relationships with carers where they felt safe and settled.

"It would be better if I knew I was staying in my placement forever." (8-11-year-old)

"I like my new carers and hope I will stay with them until I am grown up. I don't want to move again." (8-11-year-old)

"If they don't move me anymore or keep changing my social worker. I want to stay with the foster carers I am with now, and I've just been told they are moving me again." (11-18-year-old)

5.5 Known and trusted workers

There are many professionals in the lives of care experienced children and young people. In our surveys we focus on social workers for children in care and the workers that provide throughcare, after care or leaving care support for care leavers. The latter are known as Personal Advisers (PAs) in England, but different terminology is used in Scotland and Wales. We have used workers as a shorthand for all these professionals.

Many young people were very positive about the support provided by their workers, whether social workers or leaving care workers/PAs.

"I like my social worker but she is a bit strict. My best friend is [name] (previous social worker)." (4-7-year-old)

"Leaving Care have done a lot for me, I feel they try a lot harder and never give up and the previous social worker who I think gave up on me, because I was difficult and didn't always do what she asked me to do." (Care leaver)

For care leavers personal advisers were the second most common source of emotional support, second only to friends. 45% of care leavers reported that their personal advisers (PA) gave them emotional support.

[name] has been very supportive through all the good times and the bad. She is always there when I need support or just a chat. I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for her support throughout the past 2/3 years. (Care leaver)

Yet, there has been a significant⁴⁰ decline in the proportion of care leavers who report that their PA was a source of emotional support has gone down from 51% in 2017-20 to 45% in 2021-24. This suggests a need to invest in this important relationship for care leavers, make changes to policy and practice that ensures more personal advisers have the time, remit and resources to get to know and be there for the young people they are responsible for.

Children and young people wanted to feel cared for by their care workers. Some young people felt that they were a statistic or that it was 'just a job' for social workers.

"My PA to be more available and do more than what she absolutely has to. I wish she cared." (Care leaver)

"Support workers should show an interest in young people and that they care and not treat them like a pay cheque at the end of the week." (Care leaver)

"If I could describe the process, I felt like another number on some worker's sheet of paper, only needing to be kept safe physically and academically for legality's sake. The irony of the system, is that I felt anything but cared for." (Care leaver)

5.5.1 Trust workers

"I feel that I am really getting on with my current social worker and that I know that I can trust her and that she understands my views and feelings and that I can tell her everything." (11-18-year-old)

Overall, 72% of children in care (8-18 years) and care leavers trusted their social or leaving care worker all or most of the time. The odds of having very **high well-being** were over 2 times higher for young people (aged 11-18 years) who trust their social worker. As shown in

⁴⁰ $\chi^2(1, 8,228) = 26.60, p<0.001$

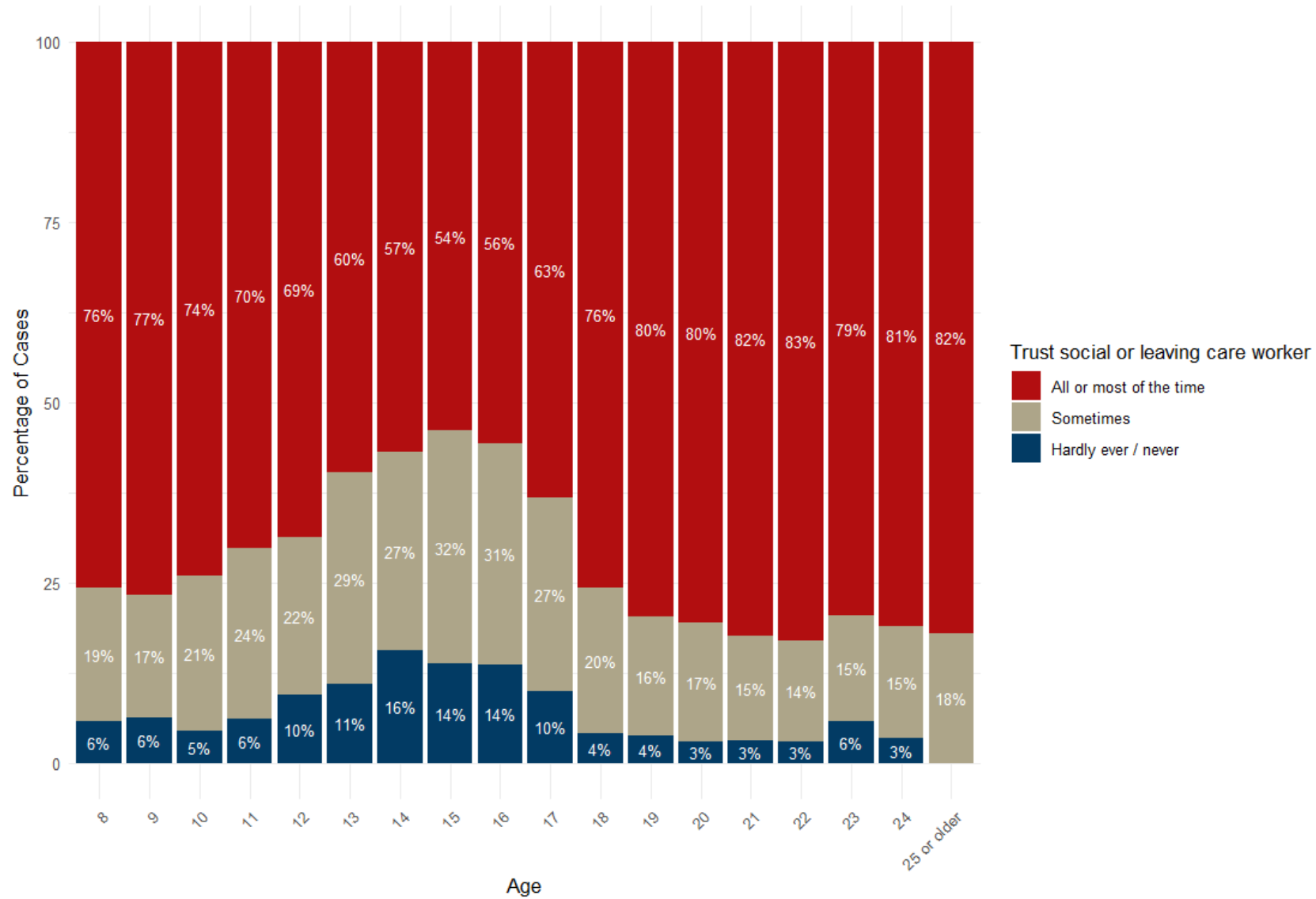
Figure 27, children and young people's feelings of trust in their social or leaving care worker seems to increase once they leave care.

4/5 care leavers trust their workers compared with 3/5 teenagers in care.

75% of 8-11 years olds in care, 60% of 11-18-year-olds in care, and 80% of care leavers trust their worker all or most of the time.

"I have been very lucky to have an amazing experience and kept the same worker and we have an amazing bond. I trust her so much. [NAME] deserves a medal" (Care leaver)

Figure 27: Trust in social/leaving care worker for children and young people in care and care leavers (2021-24, n=9,165)



Statistically significant differences between different groups of children and young people included:

- Care experienced children and young people who self-reported long-term health problems or disability were significantly⁴¹ less likely to trust their worker all or most of the time (75% vs 81%).
- Male care experienced children and young people were significantly⁴² more likely to trust their worker compared with females (74% vs 70%).

Children and young people in care who were living in a residential home were significantly⁴³ less likely to trust their social worker, compared with those in foster care, as shown in Figure 28.

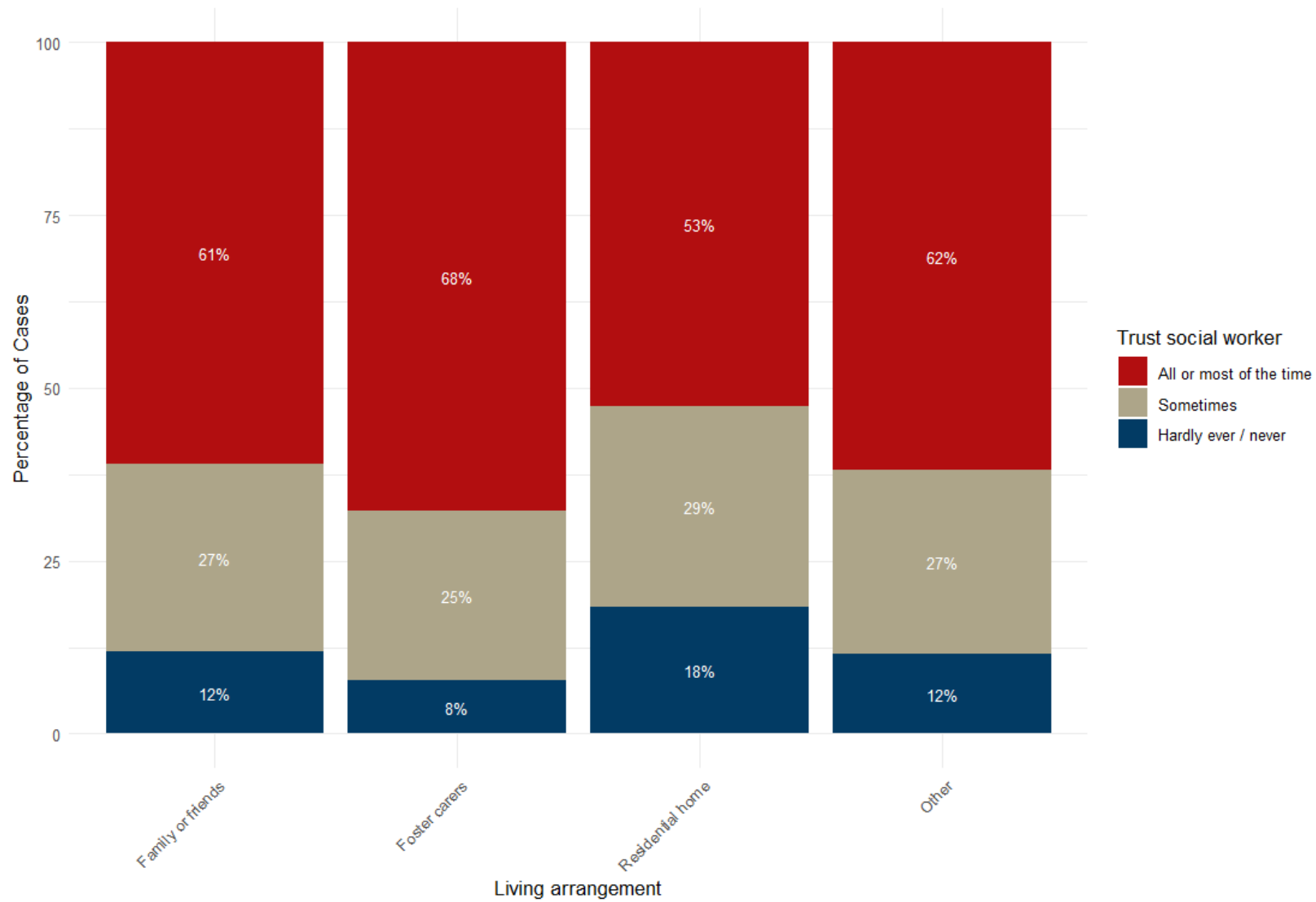
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⁴¹ $\chi^2(1, 4,359) = 25.47, p<0.001$

⁴² $\chi^2(1, 8,962) = 21.27, p<0.001$

⁴³ $\chi^2(1, 3,396) = 51.07, p<0.001$

Figure 28: Trust in social worker for children and young people in care (2021-24, n=4,555)



Children and young people wrote about social workers and leaving care personal advisers (PAs) who were available to them, listened to them, got things done and who did not judge them.

"I trust my worker and that means a lot to me. My worker is part of my life and she's my go-to person, I don't think some people understand this, she listens to me. She might not agree with me but is never judgemental and tells me in a way I understand." (Care leaver)

"I'll be leaving the leaving care teams soon but I have had the most support from them since the day I came into care. My PA has really helped me and always been there for me and listened to my worries and concerns" (Care leaver)

"My leaving care worker is [Name]. She goes above and beyond for me... she was born to do this role I really cannot fault her at all, what a superstar she is :)" (Care leaver)

Some children and young people felt their workers had been absent and unsupportive.

"Awful experience. Left to my own devices no one checking on me often. I'm not happy with my experience. You don't listen. Feel like you left me to die." (Care leaver)

"Try and be there for them more as I had very little support from my old support worker and it made things difficult." (Care leaver)

"We get social workers that don't care, I've met my social worker once and I think I've had her for 3 years now, I never met the one before her, she never called text or emailed to ask if I was okay which is disgusting. For all she knew I could have been being abused or mistreated (I wasn't) but she didn't know that because she didn't get in contact or do her job because I live in a nice area." (Care leaver)

Children and young people wanted care workers who would be proactive about contacting them and checking in on how they were doing, becoming that trusted adult. They wanted workers who demonstrated that they were there for them and cared about them. Some children and young people wanted workers to be accessible in more less structured ways, such as being available for a chat about their lives, and not just narrowly focussed on formal processes. Some wanted more face-to-face time with their workers.

"[What would make care better?]" Speaking to social worker more often about my life." (8-11 years)

"I would like more support and kept up to date on stuff. I feel like they should be getting in touch with me now and again to see how I am doing not the other way round; I feel like I need to ring them first to speak to anyone" (Care leaver)

"Communicate with your young people better. See them more often in the flesh to see how they are doing, and if they need help with anything." (Care leaver)

"Meeting more often would really help it doesn't have to be face to face it can be online or phone call thanks." (Care leaver)

"LC workers should be in touch more for a chat rather than just to do something like review a pathway plan." (Care leaver)

"I think the only thing is, make sure you listen to us kids as we need someone there to tell our troubles too, not all of us have people we can off load too." (Care leaver)

"Having your social worker saying 'you need to do this or that' sometimes it doesn't work. they need to say do you want a chat; do you feel able to do this. I know social workers have a lot to do but sometimes we just need a phone call to check we are ok. My worker at the youth team does these things but we need more of them. I think social workers need to like have more understanding on how to communicate with a younger person. Telling us what we need to do sometimes isn't going to work." (Care leaver)

Some wanted workers who were more available - answering or promptly returning calls. They wanted workers to know their needs and address them promptly.

"Actually, having a PA that wants to come and see you and answers phone calls and emails and if they are busy, they should just tell you." (Care leaver)

"I think it would be better if social services answered or returned calls, if social workers read files properly and were more understanding on the support needed." (Care leaver)

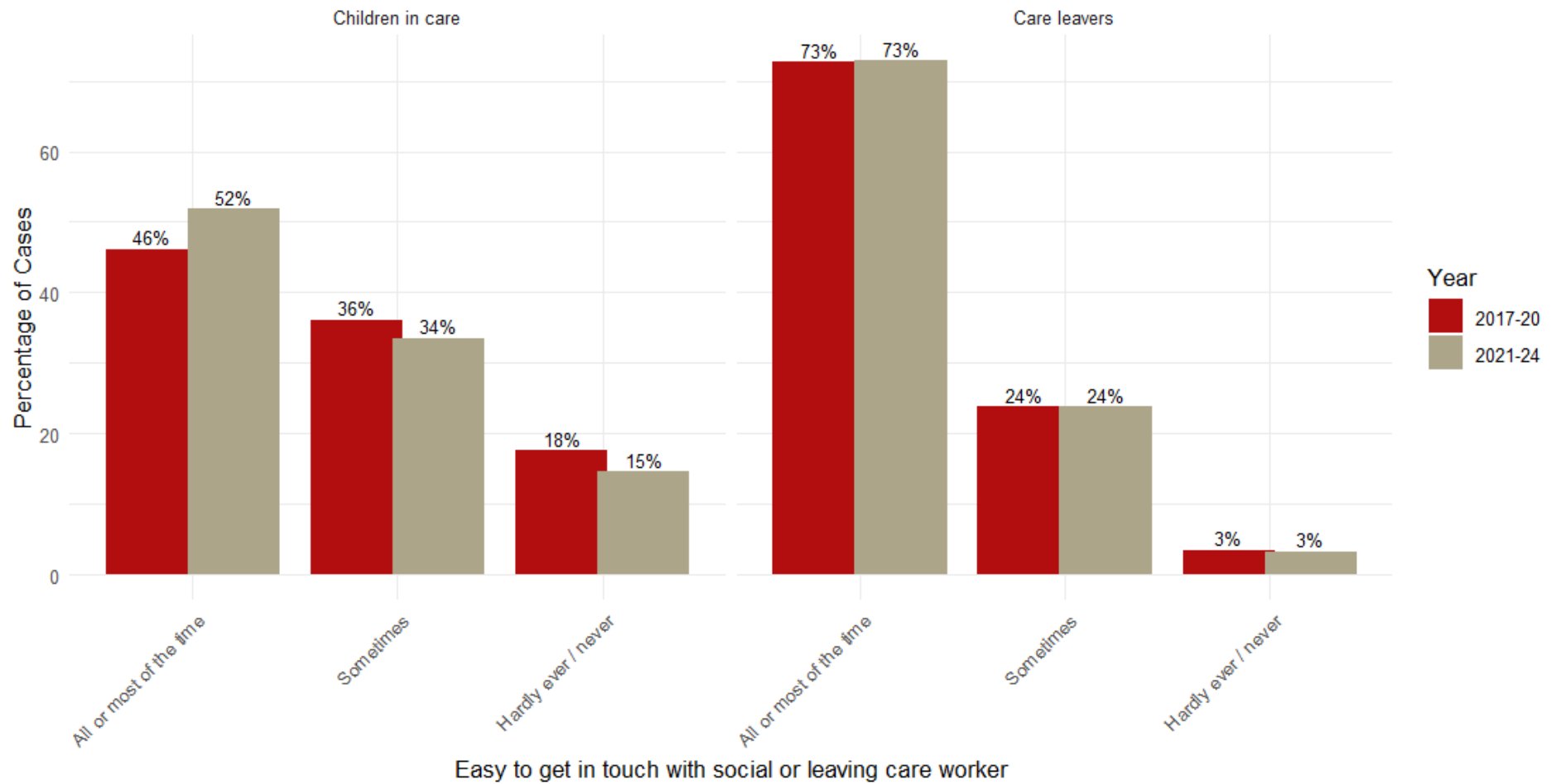
"Respond to people quicker. Everything seems to take a long time to happen." (Care leaver)

"I cannot get in contact with [Name]! I've left countless messages and emails and still no response. She doesn't listen to me and often says she will do things then just doesn't do it. Absolutely rubbish" (Care leaver)

Care leavers found it easier to contact their workers than children in care did.

Almost ¾ of care leavers felt their workers were easy to get in touch compared to just over ½ of children in care.

Figure 29: How easy children in care (CIC) and care leavers (CL) found it was to contact their workers in 2017-20 and 2021-24



Some young people described how not being able to get hold of workers or feeling that they did not do what they said reduced trust in worker. Some felt they had been lied to by workers. A few young people noted that their experience of trauma meant that this was particularly important to building trust.

"[I want] a different social worker than [name]. She tells lies all the time... nothing else." (4-7-year-old)

"More professional workers that don't just turn off their phones for weeks on end and fulfil promises that are made to young people, also you need to understand that when young people are lied to, they get angry. It's a natural reaction be more mindful of the people you are supporting" (11-18-year-old)

"My first PA ([Name]) was who I had the longest. She was a lovely woman however she didn't get things done. She would say she would do stuff then never did. People like me with trauma and mental health and severe trust issues can't have false promises and need things to be very consistent." (Care leaver)

"If social services are going to uphold what they say, because when they don't do what they say it can affect a person's mental health. They should not make promises they cannot keep." (Care leaver)

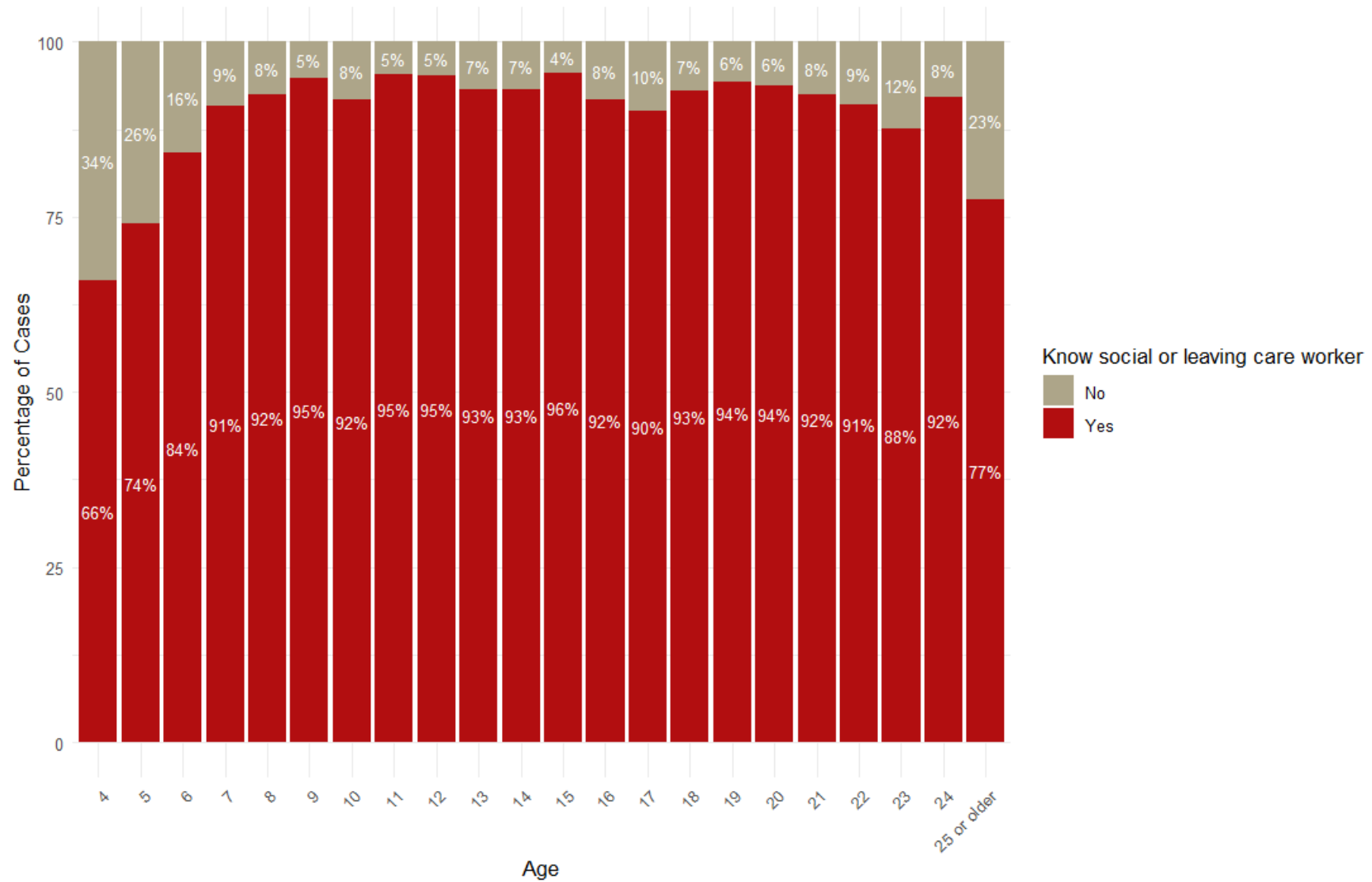
"The impact on my capacity for trust has been cataclysmic. I was lied to about the implications of confirming my mother's drinking problem, my mother lied about my actions when custody of her daughter was threatened, I was stripped from my family home and despite assurance that I'd never be placed into the care system, I was thrown into a care system with a known paedophile and I suffered physical abuse with serious psychological ramifications... I strongly considered suicide... [Local authority] has ruined me." (Care leaver)

5.5.2 Know your workers

Knowing your social worker was linked to happiness for the youngest children (4-11yrs) and very high well-being for teenagers in care (11-18-year-old).

Overall, 92% of care experienced children and young people knew who their social or leaving care worker was. As shown in Figure 30, younger children in care and care leavers aged over 25 were less likely to know their social or leaving care worker. For the older care leavers, this may be a reflection of legislation that does not require PAs to be allocated to care leavers over the age of 25 (Department for Education, 2018).

Figure 30: Know social/leaving care worker for children and young people in care and care leavers (2021-24, n=10,720)



5.5.3 Worker consistency

"Don't keep changing professionals with us, we need one person who's going to stick with us and be that stability and encouragement. I don't have one consistent professional right now and for me that makes me feel as if I'm just being passed around and I felt I endured enough of that with my time in care" (Care leaver)

Children in care (11-18-year-old) and care leavers (16-25+) are asked how many workers they have had in the last 12 months. Of the children and young people who had a worker, 53% had a single worker – i.e., they did not experience a change in social or leaving care worker in the last year.

Some children and young people were particularly grateful for having had a single, consistent worker for an extended period, and the stability this provided for them.

"I'm glad I've just had one worker because I would have found it difficult talking to someone new. If you possibly do it, just have one worker. It makes things much better for us." (Care leaver)

"It would be better if leaving care workers could remain the same to create more stability for young people" (Care leaver)

Children and young people's hopes and expectations for their relationships with care workers were particularly at odds with the frequent changes in staff some experienced. They described a frustrating process of building relationships which would then end. Children and young people emphasised that this was painful to them. Some described feeling rejected and their trust being damaged.

"I would like the social worker to not keep changing" (4-7-year-old)

"I feel that my third social worker 'ditched me'. Three out of four social workers have gone... I just don't like it! I don't like getting a different social worker" (8-11-year-old)

As shown in Table 10, children in care aged 11-18 years were less likely to have no change in social or leaving care worker compared with care leavers⁴⁴.

3/5 of care leavers had the same worker in the last year but only 2/5 of children in care did.

Table 10: Consistency of social/leaving care worker for young people aged 11-18 years (n=3,543) and care leavers (n=5,274)

| Age group | None | One | Two | Three or more |
|--------------|------|-----|-----|---------------|
| 11-18 years | 1% | 40% | 34% | 25% |
| Care leavers | 5% | 58% | 25% | 11% |
| Total | 4% | 51% | 29% | 17% |

⁴⁴ (p<0.001)

In previous Bright Spots research (Selwyn & Briheim-Crookall, 2022) we found that the percentage who did not trust their workers increased for those with changes of worker in the previous year. Some children and young people wrote about the impact on trust of frequent changes

"The only issue I've had is the frequency of changing social workers. I understand they are so overworked and that's awful but change so quickly can be negative to the young person especially if they have learned to trust someone." (Care leaver)

"I just want to be more supported with getting into a flat, I've changed PA multiple times and have to start all over again with trusting and getting to know them" (Care leaver)

As well as the difficulties in losing a supportive relationship, children and young people also noted the frustration in having to repeatedly retell their stories to new staff. Several young people felt that new staff had not taken the time to read their files.

"Consistency, actually been able to gain trust within your worker I've had so many over the years it's unreal and it's so frustrating having to repeat yourself every time and tell them your life story all over again and I'm sorry but half of them are too lazy to even look at the file work. I know that because I've had previous social workers who's not had a clue and maybe it's because they've not took the time to read the case file and learn about the young person they need to be individually working with. It just frustrates me how we are 'all the same'." (Care leaver)

"...there were times when I would have a different social worker every 2 weeks and they would come out to home visit and they wouldn't have read your file or know anything about you which was quite obvious when they asked questions like how long have you been living here for and are you happy in this placement which to me is the most patronising thing a person can ask." (Care leaver)

"A consistent worker I don't want to keep telling my story, the worker doesn't need to be a LCW it could be a previous worker I have a good relationship with" (Care leaver)

Although care leavers had more stability in workers, when they did change, this was linked to lower well-being of those who had left care. Care leavers who had either two or more, or no leaving care worker had 1.2 times higher odds of low well-being.

"Stop letting young people get attached to people that's going to leave them it's not fair and it hurts." (Care leaver)

"I don't think that care workers should be changed how they are, it affects people mentally a lot as you get trust and support from one person and finally feel happy to talk to them and then you find out they're leaving, how can I trust another person when you constantly change them?" (Care leaver)

Several children and young people understood the pressures on staff but many still wanted a relationship with their workers that lived up to the standard of 'corporate parenting' - where workers were committed and reliable for the long term, going above and beyond their professional requirements to show genuine care.

"It would be nice if my social worker was around more but I understand that she has a big case load. [...]" (Care leaver)

"Stop giving social workers shit pay and so many cases. Stop making them do so much admin work. Let them interact with children, and be there for them. Stop treating social workers so poorly they leave the job. I'm fed up of having to restart and say my story again because from what I gathered most of the leaving care workers either don't read my file or they just don't have the information updated... Why is 21 the stop for support? Why do all my other friends over the age of 26 still go to support from their families? I want long term commitment and promise to keep children safe. I want to become a social worker and be the best I can for these children, and make sure they never go through what I had to go through." (Care leaver)

5.6 Involved and informed

In self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) autonomy, being able to make your own choices and decisions about your life, is one of three basic psychological needs that support well-being. The care experienced consultants we worked with stressed the importance of feeling involved and informed – i.e., having a say in decisions about their care and understanding what plans were.

Many children and young people noted that they wanted care workers who would actually listen to them and their needs (something which is enshrined in both domestic and international law e.g., Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; Children Act 1989). Despite legal frameworks, children reported that they often did not feel listened to - and for some this affected their trust of others.

"People needs to listens to us not when they feel like it. All the time as if not then the trust will go and will be hard to get back." (Care leaver)

"I would change my social worker as I do not trust her as she doesn't listen or help." (11-18-year-old)

5.6.1 Involved in decisions

"When I am included, I feel part of it and happy" (11-18-year-old)

Children in care aged 11-18 were asked if they felt involved in the decisions that social workers made about their lives and care leavers were asked how involved they were in their pathway plans (the plans that set out their needs and how they will be addressed).

Young people in care who did not feel involved in the decisions that social workers made about their lives or that they were not given chances to be trusted had more than 2 times greater odds of low well-being. Similarly care leavers who felt involved in pathway planning had greater odds of high well-being, whereas not being involved was linked to low well-being.

Nearly half (46%) of children and young people in care (8-18 years) felt involved in decisions about their care all or most of the time, 40% sometimes felt involved, 8% hardly ever felt involved, and 6% never felt involved.

Significantly fewer children and young people living in residential care (78%) felt involved in decisions about their care, compared with all other living arrangements combined (88%).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ $\chi^2(1, 3,482) = 34.67, p < 0.001$

In their comments, some young people spoke positively about being listened to.

"I have had a brilliant experience. The [LA] council made a decision for me to move to [LOCATION] when I was 14 and that was the best decision they did for me. I met my lovely foster family and had such a lovely time with them. I was always listened to and felt appreciated every time I had my social worker visit." (Care leaver)

"I feel like if I have something important to say, people will listen" (11-18-year-old)

"I think the decisions my social worker has made about my life have always been things I've agreed with" (11-18-year-old)

Others expressed frustration at not being listened to.

"To be listened to by my social worker. My brother often gets the social worker's time. It feels like he gets picked over me. I didn't like it when I had to leave or be with someone every day when they investigated something. I wanted them to listen to what I wanted." (8-11-year-old)

"Social Workers need to need to learn to listen to kids. Don't just go off what others say they need, but listen if the child says they need something else." (Care leaver)

"I think it's important for people to listen to young people - they are the experts of their life. as a young person I don't think the best decisions are always made for me as I am hardly ever asked what I would like." (11-18-year-old)

Many young people in care felt that as they got older, they ought to have more say about their lives than they did.

"As I'm getting older. there are more things I would like to do without having to ask permission." (11-18-year-old)

"I haven't always had a say, it feels like only now I'm older am I getting a bit more. But I would like even more than I'm getting." (11-18-year-old)

For some young people, being listened to and being understood were part of being treated as unique individuals with specific needs, more than just a number in the system.

"...taking the necessary time and effort to really understand every individual down to the finest details. This would help a lot. It would also prevent you further issues and negatives arising in the future." (Care leaver)

"Not everyone's experience is the same, so you cannot generalise for everyone so PAs must make great effort into being understanding and taking into account things that young people may not want to say in public without being too intrusive and judgemental." (Care leaver)

"...it feels like I'm perceived more as a case number than a person with complex needs and an individual situation that requires bespoke plans." (Care leaver)

3 in 5 (60%) of care leavers felt involved in their pathway planning all or most of the time.

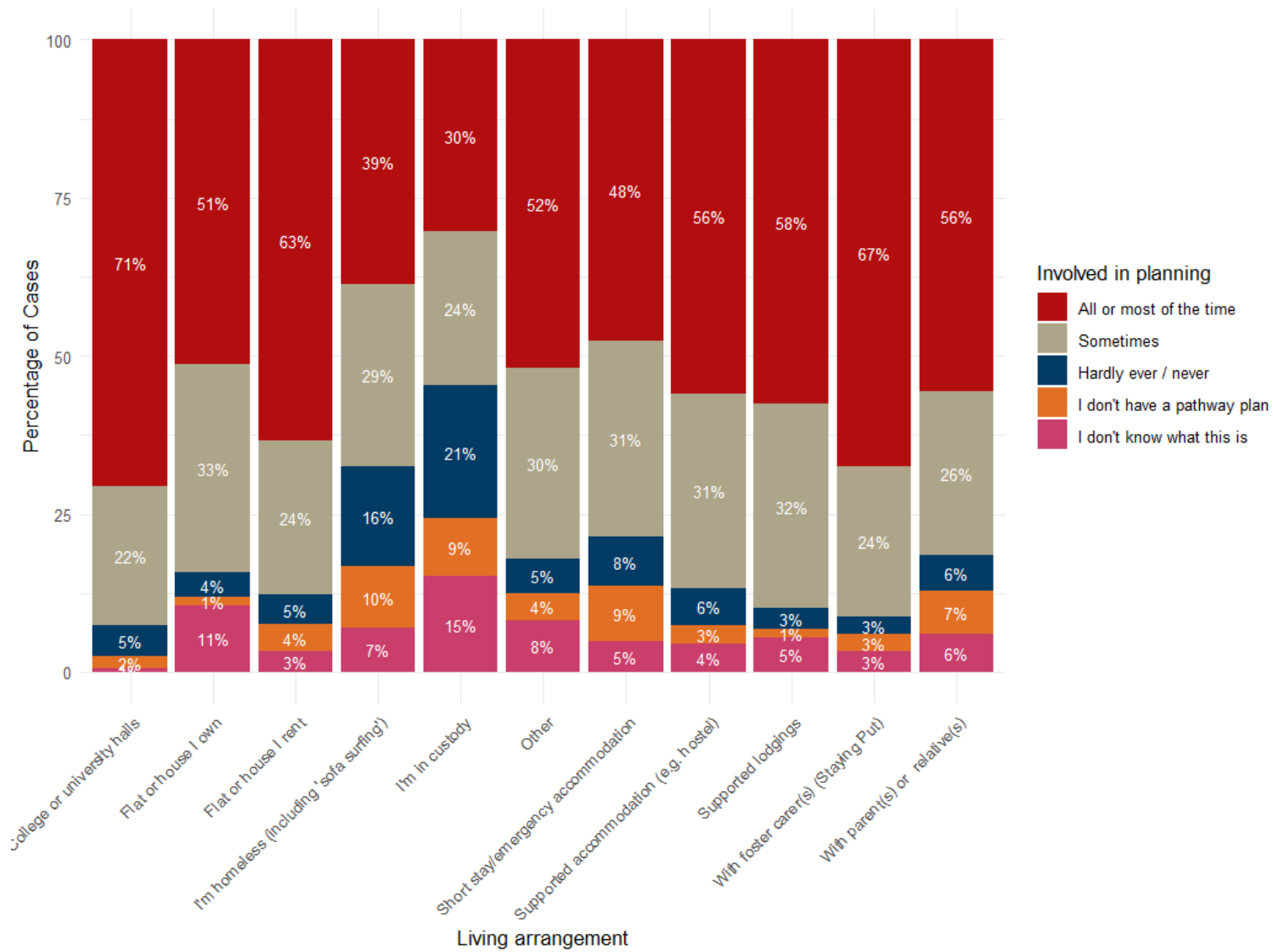
10% of care leavers either did not have a plan or did not know what one was.

Significantly fewer care leavers who were disabled (83%) felt involved in their planning compared to those who were not disabled (88%).⁴⁶

Over two thirds of care leavers who were still living with their foster carers or who were living in university accommodation always felt they were involved (Figure 31).

⁴⁶ $\chi^2(1, 4,788) = 17.56, p<0.001$

Figure 31: Involved in pathway planning for care leavers by living arrangements (2021-24, n=5,238)



5.6.2 Information shared and explained

Care experienced consultants stressed that being involved in decisions also meant being informed. They described how in care sometimes decisions were made about their lives that were not explained in a way that they could understand. This was also reflected in some of the comments from children and young people in the survey around issues like family time. Some reflected confusion and worries caused by lack of information.

"The older I've got the more I wish I knew when I was younger even tho it may of hurt my feelings it would have hurt a lot less than being lied to for 18 years of my life and if I did know more, I may have made different decisions when I was younger I threw a foster family away that loved me and could have given me a great life because they made my actual family look like saints" (11-18-year-old)

"More reassurance about where I am living - that this is my forever home. I feel that when I was younger things weren't explained to me very well. I had lots of placement changes when I was younger and this has caused a lot of upset." (11-18-year-old)

"I want to know more about my care status, as I don't know what is going on. I want to live like a normal child without all these rules that I don't understand." (11-18-year-old)

5.6.2.1 Understanding why you are in care

Some children and young people also felt that they could not rely on care workers to have the correct information. They gave examples of occasions when they had been given incorrect information, or where staff were unable to answer questions.

"Having someone who actually knows what they're on about. And knows what their job entails. Having someone who listens and doesn't tell people different things. Have people who provide correct information. Have someone who can actually make time for you to sort out important documents ready for leaving care." (Care leaver)

"Consistency with what gets told to you by social workers etc, I've been in care my whole life and have been constantly told different things which makes it hard to get on with things etc, especially when you get a new social worker who's new to the job, in a sense they feel a bit useless as they don't seem to know much, if I'm honest I've had my fair few new social workers who are new to the job and half the time I know more than they do about certain things, which to me was rather irritating." (Care leaver)

Whether or not staff had the answers, some children and young people felt that they were not given the information they needed at the right time. For some children this included information about why they were in care.

"More contact, including more attempts to speak to me. And people to explain things. Also, I didn't know until today that I had a pathway Plan I don't even know what it is." (Care leaver)

"I think I should have been told about all my entitlements more. I was refused my leaving care grant for absolutely no reasons when I 100% met the requirements. I was basically left on my own to figure everything out." (Care leaver)

"If I knew why I had a social worker I would understand more" (4-7-year-old)

"I wish the social workers had been more honest in terms of what actually happened when I was younger as I was in shock when I read my background information. Respect

our need-to-know certain facts, just be mindful of age-appropriate language." (11-18-year-old)

Some wanted more information about their birth families and understanding why they were in care.

"I don't know why he (the social worker) sent us to live with Nanny" (4-7-year-old)

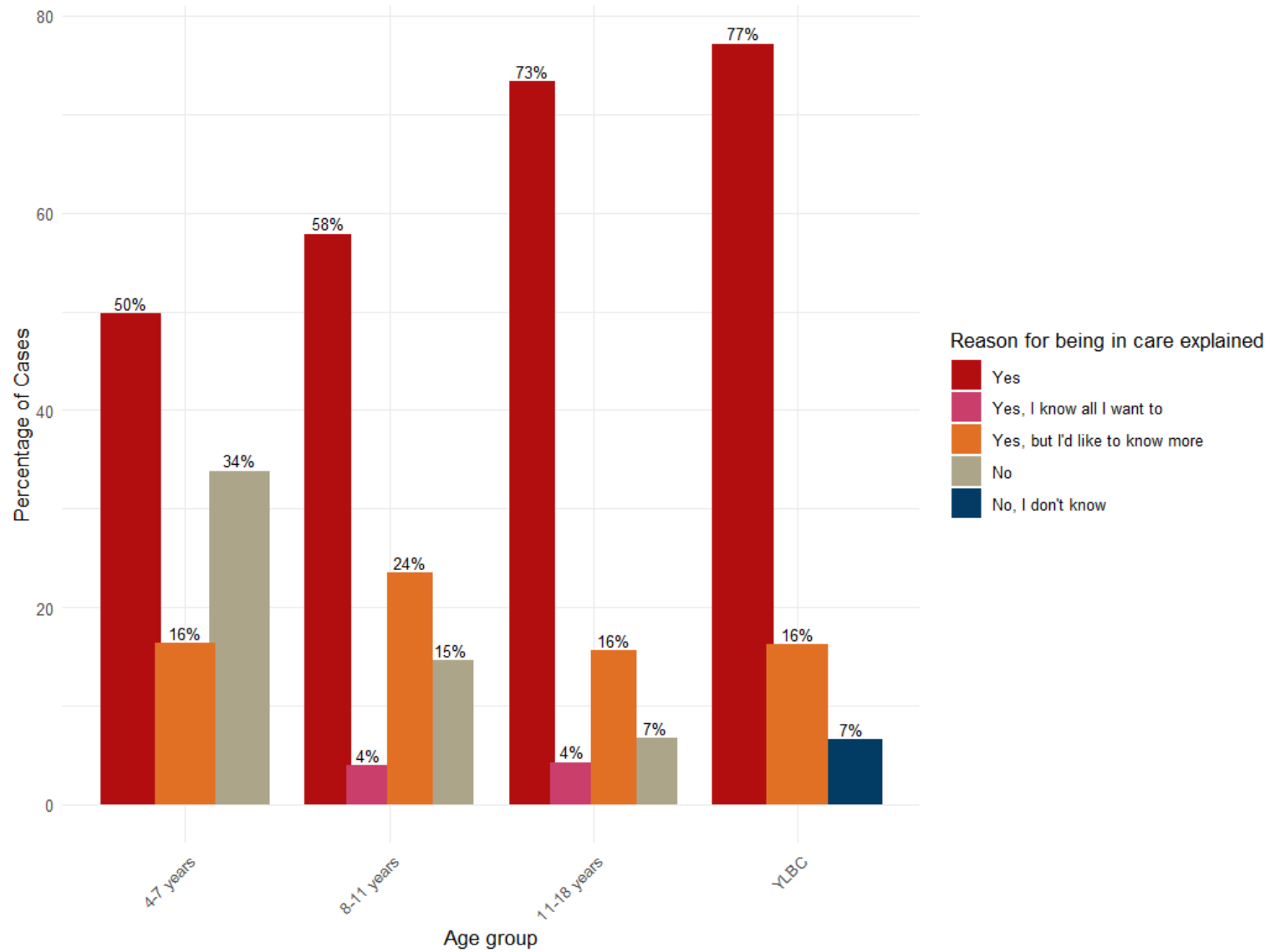
"Not being in care. I hate the care system because it's confusing and when it comes to parent contact they try and control the contact with parents and I don't understand why." (8-11-year-old)

I don't know why I don't see my dad. I worry about it because he might be dead. (8-11-year-old)

As reported in previous Bright Spots reports (Selwyn et al. 2017, Briheim-Crookall et al 2018, Selwyn & Briheim-Crookall, 2022) a significant proportion of children and young people in and leaving care report that they would like to know more about why they are or were in care, especially in the younger age groups.

Half of 4–7-year-olds do not know why they are in care or would like to know more.

Figure 32: Proportion of children in care and care leavers who felt that they knew why they were in care (2021-24)



5.6.2.2 Information about leaving care

The right information can help young people with the process of leaving care to help to help prepare them, address worries and support them to make informed decisions.

"Leaving care has been a good experience overall. I have had support from my personal advisor when I've needed it and the information that I receive from professionals is usually helpful. To make my experience better, I think that it would be useful for PAs to go through the different options that you have when leaving care (privately rent, Staying Put, council housing, how each one affects finances, etc) before you actually make a decision." (Care leaver)

Some young people highlighted the need for information to be shared as explained earlier and in more detail. Some young people stressed the importance of clear information about rights and entitlements

"Let people know what they are entitled to, their rights AND GRANT THEM IT... I am intelligent enough to always ask questions and do my own research and advocate for myself, I shouldn't have to though, as a young person who has dealt with too much trauma at a young age and removed from home, I expect these people to look after me better" (Care leaver)

5.6.3 Chance to be trusted

Getting opportunities to do things independently, make mistakes and learn from them are an important part of growing up. Young people who we developed the surveys with stressed the importance of having opportunities to be trusted as well as having trusted people in their lives.

1 in 12 young people aged 11-18 said they hardly ever or never got a chance to be trusted.

In the surveys we ask 11–18-year-olds whether they felt they get opportunities to be trusted. 57% of children and young people aged 11-18 years had a chance to show they could be trusted all or most of the time. 35% got this chance sometimes, 6% hardly ever, and 2% never got this chance.

"If my foster carer could be a little more laid back. If I had more freedom, trust and responsibility I would be a lot happier." (11-18-year-old)

"I would like to have more conversations with my foster carers so that I feel more comfortable about where I am. I would my foster carers be aware of social media and not think that it is scary or dangerous. I would like the foster care to trust me more with my phone and social media." (11-18-year-old)

"Being given the chance to show I can be trusted, for example being allowed to stay home alone." (11-18-year-old)

Some young people indicated that restrictions had an impact on their relationships with friends.

"I am feeling like I live in Jail, I don't have any freedom there is a time limitation, I don't have a social life to bring my friends totally there is no freedom to do things" (Care leaver)

"I feel I am restricted to do things that my own age group do because of my past." (11-18-year-old)

In the Your Life, Your Care survey 11-18-year-olds are asked whether they can do similar things to their friends. A majority (81%) did feel that they could at least sometimes, but just under a fifth (19%) reported that they hardly ever/never could.

5.6.4 Control over my life

"I never believed I would score answers so high in such a positive manner. Within the last year I have finally been taking my life into my own hands and making the decisions for myself and no one else has had a say in that other than the support I have received from people during this time. Encourage young people to make their decisions for themselves and trust their gut feeling. It's about them at the end of the day and we are not brainless puppets that you have to make decisions for us, just encouragement and support is what we need to plant the seed of self-worth in this world." (Care leaver)

Our Care Experienced Consultants when working on the analysis stressed the importance of being involved and informed and reflected that often children in care lack control over their lives. The comments of the children and young people surveyed suggested this was an important theme too.

"I'd make it less intrusive. Everyone is in your business all the time. They should make rules adapted to the young person's age, such as when they are making decisions on what I can and cannot do. I should be given more choice in matters and take care of my own things and do things my way." (11-18-year-old)

"I don't think I have anyone who cares about me. I can't control much in my life. Decisions are made for me by people who will not be in my life soon. I just have to go with it" (Care leaver)

"Feeling out of control and helpless as always in pain and a lot of things I'm unable to do and losing control. No sense of freedom or personal space" (Care leaver)

5.6.5 Speak to social workers alone

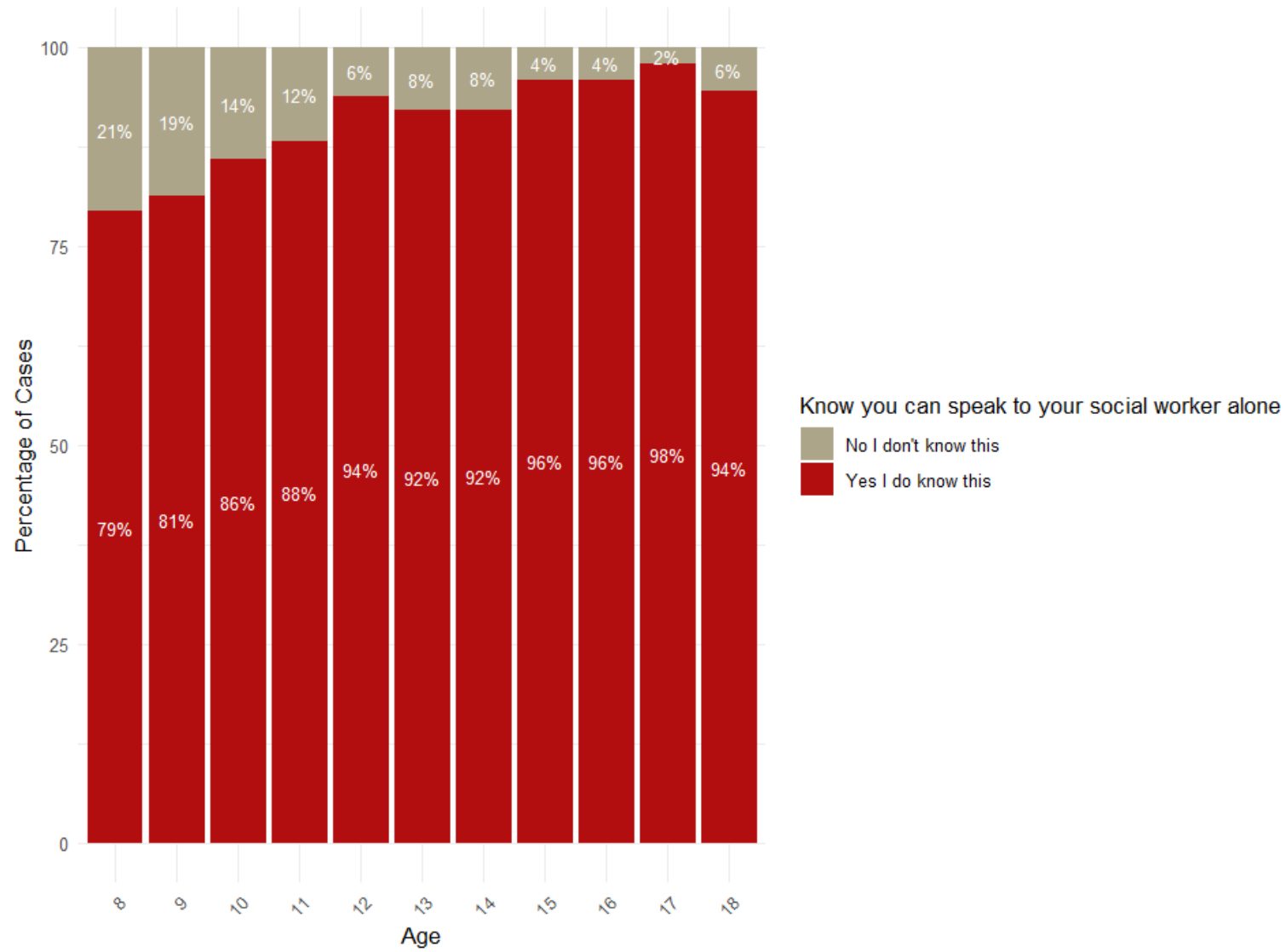
"In foster care I used to get called names and felt upset and worried all the time. When the social worker came round the carers would be really nice to me." (8-11-year-old)

An important right for children in care is being able to share their wishes and feelings openly with their workers. To make this possible, children need opportunities to speak with their worker in private. This creates a safe space where they can raise concerns without fear of being overheard. Our analysis showed that children in care who were unaware they could speak to their worker alone had 2.5 times higher odds of low well-being.

91% of children in care aged 8-18 years knew that they could speak to their social worker on their own. However, this appeared to be less well understood for younger children – as shown in

Figure 33, for example, a fifth of 8-year-olds (21%) did not know that they could speak to their social worker on their own compared to only about 1 in 20 (6%) of 12-year-olds.

Figure 33: Whether children in care aged 8-18 years know that they can speak to their social worker alone (n=4,812, 2021-24)



Being so dependent on their carers, and in a precarious situation, children and young people did not necessarily feel comfortable talking about these issues. Several young people suggested that social workers needed to be more sensitive to pick up on issues that children and young people were experiencing with carers.

"We think they don't like us but we do not want to say anything as the foster carers will know and it will be more not good for us. I think that the foster carers and the social workers should want to help us but they do not." (11-18-year-old)

"Look for better carers don't just jump in - as I have and most people I know have had carers who only do their job for the money and never buy us nice clothes or let us do sports clubs - and too scared to tell anyone as when you're young you don't have the guts to tell anyone" (Care leaver)

"Having social work listen to me when I said I was unhappy in my foster family, this would have meant I wouldn't have to experience the horrible time I had during and leaving foster care. Listen to the kids more. Not all foster parents are as nice as they seem to your face." (Care leaver)

5.7 Opportunities to learn and grow

5.7.1 Like school

"I like that I can go to school every day." (4-7-year-old)

In our Your Life, Your Care survey children in care aged 4-7 years are asked, 'Do you like school?' The response options are, 'mostly yes' or 'mostly no'. Children aged 8-10 years and young people aged 11-18 years are asked 'How much do you like school/ college?' with the response options, 'a lot', 'a bit', 'not very much' and 'not at all'.

Most children aged 4-7 years report that they like school (87%). This seems to decrease with age, with 84% liking school 'a lot' or 'a bit' aged 8-10 years, and 73% aged 11-18 years. The proportion of children and young people that like school does tend to vary widely by local authority, where responses of a lot/bit ranged between 61% and 84% - one subgroup fell to just 46% of children and young people liking school a bit/lot, making it an outlier.

Fewer girls in care (68%) like secondary school than boys (78%).

There was no significant gender difference in liking school for children aged 4-7 years⁴⁷ or 8-10 years⁴⁸. However, for secondary school aged young people, girls (68%) were significantly⁴⁹ less likely to like school compared to boys (78%). For secondary school aged young people, those from Globalised Majority groups (79%) were significantly⁵⁰ more likely to like school compared with their White peers (71%). 80% of black young people reported liking school, as did 89% of Asian young people, 73% of young people from mixed ethnic groups, and 77% of young people from other ethnic groups.

⁴⁷ $\chi^2(1, 804) = 0.34, p=0.56$

⁴⁸ $\chi^2(1, 1,137) = 2.39, p=0.12$

⁴⁹ $\chi^2(1, 3,379) = 44.67, p<0.001$

⁵⁰ $\chi^2(1, 3,451) = 19.97, p<0.001$

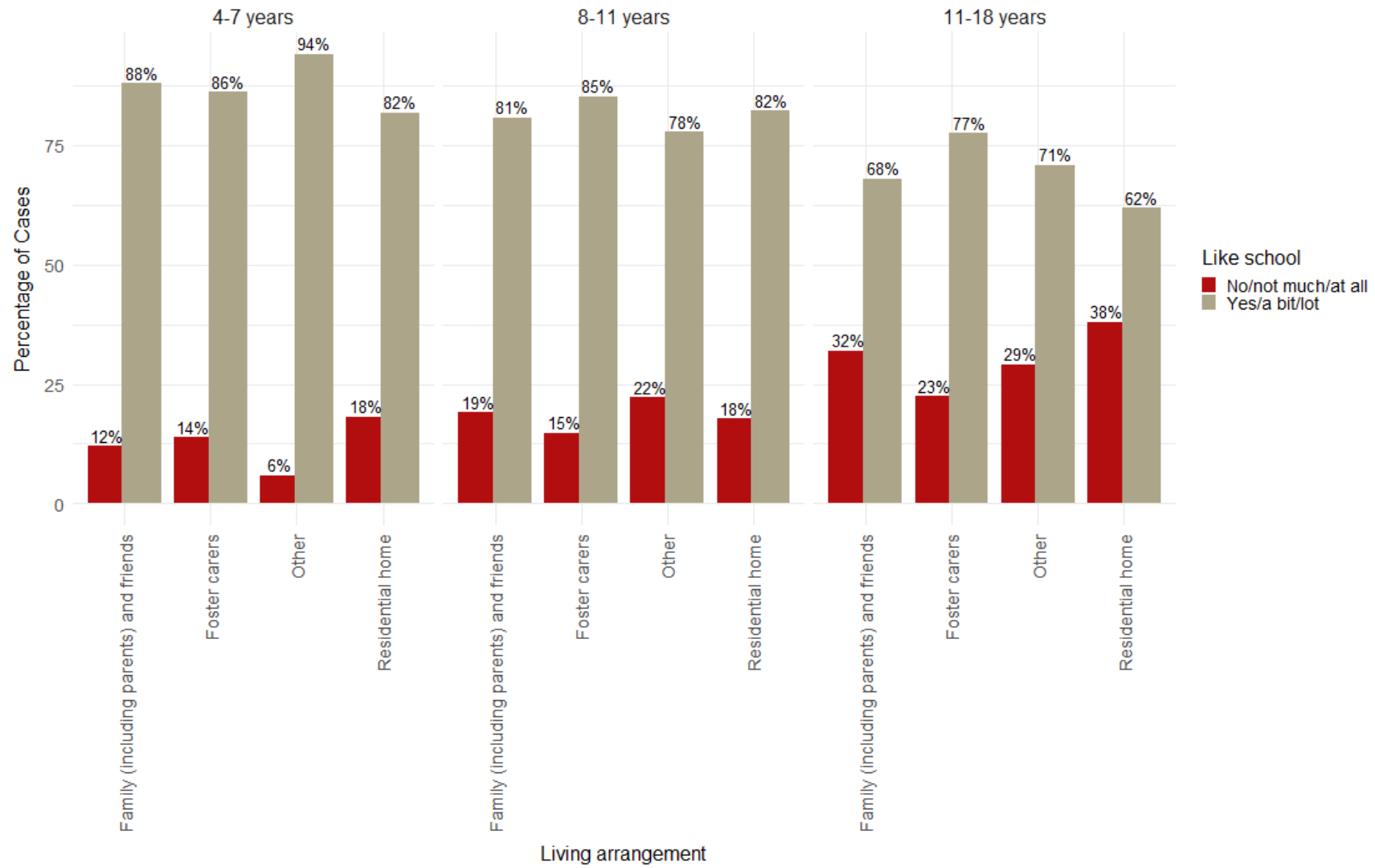
As shown in Figure 43Figure 34 for secondary school aged children significantly⁵¹ more (38%) of those in residential care did not like school, compared with 23% living in foster care. This pattern is mirrored in responses to the question 'Do the adults you live with show an interest in what you are doing at school or college?' - significantly⁵² more secondary school aged young people who lived with foster carers (96%) felt the adults they lived with were always/often interested compared with 93% of young people in residential homes.

Fewer children in residential care (93%) felt the adults that they lived with took an interest in their education than children in foster care (96%)

⁵¹ $\chi^2(1, 2,596) = 54.94, p<0.001$

⁵² $\chi^2(1, 2,544) = 12.82, p<0.001$

Figure 34: Liking school for children and young people in care aged 4-18 years by living arrangement (2021-24, n=5,627)



Children and young people were not asked to comment directly on their schooling in written questions in the Bright Spots survey. Nonetheless, some young people chose to speak about their experience of school in more general questions.

"I am very happy with my new mum and like my new school" (4-7-year-old)

"Some people don't treat me like the other kids because I have special needs. But the teachers in my school don't make me feel like that. This school definitely gets me." (11-18-year-old)

"I hate school." (11-18-year-old)

As we have seen in other areas, some children felt that they did not get enough of a say in decisions being made about their lives - including their schooling.

"Sometimes I feel that I should have a say in what I do at school and where I want to go to school." (11-18-year-old)

"I didn't like it that they took me from school. I don't feel safe anymore. School teachers don't understand or listen. I want to change school but grown-ups keep saying wait" (4-7-year-old)

"I think they should let me have a say in my education. I like where I am now and have made lots of friends. I don't like my other school because it makes me depressed." (11-18-year-old)

"Do I really have to move school because I want to stay in this school because I feel safe?" (8-10yrs)

Several children commented that they wanted to move to different schools, including to be closer to where they lived or their friends.

"If I could move to a school near foster carer as every day you are late arriving at school" (4-7-year-old)

"Going to a different school, to the school that I was meant to be going to before I was forced to move. I have more friends there." (11-18-year-old)

"Being in care has made me miss my education - I was moved so much bad always lost my friends. They make promises and break them all the time. There is nothing positive about being in care." (11-18-year-old)

5.7.2 Bullying

Children in care age 8-18 were asked whether they are afraid to go to school because of bullying. Those that reported that they were, were asked a follow up question about whether they felt they were getting support with the bullying.

A quarter of children and young people in care were afraid (always or sometimes) to go to school because of bullying

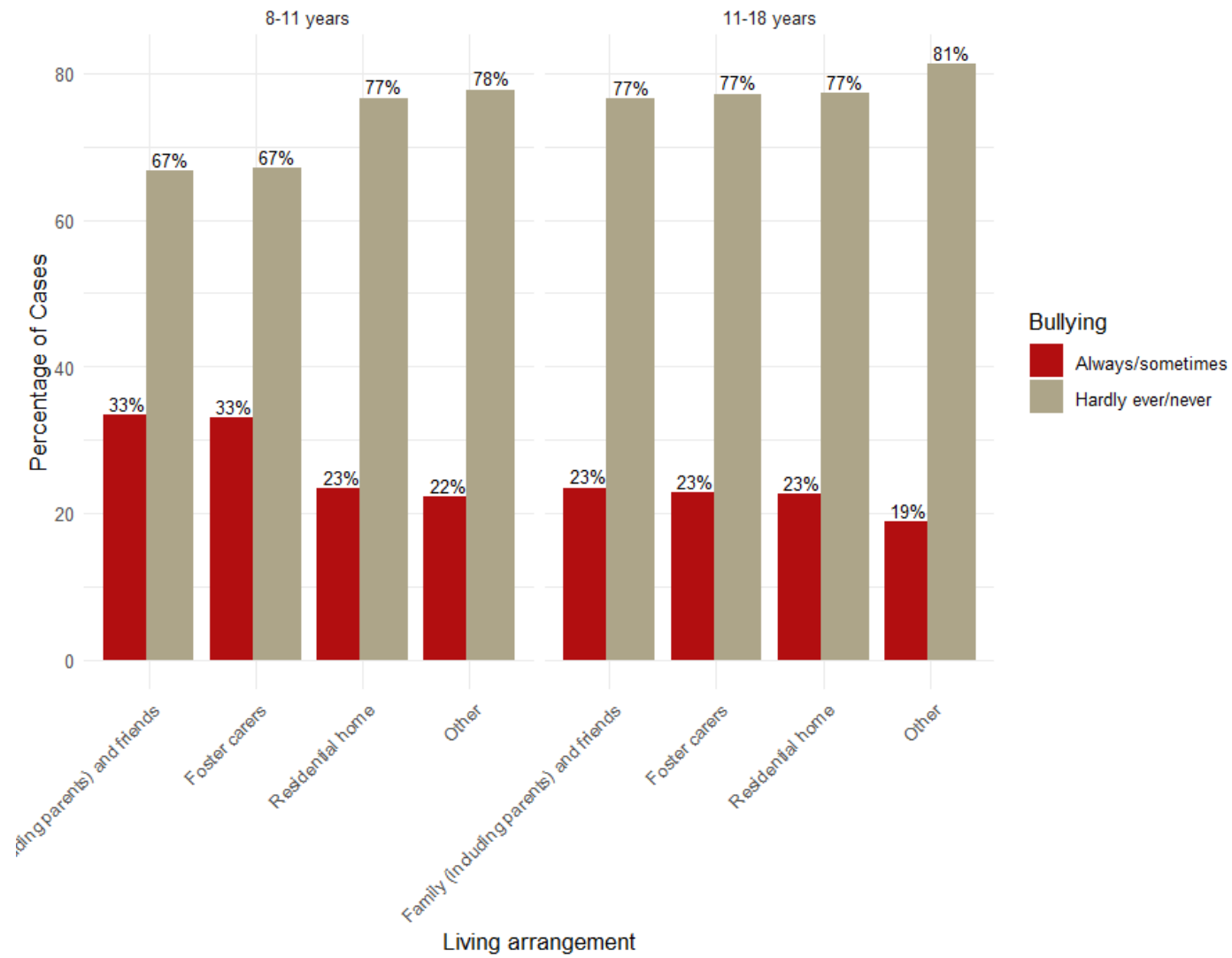
32% of those aged 8-10 years and 23% of those aged 11-18 years were afraid to go to school because of bullying. However, 88% of children aged 8-10 years receive support for bullying, compared to 76% of those aged 11-18 years.

3 in 10 girls were afraid to go to school because of bullying compared with 2 in 10 boys.

Girls were significantly⁵³ more likely to be afraid to go to school because of bullying – 3 in 10 versus 2 in 10.

⁵³ $\chi^2(1, 4,664) = 78.02, p<0.001$

Figure 35: Being afraid of going to school due to bullying for children and young people in care (2021-24, n=4,790)



A few young people noted problems with peers at school. In some cases, this included experiences of being bullied. Children and young people noted directly the impact this had on their well-being.

"I get a lot of worries at school; I am not liked very much." (4-7-year-old)

"School isn't the best but it can be good sometimes. The good thing about school is my teachers, but the not good things are friends that I can't trust and I get bullying sometimes." (11-18-year-old)

"I have been bullied at school and have PTSD from being bullied over and over since primary 4." (11-18-year-old)

When developing the survey children and young people highlighted that they sometimes experienced stigma because of being in care. In their comments some young people had experienced bullying or were worried about bullying linked to being in care.

"If the wrong people find out that I'm a young person in care, I will get bullied and abused by those who think they are the boss of people. I HATE BEING THE TARGET OF PEOPLE WHO ABUSE THE VULNERABLE. That is something I detest; the vulnerable people being taken advantage of." (11-18-year-old)

"I worry about bullying because I was bullied before for being in foster care but I am not being bullied now." (8-11-year-old)

5.7.2.1 Feeling embarrassed about being in care

Young people in care (11-18-year-old) were also asked about things that adults did that made them embarrassed to be in care. 13% said that they did.

1 in 8 young people in care aged 11-18 felt that adult did things that made them embarrassed about being care.

Several children and young people wrote about how they felt singled out in school.

"A teacher in school once said in front of the class oh you're a foster child and everyone in the class heard." (11-18-year-old)

"They touch on sensitive subjects and when I was at primary school kids used to make fun of me and the teachers did not do anything about it." (11-18-year-old)

"Get treated differently at school compared to everyone else. I always feel different and that I can't fit in sometimes." (11-18-year-old)

5.7.3 Education, training and employment for care leavers

37% of care leavers were not in employment, education, or training – 37% were studying, 21% were working, and 4% were in some form of training programme.

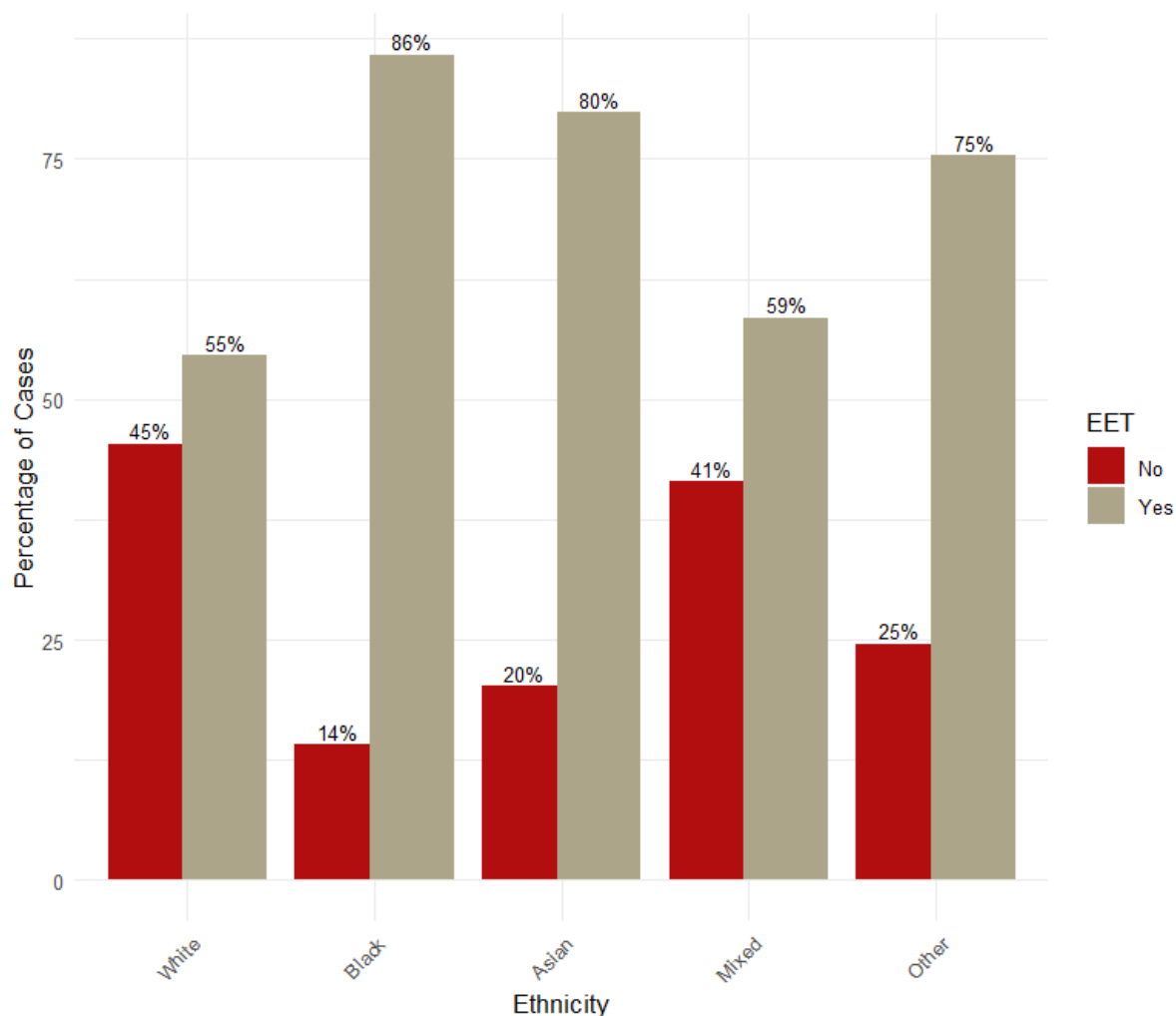
Significantly⁵⁴ more female care leavers (41%) were not in employment, education, or training, compared with male care leavers (33%). Significantly⁵⁵ more disabled care leavers (48%) were NEET

⁵⁴ $\chi^2(1, 4,940) = 41.21, p < 0.001$

⁵⁵ $\chi^2(1, 4,761) = 118.9, p < 0.001$

compared with care leavers who were not disabled (31%). As shown in Figure 36 white care leavers were most likely to be NEET.

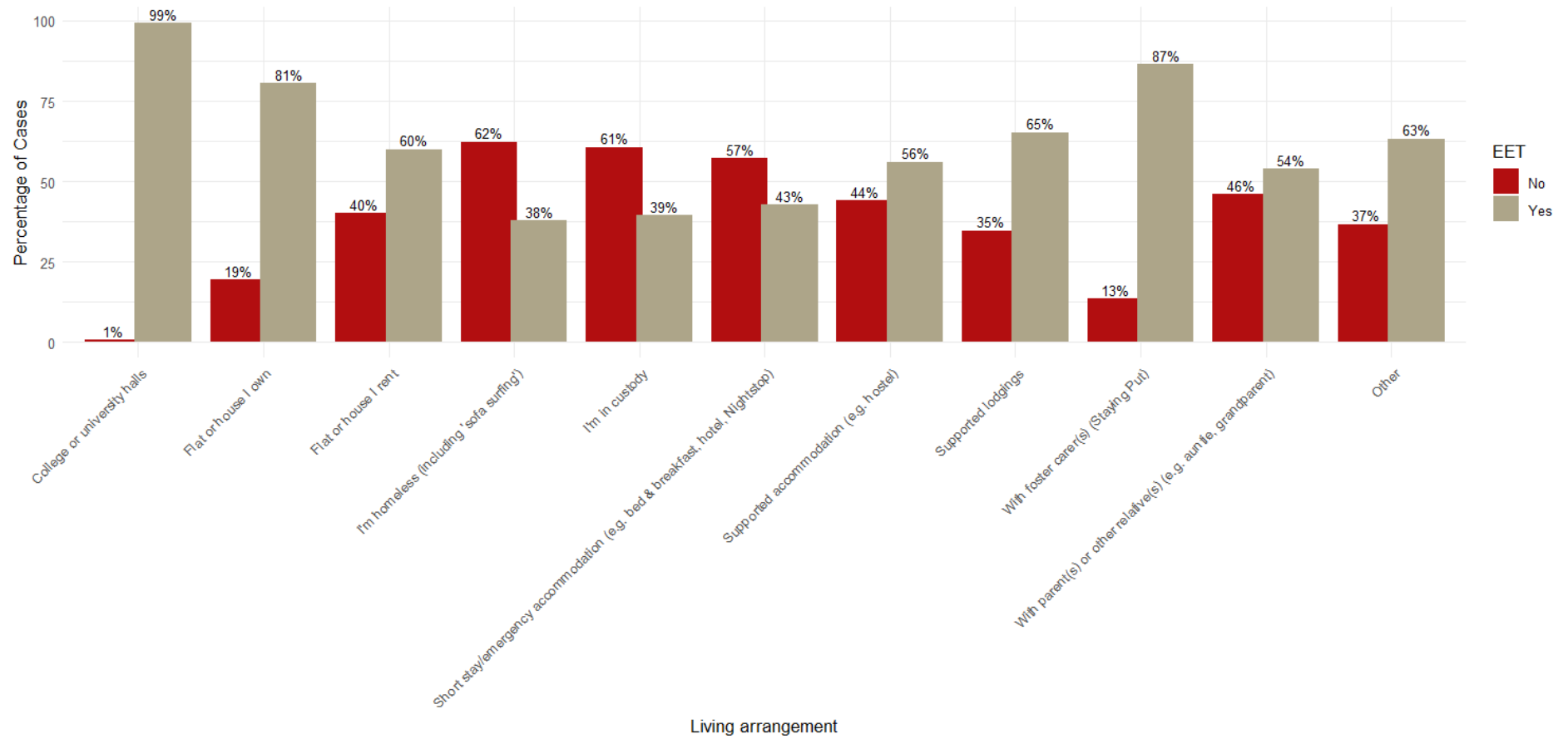
Figure 36: Education, employment and training rates by ethnicity for care leavers (2021-24, n=5,130)



As shown in Figure 37, 87% of care leavers Staying Put with foster carers were in education, employment or training. Just over half of care leavers (56%) in supported accommodation were EET.

Almost 9 in 10 of young people who remained with their foster carers after 18 were in education, training or employment, compared with just over half in supported accommodation.

Figure 37: Rates of Education, employment and training by living arrangement for care leavers (2021-24, n=5,211)



When it came to their prospects for employment or higher education, several young people shared their excitement about their futures. Some discussed their future aspirations for specific careers or educational paths. Some were grateful for the support they had received which was allowing them to pursue these paths.

"I am off to Uni in Sept to study Song writing and have secured an unconditional place so I am excited" (Care leaver)

"I am studying Business and management in [university] and I wish to open my own business in the future and manage it independently. I want to be success at it and achieve my career goal" (Care leaver)

Other young people expressed concerns about their future prospects.

"I'm afraid what I'm going to do after leaving care. The future is very uncertain for me and I'm lost. No hope at all. No job and no stability." (Care leaver)

"Sometimes I worry about the future, on what my job is gonna be and if I'll have a stable family." (Care leaver)

Many young people noted that they had difficulty finding stable employment, or were unable to work, for various reasons such as illness, disability, or health issues. Many young people mentioned mental health challenges - including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. Some young people mentioned structural or practical barriers including housing issues, transport, their immigration status, or court/prison involvement. Many were also unable to work due to parenting or caring responsibilities, or pregnancy.

"I suffer with my mental health issues I used to work in hairdressing but had to leave when everything got too much for me to handle on my own" (Care leaver)

"Being homeless has stopped me, lack of sleep, poor hygiene, things going missing and impacted mental health from the circumstances I live in. Being lead around in circles and the negligence experienced has ultimately affected me living my day-to-day life and has stopped me from living a happy life style, I'm also extremely underweight because of being left and forgotten since being 18" (Care leaver)

"Difficult circumstances college would not be a suitable comfortable environment for me and special education status limited very limited 1to1 services I find it hugely difficult even doing easy tutoring maths unfortunately... and I believe I have no skills for much and I don't even know my own interests." (Care leaver)

"I don't have right to work. I don't get the permission from Home Office yet. I am really worried about that" (Care leaver)

Many young people reported job seeking but they were facing multiple barriers - some did not feel they had enough support, or did not know where to go for jobs.

"Been looking for jobs but don't know what to do with my life and if I did, I would need help to get an interview" (Care leaver)

"I have been applying for apprenticeships, even gone for interviews but it's been a tough journey" (Care leaver)

"Trying to get into education or get a job but don't have the support I need" (Care leaver)

Some young people called for more support for their careers and employment prospects. Young people called for the provision of information about available opportunities, and practical support to help access these.

"All info regarding higher education and apprenticeships/internships/jobs should be readily advertised and promoted to people in care/care leavers in advance through a newsletter or email subscription (e.g., civil service fast stream internship)" (Care leaver)

"Getting help in different things. Like how to budget money, how to save. Help finding a job, help with CV, not just the standard CV template help but actual help that will lead to getting a job. Help getting a job, getting into education." (Care leaver)

"There should be more opportunities for people leaving care in trying new things, and getting them outside of their comfort zone but at the same time keeping them interested in their life and helping them figure out who do they want to be in the future. I hardly had any opportunity or support in trying new jobs or careers that may have interested me." (Care leaver)

"Work experience with [LA] Council." (Care leaver)

Some comments also suggested that the system was not always set up to provide support children and young people pursuing higher education.

"Definitely more planning or rules/ laws regarding a care leaver when they turn 18 but are still studying in college, have no children, live independently and plan/ work towards going university. Why is this a grey area? Why are there no rules or laws regarding that aftercare should accommodate the needs such as rent, food and bills of a young person still in college who plans on studying higher education? Applying for universal credit at such a young age when you don't fit into the category of unemployment, part time work or other challenges people face but not full-time college education. For me this was a disincentive as a lot of staff at the job seekers office were confused as to why I was applying for universal credit. It also makes you feel like you have no goals or have a future and it takes up a lot of time that could be well spent completing college work to have a better chance into getting university. The local authorities and the government need to do more to get care leavers to attend higher education by providing incentives before and duration of the higher education period." (Care leaver)

"Offering support to moving into uni and someone to accompany care leavers to uni, when moving in for the first time, regardless of whether the city is in London or not. As most young people our age would have their family helping them moving, so it can be really sad turning up to university on your own, without someone supporting you to move in." (Care leaver)

For parents, childcare could be an issue and young people suggested the need for corporate 'grandparents' to assist in the same way many grandparents do with childcare.

"Help us more with childcare. Those of us that are working or studying full-time and are trying to achieve something with children under 2 have little to nothing offered to us to help with childcare. This has been a big problem for me." (Care leaver)

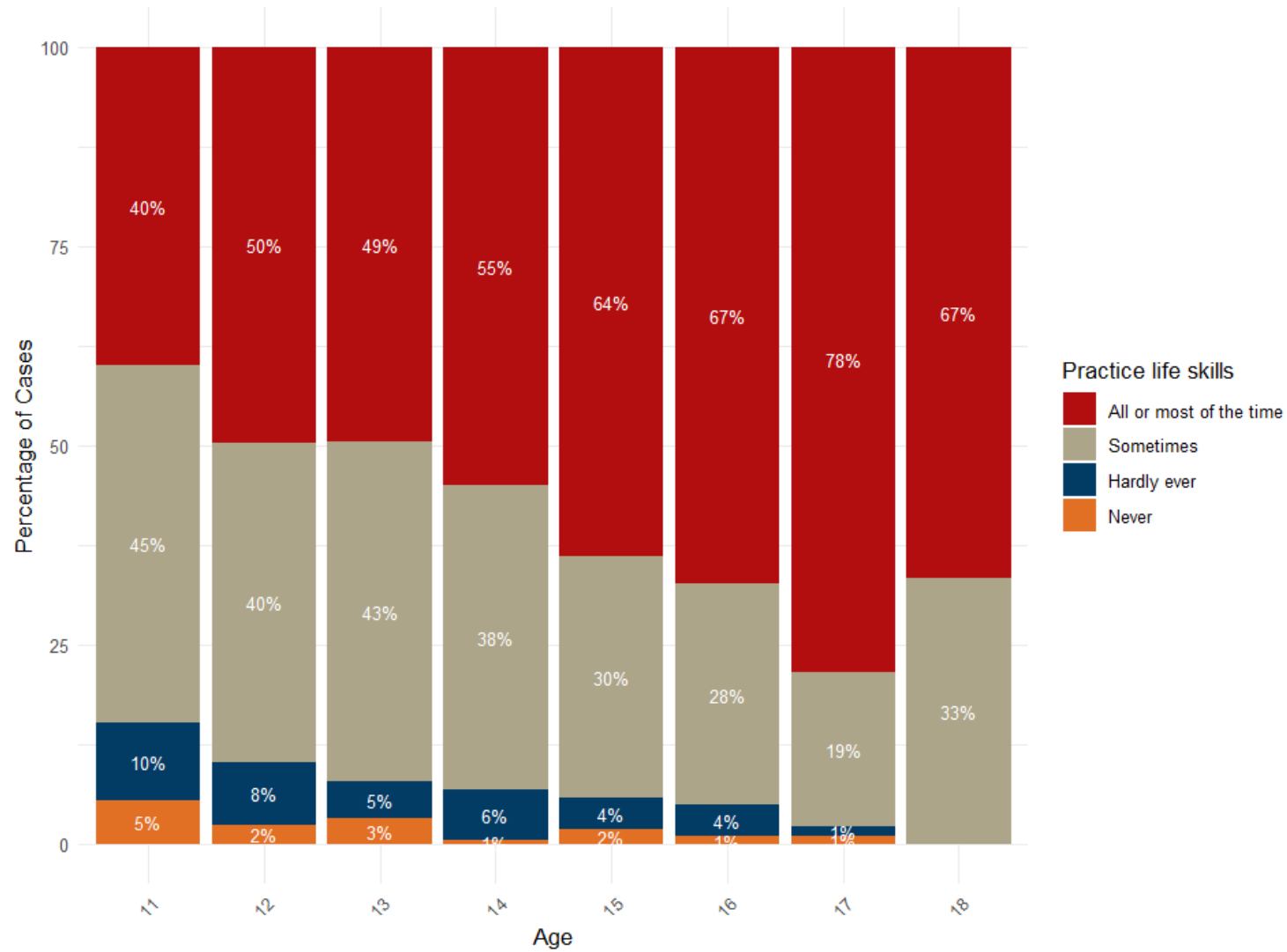
5.7.4 Life skills

Children in care (11-18-year-old) are asked whether they get an opportunity to practice life skills. Although this was not significantly associated with low or high well-being, it was a topic that a large

number of young people highlighted in their comments. Many young people wrote about how they felt the support they had while in care suddenly stopped when they left care and or turned 18 and this was supported by the data in Section 4.4.1 and Figure 11 that showed a stark drop in well-being at this time.

94% of children and young people in care aged 11-18 years were able to practice life skills all or some of the time. As one would expect, this increases with age as shown in Figure 38. We do not ask care leavers about practising life skills, but see from young people's comments that despite most getting to do this at the end of care, many feel unprepared for the challenges of adulthood once they leave care.

Figure 38: Chance to practice life skills for children and young people in care aged 11-18 years by age (2021-24, n=3,485)



It seems that this has improved over time, with children and young people in care (11-18 years) significantly⁵⁶ more likely to be able to practice life skills in 2021-24 (94%) compared with in 2017-20 (89%).

More young people felt they could practice life skills in 2021-24 (94%) than in 2017-20 (89%).

As shown in Figure 39, children and young people in residential care (95%) were significantly⁵⁷ more likely to get a chance to practice life skills always or sometimes, compared with children and young people in foster care (90%). This was also significantly⁵⁸ higher than children and young people living with family or friends (91%).

More children and young people in residential care (95%) got to practice life skills than those in foster care (90%) or living with family and friends (91%).

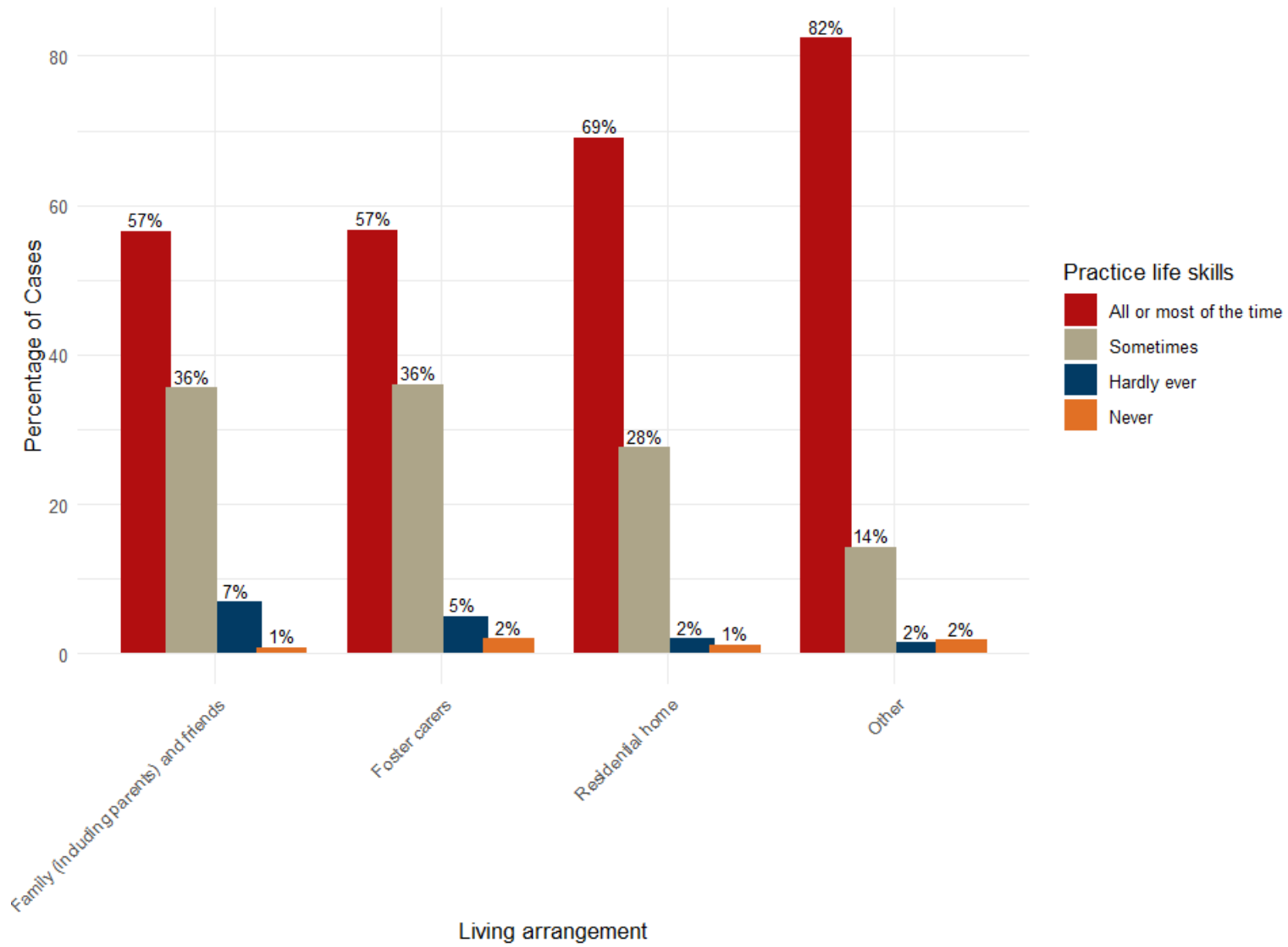
“Enforce life skills training and budgeting training more strictly. A lot of kids in care are expected to grow up quickly because we have had to do everything for ourselves. It would be nice if we were given some training and this was mandatory for foster carers or care leavers workers to carry out. My foster carers didn't want to teach me budgeting and how to use the washing machine so I had to ask other people or learn myself. Care leavers should be entitled to further help to learn these skills for the outside world even if some look like they're doing okay” (Care leaver)

⁵⁶ $\chi^2(1, 7,332) = 53.66, p < 0.001$

⁵⁷ $\chi^2(1, N = 5,728) = 20.26, p < 0.001$

⁵⁸ $\chi^2(1, 1,997) = 11.41, p < 0.001$

Figure 39: Chance to practice life skills by living arrangement for children and young people in care aged 11-18 years (2021-24, n=3,516)



In written comments, some young people reported positive experiences of transition into leaving care. They felt they had been well supported and were excited about their futures.

"I had a good transition into my own house. I learnt lots of independence from being in care and when I lived at home, so I didn't struggle." (Care leaver)

"I feel like I've been set up well, with all the help from the pathway team I have a nice house and the tools I need for the future." (Care leaver)

"Leaving care gave me so many opportunities to reach my goals in life and leaving care makes me feel proud that I have made it this far and my care leaver makes me feel at ease with any problems that I face." (Care leaver)

Others reported a more mixed experience with of leaving care, with significant challenges as they found their feet.

"Leaving care is both good and bad. You will have to learn new things, adapt to a lot of change around you. Deal with things you've never had to deal with before. Be your own person in a world full of bad. Protect yourself as now you're basically on your own regardless if people/professionals say the help/support is there. There's always an age issue or someone else telling your worker the support cannot be given. But other times it's great, you feel free: in control of your life. You decide what's best for you not somebody else. You have more say on how your future plans out" (Care leaver)

"Leaving care was tough to start off with and over time with the support it got easier" (Care leaver)

"Leaving care can be really scary as it feels like you are going into the unknown but at the same time it can be a relief as you are gaining your independence try to stay positive and remember it's normal to have bad days however you can achieve whatever you set your mind to its a long process to go through finding your feet after leaving care but I am now in an extremely healthy relationship and in a job where I help other people live their life's to the fullest as a pbs support worker I wouldn't change the past as it has shaped me into the person I am today." (Care leaver)

As set out in section 5.6.2.2, some young people noted that they were not given adequate information about what would be involved ahead of leaving care. Some felt that their social workers hadn't been sufficiently knowledgeable about the process of leaving care, and a few reported being told things which were incorrect.

"No support available, I almost never see/hear from anyone (including social worker), no funding available for help, I feel as though I have been set up to fail! (They never told me all of this before I was 18)!!!" (Care leaver)

"I would have preferred it if my old social worker had done my pathway plan earlier than this, I'm supposed to leave in 6 months and I have very little idea about what that entails." (11-18-year-old)

"The support I received from my social worker before turning 18 was lacking as she didn't know, and couldn't find out, the necessary information which left me feeling frustrated." (Care leaver)

Young people also wanted support to develop the wide range of skills which they would need for independent living. Young people gave examples of these skills - cooking, cleaning, decorating, washing and ironing, financial awareness - how to open bank accounts, how to spend money

responsibly, how to budget, how to pay bills and read meters, how to apply for benefits, medical knowledge - when to go to the doctor, and so forth. We discuss needs for financial education further below, in section 5.7.5.

"When I left care, I was pregnant and I did not know how to cook, clean or look after myself. I think it would be really beneficial to teach care leavers (before leaving) the vital skills such as cooking and decorating" (Care leaver)

"I think there needs to be more courses such as cooking classes, how to read a meter for electric and gas, how to do council tax, what to do if you have a water leak, gas leak, electrical problem, how to run a washing machine and drying machine, how to iron, what to do if you can't afford a bill and where to get help as this doesn't seem to be taught in budgeting booklets that are often handed out, more activity days for care leavers and specially for care leavers with children. As I found when I moved from a placement to my first ever flat, I had no clue how to set up bills or how to budget properly or how to read my meters among many other things" (Care leaver)

"Teach care leavers how to manage bills, job application techniques and most of all teach them how to cook a balanced diet on a budget, there's lots of day-to-day stuff like this that really sucks figuring out on your own and the workers provided don't seem to be placed in a capacity to aid in this, more that they're there to tell you your entitlements and manage guardian documentation/provide proofs of care leaver status; the latter things however are well done so please keep it up. This may be rectified for example by doing cooking days where the worker can bring ingredients to the care leaver's residence or at a third-party location if this isn't feasible and the food can be taken home. Just a thought" (Care leaver)

"Honestly y'all prepare us how to cook clean and budget but no one teaches practical things like the difference between winter fuel payment and warmer winter schemes how to apply or taxes mortgages. We only get you to 21/25 for some, whereas normal kids have parents their whole lives to help either help prepare us more or stick around for good like the family's you took us from would have" (Care leaver)

A few young people also noted that skills training was no substitute for real world experience. For example, a few young people spoke about the benefits of training flats as highlighted in Section 5.4.4.

"I feel that care leavers need more real-world experience prior to them leaving the system completely, this is because they may not have family support or anyone they can rely on. If they knew what life was like, or could be like for them, it would give them a chance to plan ahead and maybe make better decisions to better their future". (Care leaver)

5.7.5 Coping financially

A common theme in both our research review (Baker, 2017) and workshops with young people that developed the *Your Life Beyond Care* survey was the financial worry care leavers often face. Living on a low income or experiencing financial hardship is linked to low well-being (Moore & Rees, 2017; Children Society: Good Childhood Report, 2024).

In our analysis care leavers who were coping financially had greater odds of very high well-being (2 times) and those who struggled 2.3 times higher odds of low well-being. In comments, some young people made explicit the connection between financial stress and their wider well-being. Financial stress could cause anxiety, depression, overwhelm or hopelessness.

"I am on a debt management plan, likely to lose my car, have lost my job due to moving. this has given me terrible anxiety and I have considered that being dead is a better option." (Care leaver)

"Depressed, lonely, tired of this life and scraping by being broke when I am a beautiful soul I know I deserve more but it's a constant battle Just to survive and be here soon ready to give up it feels pointless I can't buy food when I want too I have to eat tinned food at [Provider] the £300 goes fast with having to pay debts to DWP and I feel lost in myself but I'm doing all I can to help myself but still pretty lost not knowing what to do with myself and I'm a sad and dark place tbh if you actually care" (Care leaver)

As well as this direct effect on well-being, some care leavers noted that financial issues were placing restrictions on their lives. Some found it challenging or unaffordable to socialise with friends, spend money on fun activities, eat healthily or buy clothes.

"Overwhelming anxiety and being in hundreds of pounds in debt is a real mood killer, I tend to isolate myself. I wish I had enough money to just go and have a coffee at a cafe with a friend but I can't even do that, and I can't bring them back to my house because it's so embarrassing" (Care leaver)

"I am on a joint UC claim with my partner, we were forced to relocate and he had to quit his job... However, we have not received the full amount once. We pay my mother board and do our shopping. Unfortunately, we don't like eating frozen chips and microwave meals however fruit and veg costs a lot more. After our food and transport costs as we live in a rural part of [Location] we are running on pennies" (Care leaver)

"Money stops me I would like to go to concerts as I have never been and birthday parties for friends as I can't afford to go as cost of present something to wear and my meal is too much" (Care leaver)

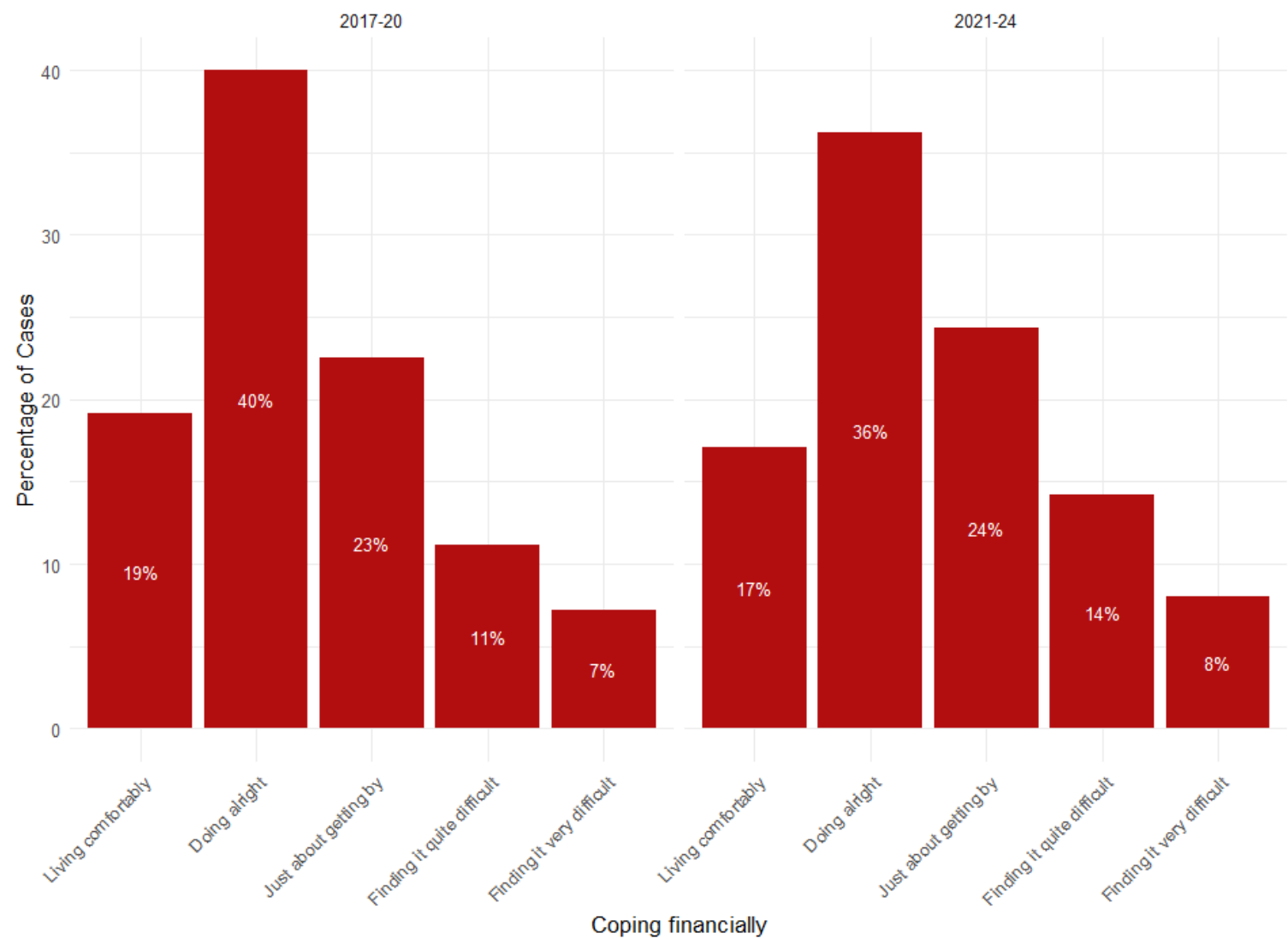
Three quarters of care leavers (78%) reported that things were comfortable for them financially ('living comfortably', 'just about getting by', or 'doing alright'), whereas 22% were finding things difficult (finding it 'quite' or 'very difficult'). Significantly⁵⁹ more care leavers were finding things difficult financially in 2021-24 (22%) compared with 2017-20 (18%).

The percentage of care leavers who struggle to cope has increased from 18% in 2017-20 to 22% in 2021-24.

"The rising cost of living is awful... I rent a house where its £350 rent and then electric is £150 and gas is £100 plus water, council tax, food has INCREASED horrendously. I'm in my overdraft and I've always been financially thriving and I've never felt so horrible with the increasing cost of living. I can't even enjoy going outside for a coffee I feel guilt. I hate it." (Care leaver)

⁵⁹ $\chi^2(1, 8,200) = 18.18, p < 0.001$

Figure 40: The extent to which care leavers are coping financially in 2017-20 (n=2,980) and 2021-24 (n=5,220)



Whether care leavers are coping financially appears to vary across living arrangements. As expected, more than half (56%) of care leavers who were homeless were finding things quite or very difficult financially; in contrast with care leavers who either rented (23%) or owned (16%) their own home. Rates of care leavers who were finding things difficult was lowest in those at college or university (14%) and those Staying Put with their foster carers (13%), with high rates reported by those in short stay or emergency accommodation (41%).

In comments, care leavers spoke about struggling with their finances. Some were short of money to pay for bills and rent, food, and transport; they struggled to afford clothing, household items, technology, activities/socialising, and education/training. A number of comments made reference to Universal Credit being insufficient to cover costs.

"I don't have enough money to live on... I have rent arrears. I have a shortfall of £120 per month, I can't make ends meet, and it's all mounting up." (Care leaver)

"I am a 19-year-old living in a flat. I never have electric; I never have enough money for food. I find it so hard.... I always have hospital appointments where I have to get taxis everywhere so I never have money... The support for money is terrible." (Care leaver)

"Managing money is really hard I live alone and money is my worst nightmare" (Care leaver)

Several care leavers noted their financial issues related to costs associated with housing. A few young people noted being unable to move house due to rent arrears they had accumulated.

"I was in temporary accommodation where there was lots of negative factors such as fighting drugs and alcohol misuse, not being able to work or study. Then I left because I was worried what I would do (going down the wrong path) so my care worker said they would help me private rent for 6 months while they find me council housing. I'm now being evicted over a year on and in loads of debt. I just want somewhere I feel safe and I can call mine to make the best for my mental and physical well-being as we as my future" (Care leaver)

"Due to the housing problems, I am wasting money on heating daily, electricity by running dehumidifiers - also constantly having to replace large pieces of furniture like bookcases, sofas, beds etc. I survive but I have to borrow money every month. I also have a crazy amount of debt due to taking out loans and credit cards to try and cope with the need for furniture and things like curtains and cleaning products/mould/mildew paint." (Care leaver)

"Because of previous debt I cannot move from where I live. This is causing mental health issues..." (Care leaver)

As several young people pointed out, moving out from homes at 18 - with all the associated costs - was in stark contrast to the experiences of most young people who are not care-experienced; care-experienced young people are further set back in that they often do not have access to familial sources of financial support. Some young people felt unable to realise their aspirations.

"I feel grateful for the support but I have worked so, so hard in jobs and at uni to still end up stuck due to financial barriers. In care I was supported well but I just need a tiny bit more to be honest. In 2024 moving out at 18 is not the norm and doing this puts you in a terrible situation to build your career, I can't save enough to fund further training but can't leave my entry job as I need the money hence I'm stuck." (Care leaver)

"I'm working full time trying to gain a career it is difficult having a massive rent expense from the age u start working full time and no family support. I have done an undergrad degree but to get anywhere I need a masters but it's unaffordable despite all my efforts unfortunately. It's tough I have nobody to support with this." (Care leaver)

Some young people noted that a lack of work contributed to their financial struggles. We discuss employment further in Section 5.7.3.

Given the financial stress that many were under, unsurprisingly many young people noted that they had got into debt. Several noted using or being unable to get out of their overdraft. Others had credit cards or other forms of debt. Some young people referred to the stress that this was causing them.

"I'm doing really well except struggling to get out of debt with my gas and due to being autistic and not understanding what's being said and needing support with things and feeling not listened to it's getting overwhelming." Care leaver

"I am in debt. I am constantly in my overdraft and sometimes my bills bounce back because there's no money in my account." (Care leaver)

"It is hard. I have found myself at the bottom of a £2000.00 overdraft from being at university. I'm not an exceptionally big spender and I've found I've not had enough to support myself whilst at university." (Care leaver)

"Overwhelmed with debt and struggling to carry out a plan that will help" (Care leaver)

Several young people noted that they had learned to manage their money but some were still struggling from debts incurred when they were younger. Some bemoaned the fact that they did not have support to learn money management when they were younger.

"I believe I'm good when having money but I do have debt going at the moment. Being 19 I was allowed to take contracts and overdrafts along with universal credit and getting too much hasn't done me well as I'd waste it." (Care leaver)

"Managing money has always been difficult for me as I never got taught the way of managing money whilst in care, but I do get by just about but it's hard and I did get in quite a bit of debt a few years back which I'm trying to manage now." (Care leaver)

"I'm doing ok now, but when I was a younger care leaver I was in a lot of debt. I did not have the right support in learning about money management." (Care leaver)

One young person was grateful for the support they had received from their personal adviser, in managing their debt.

"I'm in debt but my person advisor helps me out by filling forms and by talking to the company on the phone for me to help to sort out a payment plan and to explain the situation so everything is good now. I'm not that worried now because it comes off my benefits so they are getting paid and I won't have to worry about it so much. So, it's all good now" (Care leaver)

Whilst many young people emphasised that they were good at managing money, and were nonetheless struggling financially, some felt that they were not as good at managing money.

"I work minimum wage in a restaurant so I have to work hard for my money, meaning when I spend it it's not on something useless. My money goes all on bills and rent as well as debt that I am paying off. By the end of that I'd have about £100 to last me the

month for food which £25 a week can get you a lot. I feel I manage my money well."
(Care leaver)

"I write out the totals I get for the month, any essentials I need I will section out first. I find that my money is difficult to cover my expenses, my travel expenses eat into my money." (Care leaver)

"I really, really want to be in control of my finances. I just don't seem to help myself as I keep myself in debt, even with repayment plans in place... I'm very scared on how I am going to manage being a new mum with no real certainty of what income I actually have for myself." (Care leaver)

"I can't manage money and this is something I've struggled with for years. I'm now in so, so much debt it's not worth trying to get out" (Care leaver)

"I find it hard to budget and spend my money very quickly." (Care leaver)

Some young people called for more financial education and money management training to be made available. This included care leavers who wanted this support, as well as those who recognised that it would have been useful to have this experience prior to leaving care. Some called for formal financial education classes and others suggested that money management should be taught over time by carers.

"Preparing more for budgeting and financial realities of being 18. Carers should be preparing us from 15/16 years old so we're more ready." (Care leaver)

"I feel as though you need to give young people extensive lessons and maybe information packs about rent, money management and their options and responsibilities before turning 18." (Care leaver)

"I think it's important that young people are taught the importance of keeping control of their finances as it's very easy to get yourself in debt" (Care leaver)

Apart from financial education, some care leavers called for more direct support from staff and local authorities. Some young people felt that local authorities were failing in their duty of care and corporate parenting responsibilities to care leavers. Others wanted more information and transparency around the support that was available.

"I feel that social workers could help a bit more with independence support i.e., benefits, budgeting, forms, credit and debit, grants, funds etc." (Care leaver)

"I feel like I need more support and information for YP moving out from foster carer to semi-independent. The booklet is not enough to prepare. There should be more interaction and visits from PA. Things feel robotic." (Care leaver)

"More money and funding - realistically, [LA] does not act as a parent and look after the care leavers - [LA] should look after their care leavers more and provide more training and support for after care" (Care leaver)

"I think more transparency in what's available to me would be helpful things like what aid can be offered and what restrictions accompany said aid." (Care leaver)

Care leavers called for more direct financial support for care leavers struggling financially - either as grants for specific items and expenses, or as ongoing financial support for those in poverty. A few young people also felt that birthday and Christmas allowances should continue for care leavers.

"More support from the council, used to get support with WIFI bills but have rescinded that. Lack of compassion and empathy towards care leavers. Definitely need more funding especially since most of us are estranged from our families and the council is meant to look after us like family." (Care leaver)

"I would like to get braces. I need them as I cannot close my mouth, but [LA] will not pay." (Care leaver)

*"More grants because I am a broke b*tch" (Care leaver)*

"I would like a bit of support with the financial as it very difficult now having a baby and haven't got any support with money and not be able to work" (Care leaver)

"Give us more grant to spend on house stuff and sometimes give it to us in cash" (Care leaver)

"Actually, help people when they need them and when they're struggling and they're asking for the personal budget not to refuse it because they had a week ago my leaving care worker won't even give me a penny out of my money." (Care leaver)

Part of your home being right for you is having the resources to make sure that it is liveable. The setting up home allowance was recently increased to £3,000, but research by A National Voice found that not all local authorities had implemented this change. Young people also reported issues with inadequate information about the grant and called for more choice in how it is used (ANV, 2024). This was echoed in comments

"I waited a very long time to get my setting up home grant items. I don't mind the fact I was not given the money, but I couldn't move into my flat without a bed or fridge or cooker. I know it was not the fault of my PA but whoever orders it needs to do it quicker because it's not right to have to wait over a month when you're paying rent and but can't live there, it's silly." (Care leaver)

"Also, when it came to helping me spend my money (care grant) which I got £1,500 to spend on furnishing my flat she was not in her office always on leave so I ended up buying crap instead of useful furniture what could have lasted me a lot of years" (Care leaver)

"Little bit more help with the financial. It's unclear how much you have or your grant. Had to wait for grant for setting up home. It might help to have some sort of visual record of what is being spent in SUH grants. stick to one amount." (Care leaver)

6 Concluding remarks

Understanding how children and young people feel about their lives is key to helping them thrive. The Bright Spots programme enables local authorities and policymakers to focus on what truly matters to children in care and care leavers. By showing which factors drive well-being the findings in this report can help shape policy and practice to make life better for our children in care and care leavers.

Children in care and care leavers, like all children, have dreams and goals, and they deserve the same opportunities as other children to realise them.

"[What would make care better?] For there to be a real rainbow when I look out of my bedroom window...for me to be able to jump on clouds." (4-7-year-old)

Being taken into care is the biggest change the state can make in a child's life. When local authorities step in, they become responsible for securing a better future for that child. Through listening to what children and young people have told us we know that we can get it right. But we don't yet do that for everyone. We must learn from what children in care and care leavers have told us to make sure we cultivate the right circumstances, with the right opportunities and people around for each child to grow up happy and have a good life. Currently the system leaves too many children and young people in care and care leavers feeling helpless and hopeless. Children in and leaving care deserve a care system that cares, that nurtures them and provides them with the foundations to realise their dreams.

"[LA] has to do better for their young people. They need to be more nurturing towards their young people - they need to be gardeners to the flowers (young people)". (Care leaver)

Many of the things that improve well-being for children in care and care leavers do not have to cost lots of money. It can be about making little changes such as carving out time for children and young people and making sure they feel seen and heard. Our findings show lots of different things influence well-being. Pop to the park or go for a walk in the woods with the children and young people. Talk to them about the things that are important to them. Give them a card that says 'well done on passing your exam' that shows you believe in them.

Whilst making such things happen relies on the relationship individual workers and carers have with children and young people, it is also important that the system enables and supports us all to focus on well-being. This involves fostering a culture that values what is important to children and young people, making sure that the right people are there for them, and that they can offer consistency and are empowered to support children and young people to thrive. For example, recruiting more foster carers will only be helpful if they are people for who building and maintaining trusting and supportive relationships is central to their ethos.

There have already been many positive developments that help support this change in culture. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister, 2022) identified the importance of relationships for children in care and care leavers. When CoramBAAF adapted Form F, the form which is used to assess new foster carers, they used Bright Spots findings to inform the section on the Child's Needs. When Ofsted developed their new inspection criteria of services for care leavers, they incorporated many of the things that young people have said is important to their well-being. We need to continue to build on this good work to make care better for more children and young people, act on what is already known and fill in the gaps in our understanding.

6.1 Areas for future research

The richness of the Bright Spots data means that there are many more topics to explore and delve into further. We saw that certain groups have better or worse well-being. This research identified some of these and there are doubtless many more.

We have already produced reports exploring the experiences of children and young people with disabilities and long-term health conditions (Baker & Briheim-Crookall, 2024) and children living with family and friends (Selwyn & Briheim-Crookall, 2023).

Further analysis of the experiences of particular groups would be useful, such as girls and young women or those that identify in another way; children in residential care or supported accommodation; and recent entrants into care.

A project to better understand the experience of being a parent and its interaction with well-being for care leavers would also be particularly interesting, as our findings go against what we would expect in the general population.

Given the interaction between age and the accommodation that young people live in, it would be particularly interesting to better understand the experience of older young people in care (16- and 17-year-olds), who may be the group most likely to live in non-family-based accommodation (residential or supported accommodation) and to complement the findings from our work on homelessness.

We saw how certain indicators had changed over time and more research is needed to understand this, e.g., what had led to a reduction in the proportion of children and young people who feel safe and settled where they live and the factors that are leading to a decline in care leavers reporting that certain groups of people provide them with emotional support (foster carers and personal advisers).

To further inform practice a deep dive into the ‘bright spots’ described by children and young people in the data would be helpful. What does the qualitative data tell us about the experience and views of children and young people who report very high well-being or feel well supported around specific drivers of well-being (e.g., have trusted supportive relationships with carers or workers)? Every year that we continue the survey we add more data to our combined data set. Each line in this represents a child who has chosen to share how they are feeling with us, we can amplify their voice and those of thousands of others to better understand children’s experiences. We found that the insights from Care Experienced Consultants invaluable, it helped us to better understand the messages from children. Therefore, any future data analysis of the Bright Spots evidence base must be in partnership with children.

This is the agenda for the Coram Institute for Children and the practice and advocacy work of Coram Voice as it looks to get young voices heard in the decisions that matter for children and young people and the recommendations of this report are focused on the practical steps that can be taken by every agency, professional, local and national government.

6.2 Recommendations to move from surviving to thriving

1) Prioritise what children in care and care leavers say is important to their well-being as outcomes locally and nationally.

Well-being is not a “nice extra”—it directly influences our health, education, and employment outcomes. Listening to, recording and acting on children and young people’s views needs to be more embedded throughout what we do. Paying special attention to the seven key drivers of well-being when developing, delivering or evaluating services is the starting point.

Bright Spots surveys are one tool available to local authorities to capture the views and experiences of children in care and care leavers. Through the ‘Ask Me What Matters’ Project Coram Voice’s Bright Spots team has worked with a small number of local authorities and their young people to embed some of the questions and topics we explore in Bright Spots in day-to-day practice

- Well-being should be central to how we understand and measure success in Children's Social Care. Any solutions should draw on the considerable learning from the last decade of the Bright Spots programme and place children and young people's views at the centre.
- Future opportunities to embed the drivers will include adapting the Department for Education's national outcomes measures and the evaluation criteria relating to children in care that Ofsted use as part of ILACS (Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services), in a similar way to the criteria used for care leavers.

2) Ensure policy and practice is led by the seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers.

Our seven drivers of well-being are all about understanding - from children and young people's viewpoint - what they need to have a good life. This is what we want for all of our children and young people.

- Decision makers should direct national and local policy developments, resources and interventions to target the seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers.
- Local authorities involved in the Bright Spots programme should further target their work by using their local survey findings to identify specific areas to address locally, reflecting the views of their children and young people. Practice examples collated in the [Bright spots resource bank](#)⁶⁰ can help this work.

3) Invest in and support children and young people to develop relationships that last into adulthood.

Trusting and supportive relationships are essential and more must be done to make sure children in care and care leavers are supported to maintain and develop relationships with the people who are important to them. Children living in a family, whether with foster or kinship carers or parents and care leavers in family-based settings had higher well-being. This does not mean that these are the right arrangements for all children and young people, but more could potentially benefit.

- Whilst maintaining a range of options to best meet the needs of individual children and young people, the Care system should maximise opportunities for children and young people who feel it is right for them to live in family-based environments.
- When improving practice, allocating resources and planning services professionals and decisions makers should prioritise building and maintaining trusting relationships with key adults (family, carers, workers) as well as other children and young people (friends and siblings).
- Carers, social workers and leaving care personal advisers should be given the remit, resources and time to get to know children and young people, listen to them, be there for them and support them to maintain other important relationships.

4) Improve support for care leavers and provide gradual and extended transitions

⁶⁰ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/brightspots/>

Too many care leavers are struggling and we need to reverse the decline in well-being they have experienced. It is important to recognise and build on the positive role many leaving care personal advisers already play for the young people they work with.

- **The Department of Education and leaving care services, together with partner agencies should:**
 - **Help care leavers avoid the cliff edge of care and build trusting and supportive relationships with people who believe in them, including personal advisers who stay with them and do not change.**
 - **Make sure services are needs led rather than age led and make sure young people are involved in planning their futures through pathway plans and are kept informed and prepared as they make the move from care.**
 - **Support care leavers to realise their aspirations and overcome barriers to education, training and employment and make sure they can access mental health and financial support when they need it.**
 - **Help care leavers find and keep safe and stable accommodation that is right for them.**
 - **For those that are parents recognise the positive impact being a parent can have and support them in the same way other grandparents do.**

5) Embed listening to young people in policy and practice improvement.

It is not enough to simply measure and record what children and young people say—their right to be heard requires meaningful action. The Bright Spots programme partners with local authorities to ensure decision-makers listen and respond to the voices of children and young people. In our work we have found that the most effective interventions use co-production and participation, creating solutions together with them.

To achieve this, robust structures for engagement are essential. These include mechanisms for capturing and collating views—such as surveys, care plans, polls, and engagement sessions—as well as spaces where young people can come together to discuss and influence decisions, like children in care councils, care leaver forums, and national equivalents.

Key recommendations:

- **National and local government agencies should ensure structures and mechanisms exist at both local and national levels to involve children and young people in decisions—both about their individual care and at organisational and strategic levels.**
- **When providing opportunities these agencies should recognise that children and young people have different preferences for engagement and may wish to contribute on different issues. They should provide a diverse menu of participation and co-production options so they can choose how and when to be involved.**

6) Acknowledge difference

Well-being is influenced by factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and care experience—meaning a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Some children and young people will require specialist interventions to address their needs, including mental health support. Recent work by leading academics set out the steps needed to better meet mental health needs of children in care (Hiller et al, 2025) and our recent report (Baker & Briheim-Crookall, 2024) makes recommendation

related to children in care and care leavers with a disability. As noted above, further research can deepen our understanding of well-being among specific groups and how to address them.

Key recommendations:

- **Services should recognise and respond to the needs of particular groups, including children and young people with disabilities and long-term health conditions and girls/young women, who consistently report lower well-being.**
- **Central government, health and social care should work together to increase access to evidence-informed mental health service provision for children in care and care leavers in England.⁶¹**
- **Children’s social care staff should be alert to circumstances that are linked to lower well-being such as where children and young people live or when they came into care.**

7 Appendix

7.1 Methodology and statistical analysis

7.1.1 Quantitative analysis

The Bright Spots Programme works with individual local authorities to conduct the Your Life, Your Care survey with children in care (aged 4-17) and the Your Life Beyond Care survey with care leavers (aged 16-25+). Further details about the data collection is available in Appendix **Error! Reference source not found.**.

The quantitative data in this report focuses on responses from these surveys gathered between 2021 and 2024. We also use a comparative dataset with responses from 2017 to 2020 to look at changes over time.

Statistical analysis was conducted in R and RStudio. Descriptive analysis included examination of basic frequencies and means of question responses. Throughout, percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding. We use a number of inferential tests to understand associations between variables, including multi-variate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to understand differences in well-being scales, chi-square tests to understand whether there were significant differences between expected and observed frequencies of categorical variables in relation to high or low well-being. A Bonferroni correction was applied for multiple comparisons.

We used logistic regression models to examine the probability of secondary-school aged children (11-18 years) and care leavers having high or low well-being based on their responses to other survey questions. The logistic regression model for primary school aged children (4-11 years) explored the factors that increased the probability of happiness yesterday. A detailed description of the model building is provided in Appendix 7.5, as well as summaries of the five final regression models.

7.1.2 Qualitative analysis

⁶¹ See Hiller et al (2025) for specific recommendations drawn from experts in this field.

Qualitative analysis of children and young people's responses to free-text questions in the Bright Spots surveys was undertaken of responses collected between 2015 and 2024. All written comments were reviewed by researchers and responses were anonymised to remove references to names, locations, and any other identifying information.

Responses to the free-text questions were analysed using Artificial Intelligence (AI). Anonymised responses were uploaded to Coram's AI Sandbox. This is a Large Language Model (LLM) system which does not share data with third parties, and the LLM was accessed through Coram computers. The AI can only process individual data files of a given size, and so the data was split into multiple files to upload to the system. We prompted the AI's LLM to summarise all the responses into the 10 most frequently occurring topics and produce a description of each topic. The AI was then prompted to extract relevant illustrative quotes related to each topic.

Every AI-generated output was validated to check that they were genuinely reflective of the survey responses. Quotes were extracted to confirm that AI-generated topics represented responses shared in the data. Each quote extracted in this way was also individually checked to confirm its accuracy in the original dataset.

To further validate the AI analysis, AI-generated themes were compared to themes identified by human researchers in other work - including both local analyses of Bright Spots data and previous analyses of large Bright Spots datasets (covering much of the same data). The AI-generated analysis was integrated to the structure of this report, and further thematic analysis of specific topics was conducted manually by Coram researchers.

7.1.3 Role of Care experienced consultants

Seven Care Experienced Consultants (CECs), young people aged 16-25 with lived experience of care, informed the final report. CECs are paid sessional staff that contribute to a range of Coram Voice projects as experts by experience.

As part of the research process, an in-person thematic analysis session was held to familiarise the CECs with the findings and explore patterns in participants' responses. This involved reading through qualitative quotes and statistical data, posing exploratory questions, and engaging in a sorting activity to group related ideas and uncover common themes. In September, an online workshop was conducted to review the identified drivers of well-being. During this session, participants sense-checked the proposed categories and visualisations, and provided feedback on the clarity of the format and language used. CECs helped choose the best design for infographics

In addition, the team of CECs co-facilitated a seminar to share and discuss emergent findings and explore implications for policy and practice of the research. One of the CECs produced the foreword to the report that was also used in the seminar.

7.1.4 Local survey distribution

Local authorities who use the surveys are supported by Coram Voice to distribute the survey to their care and care leaver population. The surveys are available primarily online; although paper surveys are also available and used where no internet is available, or when children prefer this method. Your Life, Your Care surveys differ by age group: a) 4 - 7 years (16 questions), b) 8 - 10/11 years in junior school (31 questions), and c) young people of secondary school age 11-18 years (46 questions). A

core set of 16 questions appear in all three surveys. Your Life Beyond care is for young people who are no longer in care and receiving leaving care support, aged 16 to 25+ (41 questions).

To ensure that children and young people are provided with the opportunity to take part, an initial working group meeting is held with key staff (and in some cases young people) to consider how lesser-heard voices (e.g., young people out of area, seeking asylum, in custody, or with disabilities) can be included. Professionals are encouraged to support young people who need help in completing the survey, but local authorities are also advised to avoid using foster carers, social workers, and leaving care workers as many of the survey questions ask about those relationships. Twice weekly response rates are shared with the local authority to keep them on track and make them aware of how effectively the survey is being distributed. Young people complete the survey anonymously: individual identifiers such as names and locations are not collected. Once the survey has closed and results analysed each local authority is provided with a bespoke report on an analysis covering their local cohort. Follow-up meetings to disseminate the findings and explore how they can inform services are held

7.1.5 Categorising well-being

ONS well-being questions were not used in surveys for children aged 4-10 years. Instead, we used the question 'how happy were you yesterday?' as a proxy for well-being. Children who answered, 'Quite unhappy' or 'Very unhappy' were scored as 'unhappy'. For young people aged 11-17yrs low well-being was calculated using the four well-being scales: overall life satisfaction, happiness yesterday, doing things in life that have meaning, and positivity about your future. Young people who scored low (0-4) on any two of the four scales were classified as having low well-being. Young people who scored 9-10 on any two of the four scales were classified as having very high well-being. We defined well-being like this to ensure that a high or low rating on one scale did not unduly influence the percentage we then categorised as having high or low well-being. For care leavers, low well-being was calculated using four well-being scales: overall life satisfaction, happiness yesterday, doing things in life that have meaning, and feelings of anxiety. Care leavers who scored low (0-4) on any two of the four scales (for anxiety the equivalent was scoring high, 6-10) were classified as having low well-being and those who scored 9-10 on any two scales (for anxiety the equivalent was scoring very low, 0-1) were classified as having very high well-being.

7.2 Demographics and representativeness

7.2.1 Response rates

11,104 care experienced children and young people responded to the surveys between 2021 and 2024 from an eligible population of 30,106.

Table 11: Response rate by care status

| Age range | Eligible care population in LAs surveyed <i>n</i> | Bright Spots survey Responses <i>n</i> | Response rate % |
|----------------------------------|---|--|--------------------|
| Children in care (4-18 years) | 16,355 | 5,787 | 35% |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|-----|
| Care leavers (16-25+ years) | 13,751 | 5,317 | 39% |
| Total | 30,106 | 11,104 | 37% |

7.2.2 Age

There was an almost even split of survey responses from children in care (5,787, 52%) and care leavers (5,317, 48%). Data on age was available for 97% of the sample (n=10,811).

Table 12: Breakdown of current and comparative dataset by age group and total number of local authorities

| | Comparative data set (2017-2020) | Current data set (2021-2024) | Total |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------|
| Children in care: 4-7 years | 1,008 | 826 | 1,834 |
| Children in care: 8-10 years | 1,664 | 1,356 | 3,020 |
| Children in care: 11-17 years | 3,963 | 3,605 | 7,568 |
| Care leaver: 16-25+ | 3,040 | 5,317 | 8,357 |
| Number of Local authorities | 46 | 43 | 66 |
| Total | 9,675 | 11,104 | 20,781 |

7.2.3 Geographic distribution

The current dataset (n=11,104) contains responses from children and young people in 43 local authorities. In nine of these local authorities, Bright Spots was used across multiple years between 2021 and 2024. These 43 local authorities were in 11 regions across England, Scotland, and Wales (regions in Scotland and Wales are grouped as national categories to protect the anonymity of local authorities that took part) as shown in Table 13. There was a reasonable spread across regions in England, Scotland, and Wales. However, there no surveys were delivered in this period in the East Midlands.

Table 13 Region of children and young people by age group

| Region | 4-7 years | 8-10 years | 11-18 years | Care leavers | Total |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Channel Islands | ⁻⁶² (0%) | - (0%) | - (1%) | - (1%) | - (1%) |
| East of England | 90 (11%) | 180 (13%) | 509 (14%) | 871 (16%) | 1,650 (15%) |
| London | 74 (9%) | 120 (9%) | 486 (13%) | 794 (15%) | 1,474 (13%) |
| North East | 23 (3%) | 49 (4%) | 85 (2%) | 49 (1%) | 206 (2%) |
| North West | 47 (6%) | 62 (5%) | 154 (4%) | 542 (10%) | 805 (7%) |
| Scotland | 169 (20%) | 245 (18%) | 473 (13%) | 428 (8%) | 1,315 (12%) |

⁶² Values suppressed due to low counts.

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| South East | 158 (19%) | 296 (22%) | 756 (21%) | 990 (19%) | 2,200 (20%) |
| South West | 69 (8%) | 131 (10%) | 457 (13%) | 836 (16%) | 1,493 (13%) |
| Wales | 9 (1%) | 12 (1%) | 40 (1%) | 46 (1%) | 107 (1%) |
| West Midlands | 135 (16%) | 192 (14%) | 466 (13%) | 378 (7%) | 1,171 (11%) |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 50 (6%) | 67 (5%) | 153 (4%) | 319 (6%) | 589 (5%) |

7.2.4 Gender

Boys/males were slightly underrepresented: 52% in our sample⁶³ compared with 56% in the national care population in England⁶⁴. Equivalent national data is not available for care leavers.

Table 14: Sex of children and young people by age group

| Age | Boys/Male | Girls/Female | Other 'Let me tell you' | Prefer not to say | Missing | Total |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------|----------|---------------|
| 4-7 years | 419 (51%) | 402 (49%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 5 (1%) | 826 (100%) |
| 8-10 years | 676 (50%) | 650 (48%) | 0 (0%) | 21 (2%) | 9 (1%) | 1,356 (100%) |
| 11-18 years | 1,891 (52%) | 1,570 (44%) | 49 (1%) | 65 (2%) | 30 (1%) | 3,605 (100%) |
| Care leavers | 2,576 (48%) | 2,418 (45%) | 89 (2%) | 100 (2%) | 134 (3%) | 5,317 (100%) |
| Total | 5,562 (50%) | 5,040 (45%) | 138 (1%) | 186 (2%) | 178 (2%) | 11,104 (100%) |

7.2.5 Ethnicity

Most children and young people responding to Bright Spots were White (73%⁶⁵). This is similar to the proportion reported nationally for children in care in England (73%)⁶⁶. Nationally, 7% of children in care are black, 5% are Asian, 11% were from mixed/multiple ethnic groups, and 4% were from other ethnic groups⁶⁷. Equivalent national data is not available for care leavers.

⁶³ Percentage excluding 'prefer not to say' and missing responses.

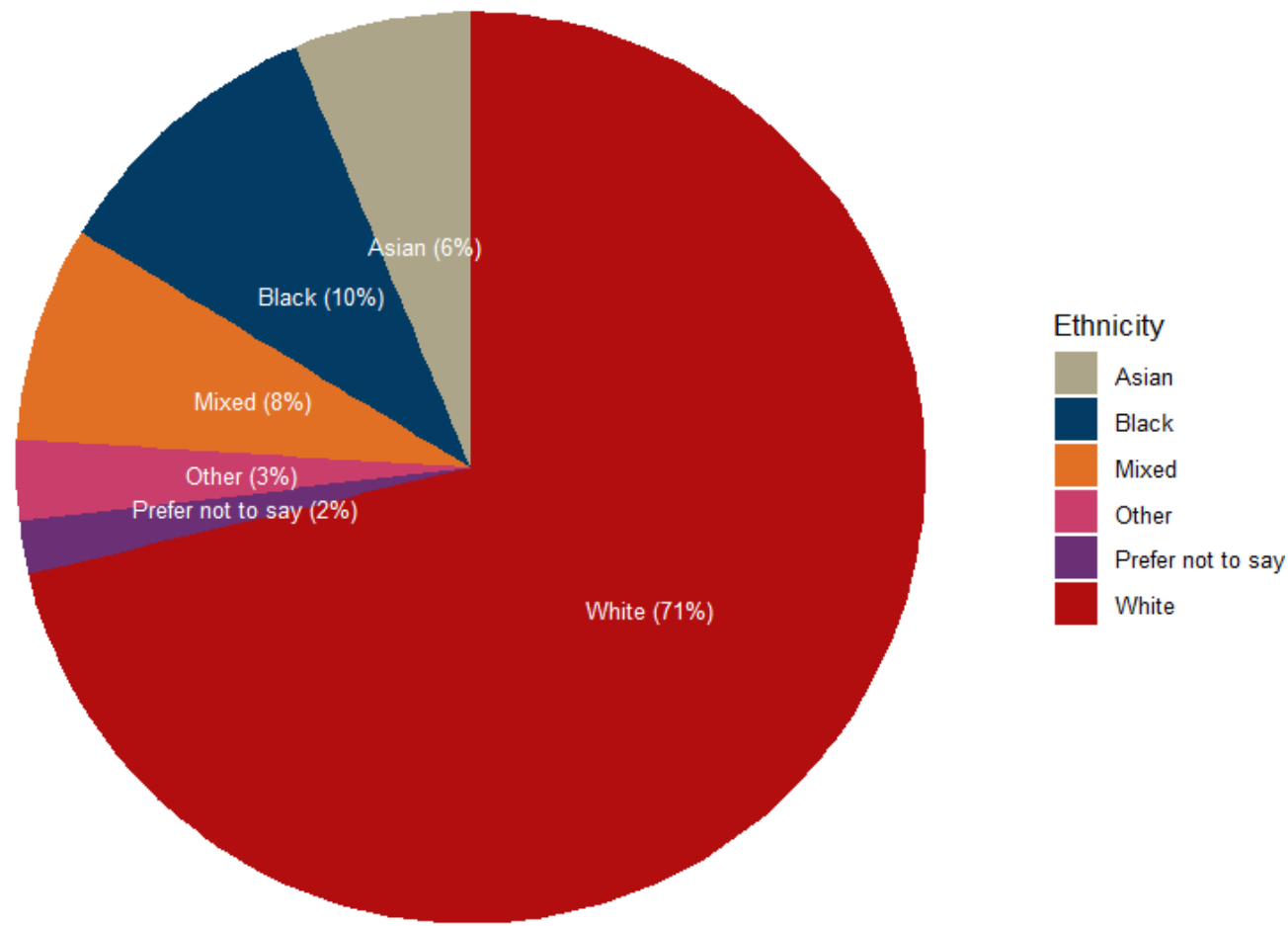
⁶⁴ Taken from Department for Education's Children looked after in England including adoptions dataset for years 2021, 2022, and 2023 (Department for Education, 2024).

⁶⁵ Percentage excluding 'prefer not to say' and missing responses.

⁶⁶ Taken from Department for Education's Children looked after in England including adoptions dataset for years 2021, 2022, and 2023 (Department for Education, 2024).

⁶⁷ Low rates of missing/refused data mean that these percentages are the same as a proportion of all responses and as a proportion of all responses less missing/refused.

Figure 41: Ethnicity of children and young people (n=10,907)



However, this proportion varied across age groups, as shown in Table 15 - 82% of primary school aged respondents were White compared with 75% of secondary school aged respondents and 67% of care leavers. Data on ethnicity by age is not available nationally so more nuanced comparisons cannot be made.

Table 15: Ethnicity of children and young people by age group

| Ethnicity | 4-7 years | 8-10 years | 11-18 years | Care leavers | Total |
|-----------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Asian | 12 (1%) | 28 (2%) | 172 (5%) | 474 (9%) | 686 (6%) |
| Black | 47 (6%) | 59 (4%) | 283 (8%) | 707 (14%) | 1,096 (10%) |
| Mixed | 87 (11%) | 135 (10%) | 330 (9%) | 285 (6%) | 837 (8%) |
| White | 659 (81%) | 1,094 (82%) | 2,644 (75%) | 3,374 (64%) | 7,771 (73%) |
| Other | 12 (1%) | 12 (1%) | 105 (3%) | 159 (3%) | 313 (3%) |
| Total | 817 (100%) | 1,328 (100%) | 3,534 (100%) | 5,317 (100%) | 10,703 (100%) |

Ethnicity of respondents is related to the region in which the survey was conducted. In all regions except for London the majority of respondents were White (compared with Globalised majority ethnic groups). In London, 67% of respondents were from Globalised Majority ethnic groups; 27% were Black, 17% were Asian, 23% were from Mixed or other ethnic groups.

7.2.6 Where children in care and care leavers live

Children in care (n=5,740) and care leavers (n=5,255) also provided information on where they lived. Most children and young people in care were in foster placements. Younger children were more likely to live with their parent(s) and family or friends, compared with older young people. Conversely, older young people were more like to live in a residential home and 'other' forms of accommodation compared with younger children.

Table 16: Placement types of children and young people by age group

| Placement type | 4-7 years | 8-10 years | 11-18 years | Total |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Family or friends | 226 (27%) | 274 (20%) | 438 (12%) | 938 (16%) |
| Foster carer(s) | 486 (59%) | 897 (66%) | 2,070 (57%) | 3,453 (60%) |
| Parent(s) | 81 (10%) | 85 (6%) | 147 (4%) | 313 (5%) |
| Residential home | 12 (1%) | 82 (6%) | 580 (16%) | 674 (12%) |
| Other | 18 (2%) | 9 (1%) | 335 (9%) | 362 (6%) |
| Missing | 3 (0%) | 9 (1%) | 35 (1%) | 47 (1%) |
| Total | 826 (100%) | 1,356 (100%) | 3,605 (100%) | 5,787 (100%) |

Table 17: Living arrangement of care leavers

| Living arrangement | Care leavers |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| With parent(s) or family | 466 (9%) |
| With foster carer(s) | 553 (10%) |
| Supported accommodation | 806 (15%) |

| | |
|---|--------------|
| Supported lodgings | 220 (4%) |
| College or university halls | 163 (3%) |
| Flat or house I own | 77 (1%) |
| Flat or house I rent | 2,365 (44%) |
| Short stay/emergency accommodation | 103 (2%) |
| Homeless | 114 (2%) |
| In custody | 33 (1%) |
| Other | 354 (7%) |
| Missing | 62 (1%) |
| Total | 5,317 (100%) |

7.2.7 Length of time in care

Children in care and care leavers also provided information on the length of time they were in care. Different response options were used for children in care and care leavers, so results are reported separately.

Figure 42: Time in care for children and young people in care by age group (n=5,737)

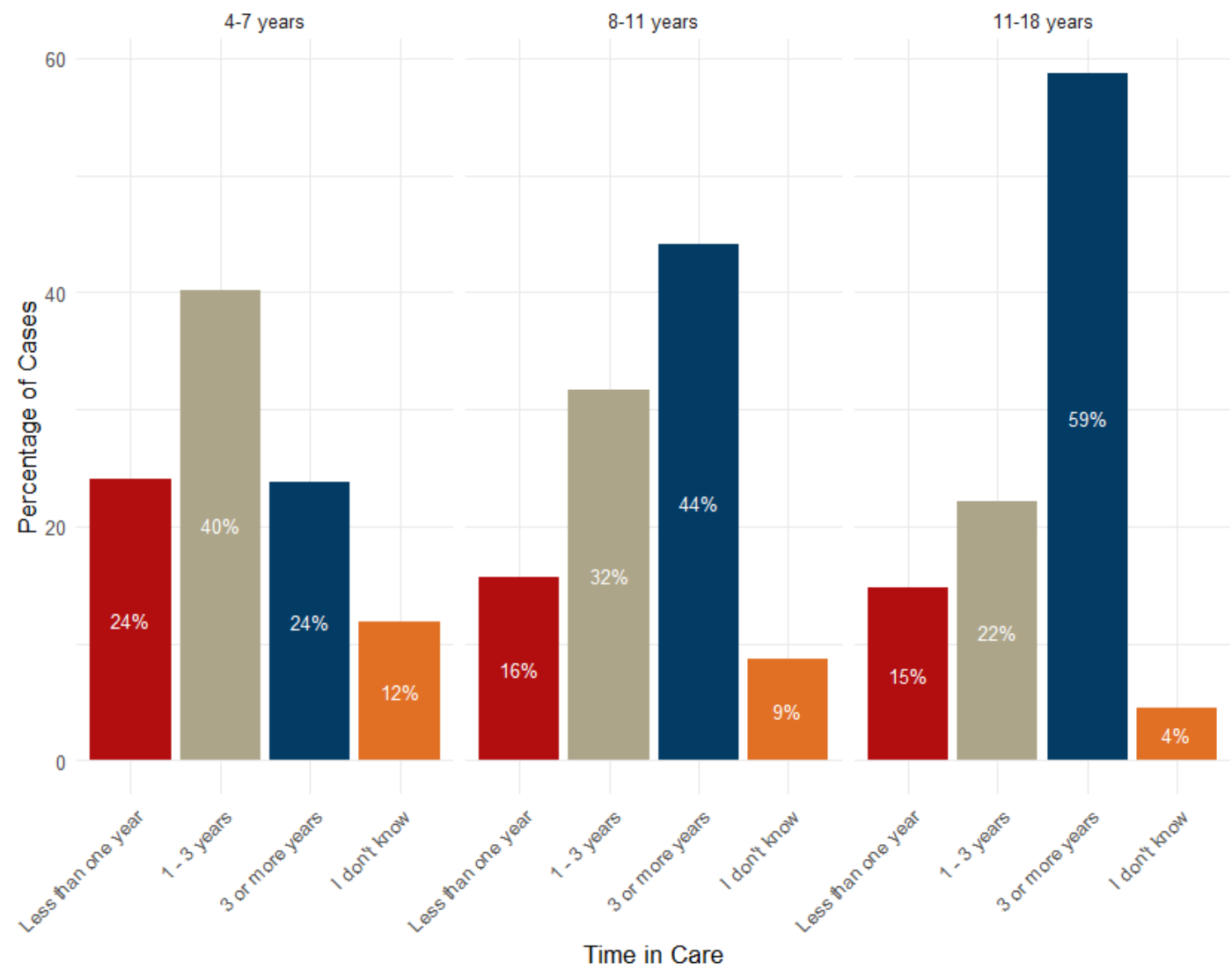
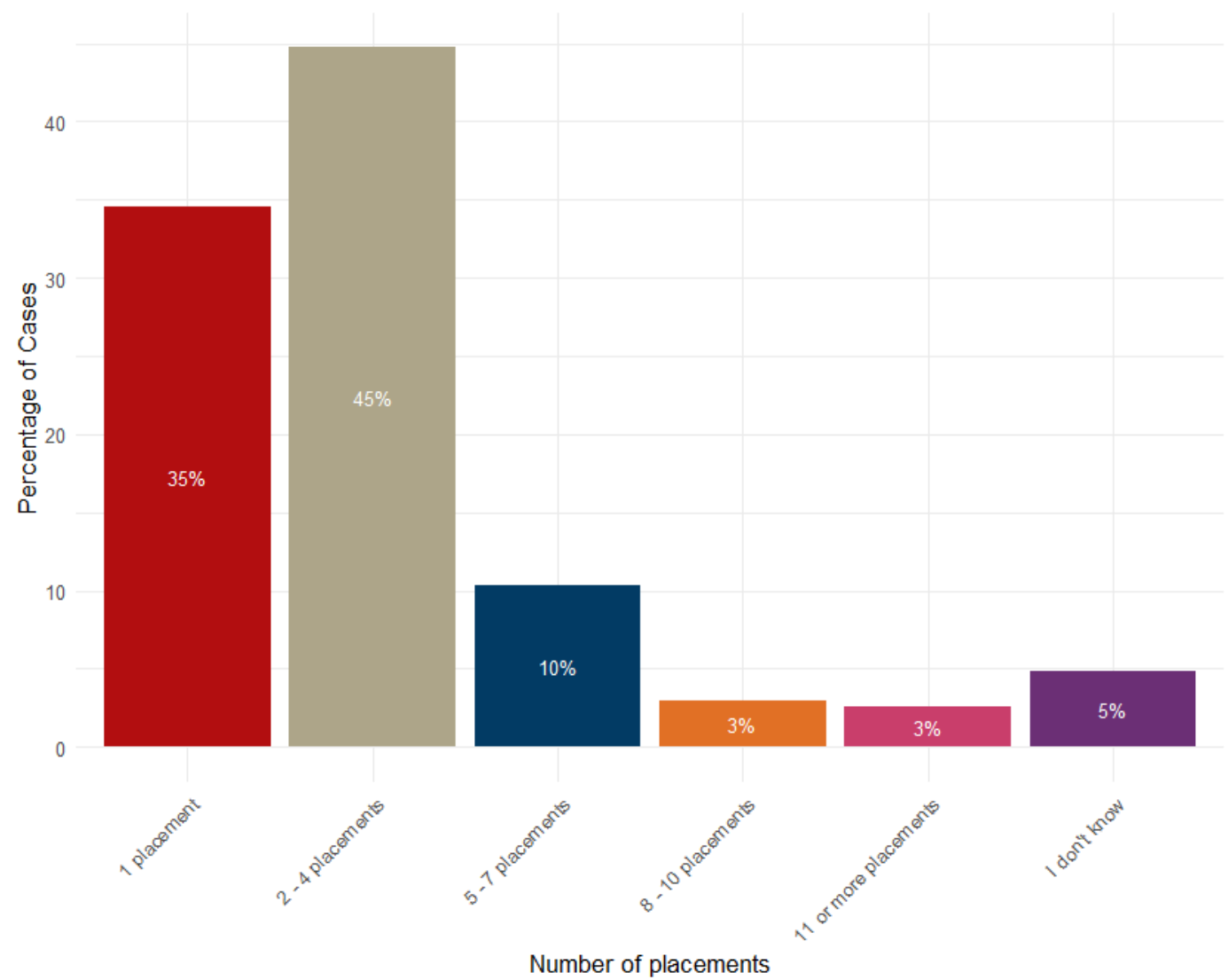


Table 18: Time in care for care leavers

| Time spent in care | Care leavers |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Less than a year | 293 (6%) |
| 1 - 3 years | 1,620 (30%) |
| 4 - 7 years | 1,523 (29%) |
| More than 7 years | 1,556 (29%) |
| I don't know | 300 (6%) |
| Missing | 25 (0%) |
| Total | 5,317 (100%) |

7.2.8 Number of placements

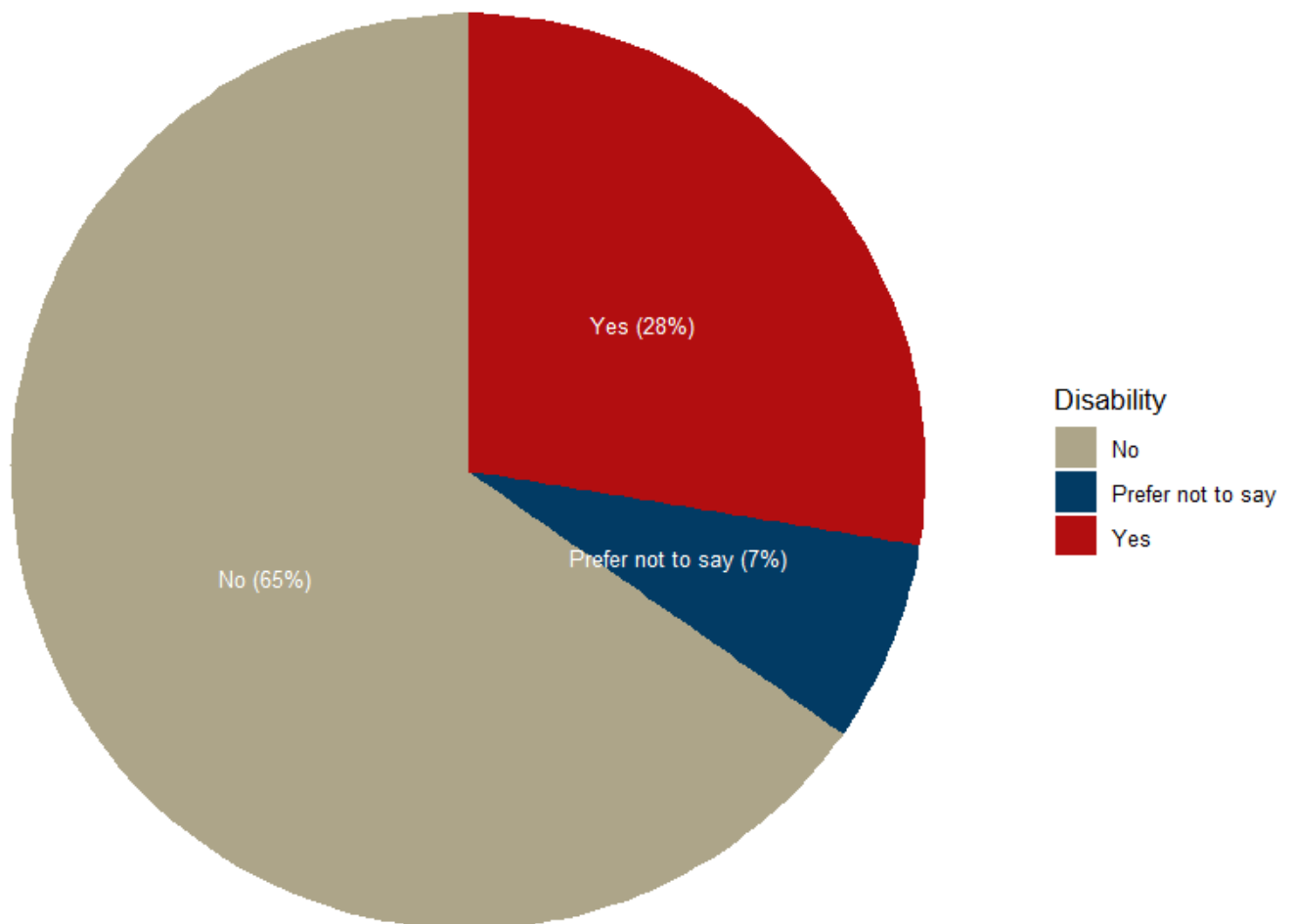
Figure 43: Number of placements for children in care aged 11-18 years old (n=3,576)



7.2.9 Disability or Long-term health problem

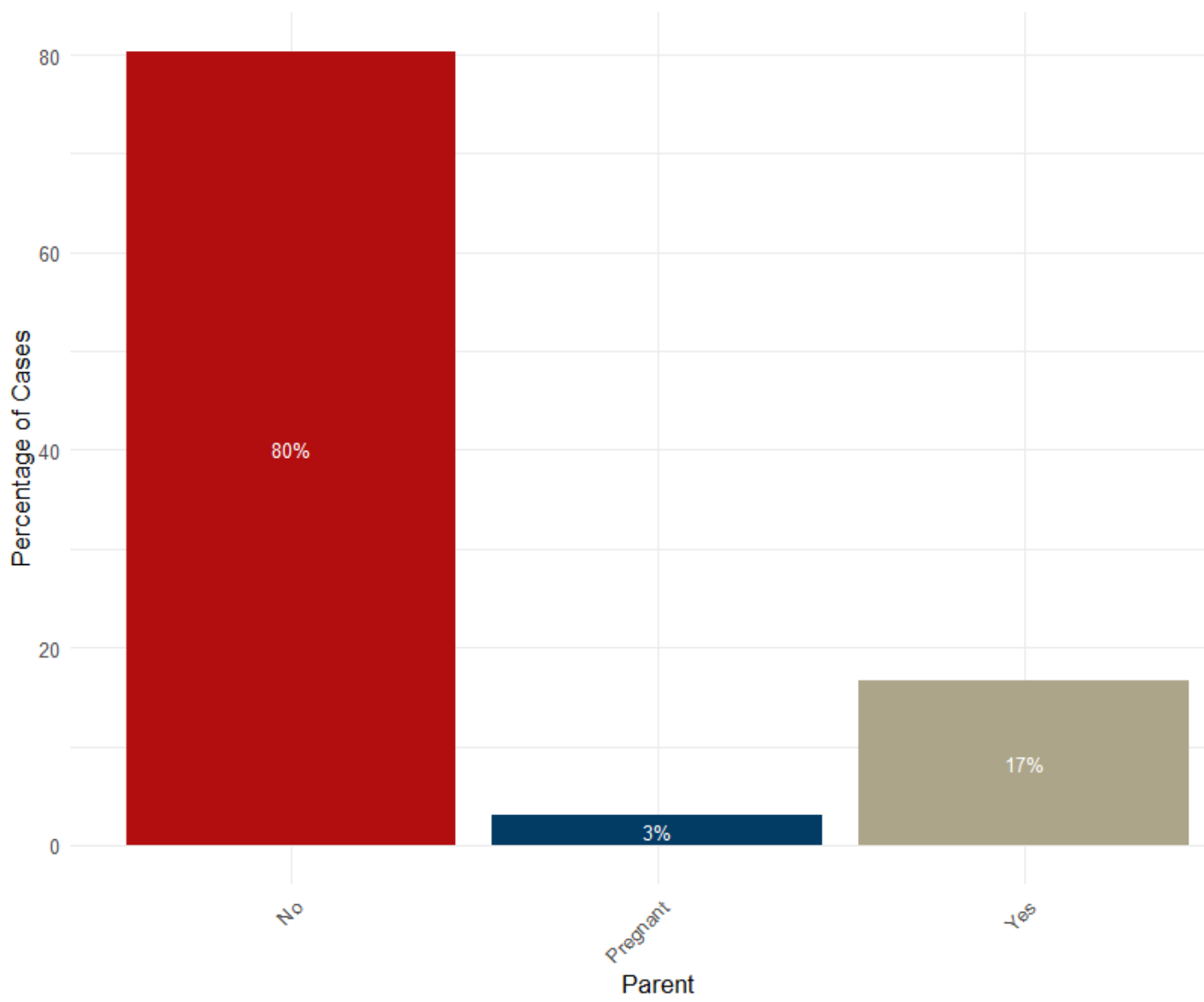
Care leavers were asked whether they had a disability or long-term health problem that limits their day-to-day activities. Most care leavers reported that they did not have a disability (70% excluding prefer not to say), whereas 30% (excluding prefer not to say) did have a disability.

Figure 44: Proportion of care leavers by disability /long-term health problem status



7.2.10 Partners / being a parent

Figure 45: Whether care leavers were parents, pregnant (or their partner was pregnant), or were not parents (n=5,227)



7.3 Personal Well-being data

7.3.1 Personal well-being data tables 2021-24

Table 19: Life satisfaction and happiness of children in care age 11-18 and care leavers age 16-25

| Rating | Life satisfaction | | | | Happiness yesterday | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------|--------------|------|---------------------|------|--------------|------|
| | Children in care | | Care leavers | | Children in care | | Care leavers | |
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| 0-4 low | 499 | 14% | 1,489 | 29% | 572 | 16% | 1,398 | 27% |
| 5-6 medium | 825 | 23% | 1,542 | 30% | 781 | 22% | 1,479 | 29% |
| 7-8 high | 993 | 28% | 1,306 | 25% | 926 | 27% | 1,277 | 25% |
| 9-10 very high | 1,195 | 34% | 854 | 16% | 1,208 | 35% | 1,030 | 20% |
| Total | 3,512 | 100% | 5,191 | 100% | 3,487 | 100% | 5,184 | 100% |

Table 20: Positivity about the future and feeling the things you do in life are worthwhile of children in care age 11-18 and care leavers age 16-25

| Rating | Positivity about future | | | | Things do worthwhile | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|------|--------------|------|----------------------|------|--------------|------|
| | Children in care | | Care leavers | | Children in care | | Care leavers | |
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| 0-4 low | 363 | 10% | 1,215 | 23% | 347 | 10% | 1,285 | 25% |
| 5-6 medium | 795 | 23% | 1,319 | 25% | 810 | 24% | 1,523 | 30% |
| 7-8 high | 1,059 | 30% | 1,220 | 24% | 1,061 | 31% | 1,239 | 24% |
| 9-10 very high | 1,261 | 36% | 1,425 | 28% | 1,205 | 35% | 1,099 | 21% |
| Total | 3,478 | 100% | 5,179 | 100% | 3,423 | 100% | 5,146 | 100% |

Table 21: Anxiety yesterday for care leavers

| Rating | Anxiety | |
|---------------------|--------------|------|
| | Care leavers | |
| | Number | % |
| 0-1 very low | 1,335 | 26% |
| 2-3 low | 752 | 14% |
| 4-5 medium | 1,204 | 23% |
| 6-10 high | 1,904 | 37% |
| Total | 5,195 | 100% |

7.3.2 Personal well-being over time – comparison between 2017-20 and 2021-24

7.3.2.1 Life satisfaction

Figure 46: Life satisfaction for secondary school aged children in care (11-18 years) and care leavers in 2017-20 (n=6,413) and 2021-24 (n=8,703)

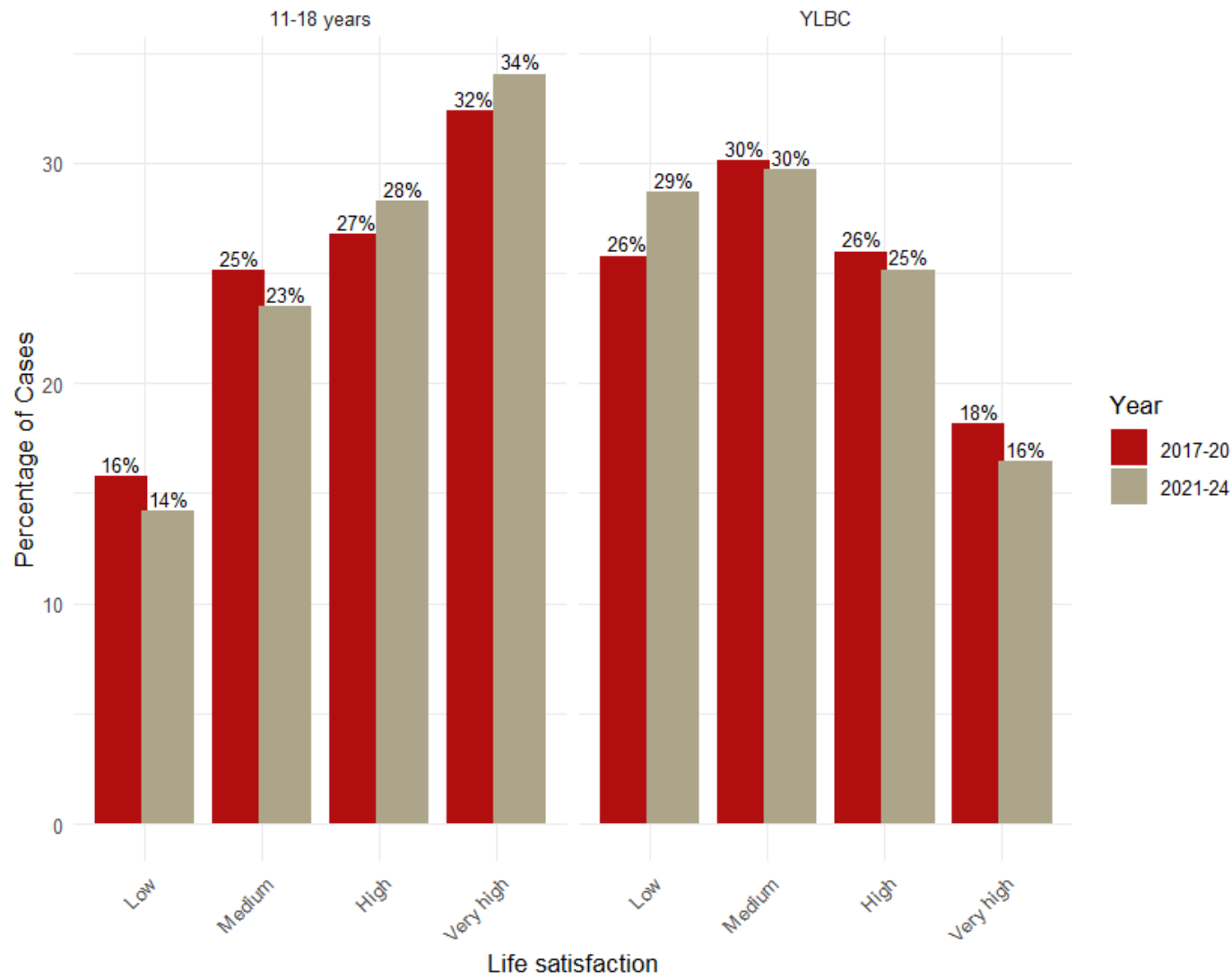
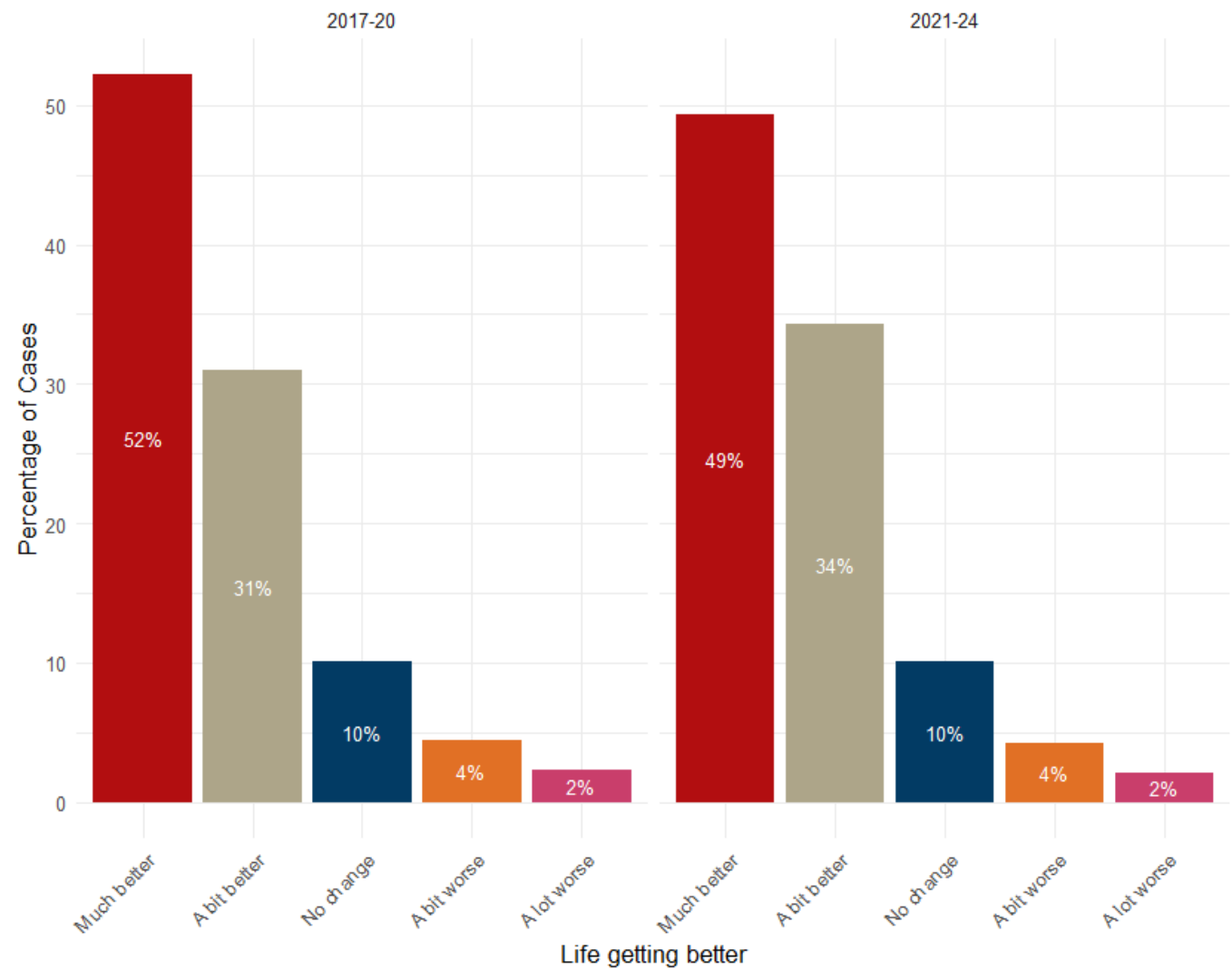


Figure 47: Children in care (8-18 years) feeling that life is getting better by year group (2017-20, 2021-24; n=10,296)



7.3.2.2 Happiness yesterday

Rates of feeling happy yesterday were consistent between 2017-20 and 2021-24 for children aged 8-10 years (75% in 2017-20 and 73% in 2021-24⁶⁸) and 4-7 years (82% in 2017-20 and 79% in 2021-24)⁶⁹.

Figure 48: Happiness yesterday for primary school aged children in care (4-10 years) in 2017-20 (n=965) and 2021-24 (n=814)

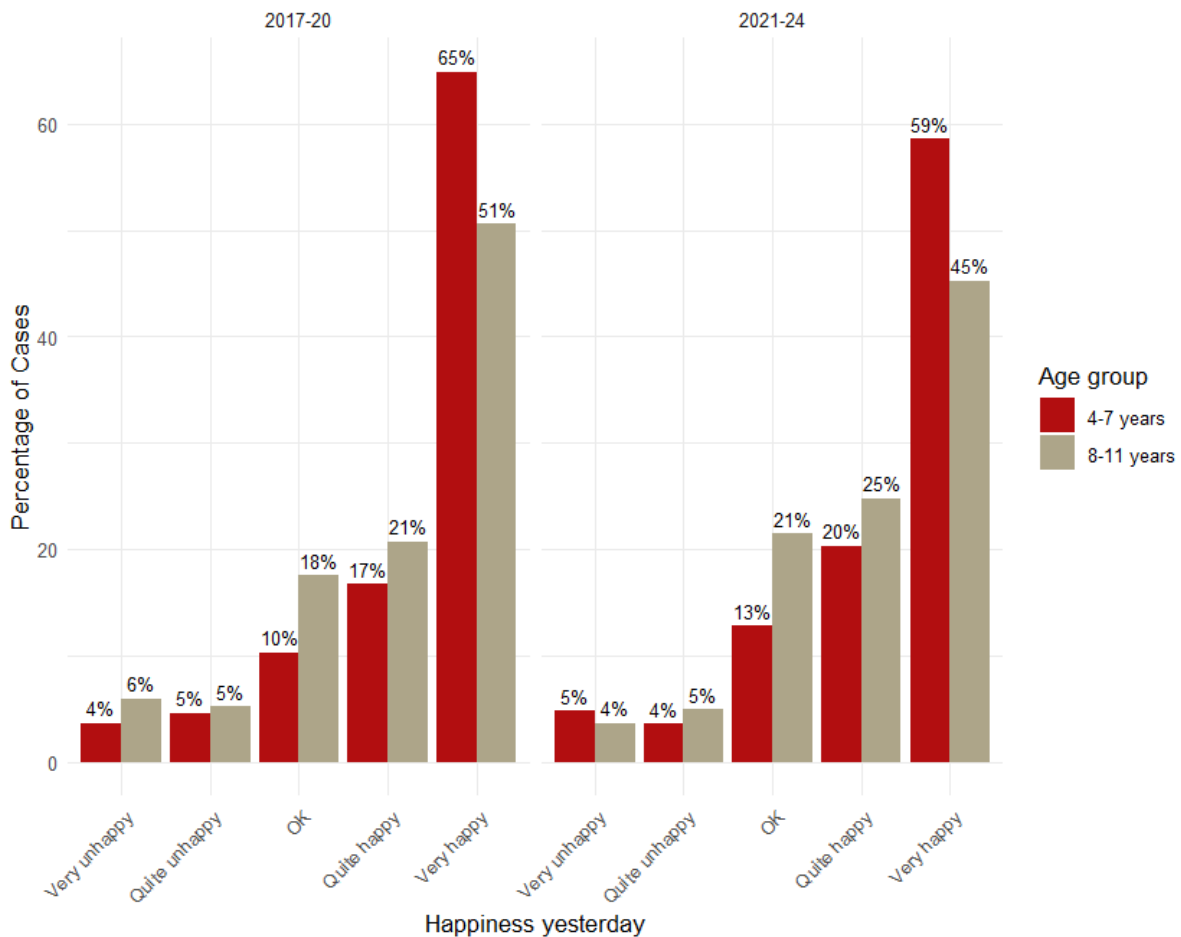
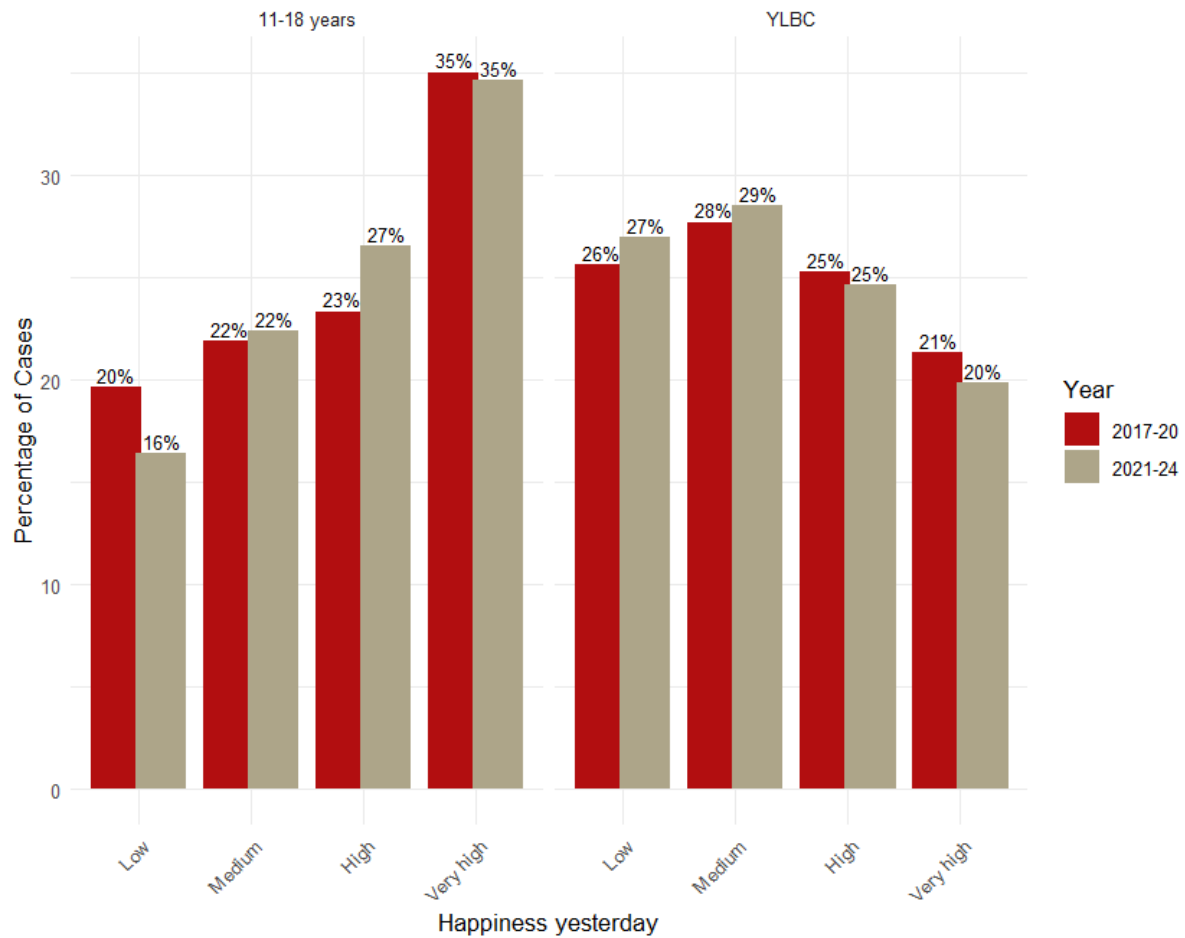


Figure 49: Happiness yesterday for secondary school aged children in care (11-18 years) and care leavers in 2017-20 (n=6,419) and 2021-24 (n=8,671)

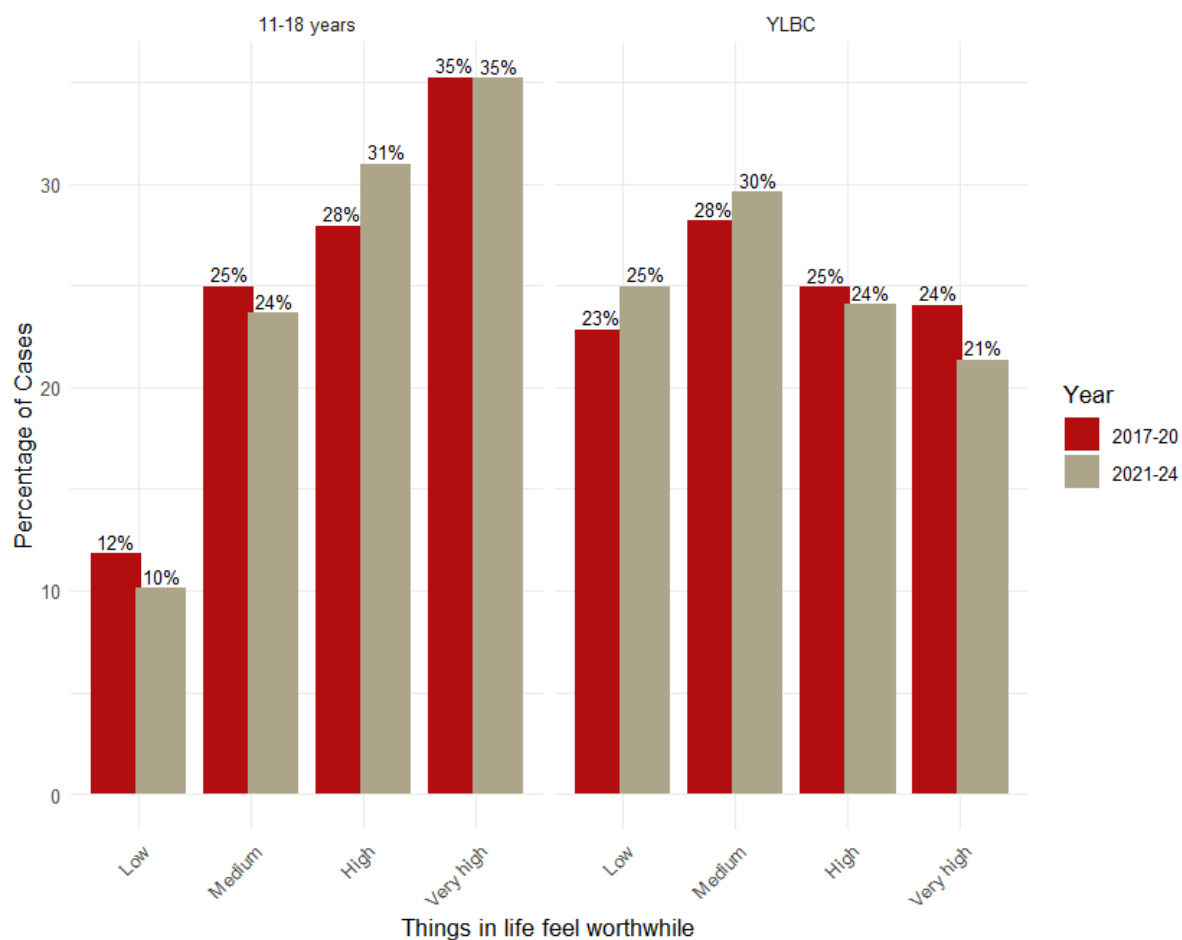
⁶⁸ $\chi^2(1, 4,730) = 1.92, p=0.17$

⁶⁹ $\chi^2(1, 1,779) = 1.85, p=0.17$



7.3.2.3 Things do worthwhile

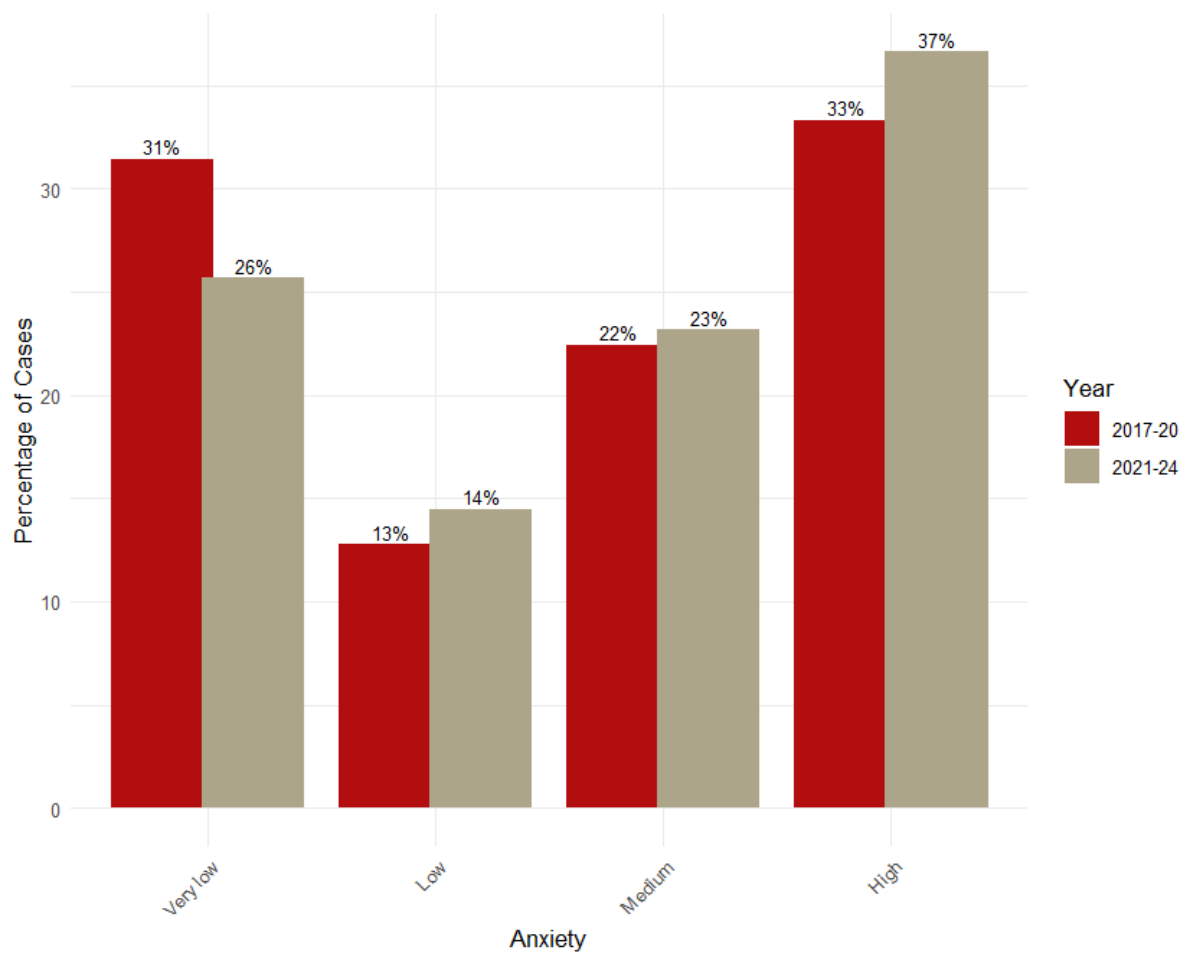
Figure 50: Feeling that things are worthwhile for secondary school aged children in care (11-18 years) and care leavers in 2017-20 (n=6,334) and 2021-24 (n=8,569)



7.3.2.4 Anxiety

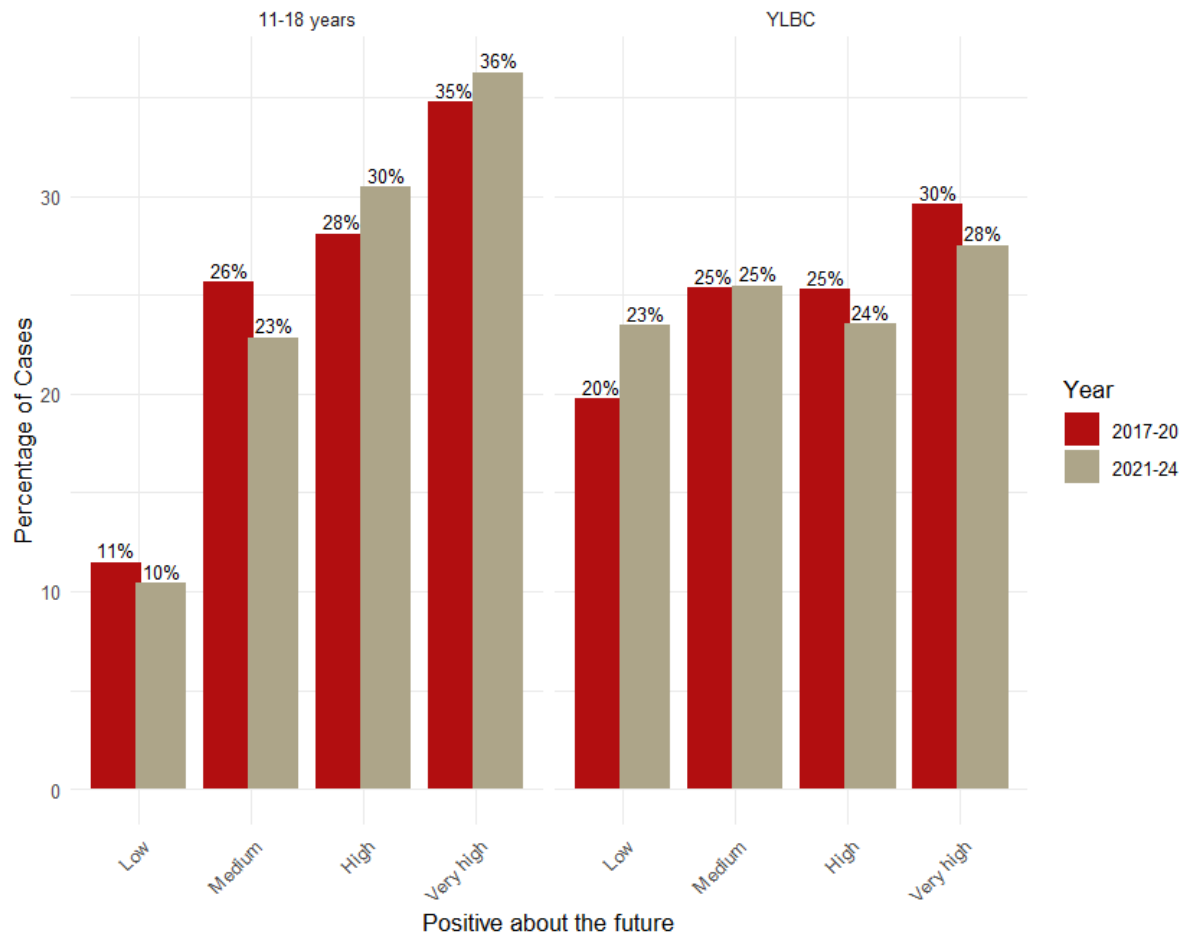
36% of care leavers in 2021-24 had high anxiety, compared with 33% in 2017-20. Similarly, 40% of care leavers in 2021-24 had either 'low' or 'very low' anxiety, compared with 44% of care leavers in 2017-20.

Figure 51: Anxiety for care leavers in 2017-20 (n=2,847) and 2021-24 (n=5,195)



7.3.2.5 Positivity about the future

Figure 52: Positivity about future for secondary school aged children in care (11-18 years) and care leavers in 2017-20 (n=6,364) and 2021-24 (n=8,657)



7.3.2.6 Well-being changes over time in the general population

Data on well-being over time for adults is available from the Office for National Statistics, drawing on their Annual Population Survey. The latest annual data set (ONS, 2023) included changes over time in adult well-being since 2011/12.

Figure 2: The proportion of people reporting poor well-being increased in the year ending March 2023

Proportion of people reporting different well-being thresholds for life satisfaction, worthwhile, happiness or anxiety in the UK, year ending March 2012 to March 2023

Notes 1. Please see the glossary for information on the threshold grouping of ratings

Unit %

| | Life Satisfaction | | | | Worthwhile | | | | Happiness | | | | Anxiety | | | |
|---------|-------------------|--------|-------|-----------|------------|--------|-------|-----------|-----------|--------|-------|-----------|----------|-------|--------|--------|
| | Low | Medium | High | Very High | Low | Medium | High | Very High | Low | Medium | High | Very High | Very Low | Low | Medium | High |
| | 0 - 4 | 5 - 6 | 7 - 8 | 9 - 10 | 0 - 4 | 5 - 6 | 7 - 8 | 9 - 10 | 0 - 4 | 5 - 6 | 7 - 8 | 9 - 10 | 0 - 1 | 2 - 3 | 4 - 5 | 6 - 10 |
| 2011/12 | 6.51 | 17.44 | 49.83 | 26.22 | 4.77 | 15.04 | 48.73 | 31.47 | 10.74 | 18.03 | 39.34 | 31.90 | 36.70 | 23.56 | 18.05 | 21.69 |
| 2012/13 | 5.71 | 17.10 | 51.15 | 26.03 | 4.34 | 14.81 | 49.46 | 31.39 | 10.26 | 17.97 | 40.70 | 31.06 | 38.10 | 23.48 | 17.58 | 20.85 |
| 2013/14 | 5.54 | 15.92 | 51.62 | 26.92 | 4.20 | 13.93 | 49.18 | 32.69 | 9.62 | 16.99 | 40.69 | 32.70 | 39.57 | 23.75 | 16.74 | 19.93 |
| 2014/15 | 4.74 | 14.81 | 51.70 | 28.75 | 3.78 | 12.84 | 49.02 | 34.35 | 8.87 | 16.59 | 40.44 | 34.10 | 40.92 | 23.23 | 16.49 | 19.36 |
| 2015/16 | 4.56 | 14.23 | 52.05 | 29.16 | 3.62 | 12.80 | 49.21 | 34.37 | 8.81 | 16.46 | 40.49 | 34.24 | 40.79 | 23.14 | 16.61 | 19.46 |
| 2016/17 | 4.53 | 13.76 | 51.74 | 29.97 | 3.67 | 12.30 | 48.90 | 35.13 | 8.59 | 16.31 | 40.26 | 34.85 | 40.16 | 23.34 | 16.65 | 19.86 |
| 2017/18 | 4.45 | 13.46 | 52.05 | 30.04 | 3.64 | 12.06 | 48.48 | 35.83 | 8.27 | 16.34 | 40.54 | 34.85 | 40.48 | 23.14 | 16.38 | 19.99 |
| 2018/19 | 4.37 | 13.26 | 51.64 | 30.74 | 3.66 | 12.01 | 48.27 | 36.07 | 7.90 | 15.68 | 41.00 | 35.43 | 40.88 | 23.17 | 16.19 | 19.76 |
| 2019/20 | 4.72 | 13.86 | 51.56 | 29.86 | 3.85 | 12.03 | 48.39 | 35.72 | 8.81 | 16.50 | 40.56 | 34.13 | 38.42 | 22.86 | 16.77 | 21.95 |
| 2020/21 | 6.13 | 17.54 | 52.59 | 23.75 | 4.47 | 13.89 | 50.15 | 31.49 | 9.26 | 18.60 | 42.60 | 29.53 | 33.08 | 24.17 | 18.56 | 24.19 |
| 2021/22 | 5.08 | 15.19 | 53.72 | 26.01 | 4.06 | 13.13 | 50.20 | 32.61 | 8.53 | 16.72 | 42.43 | 32.31 | 35.99 | 24.11 | 17.44 | 22.46 |
| 2022/23 | 5.73 | 16.13 | 53.75 | 24.38 | 4.50 | 13.67 | 49.59 | 32.23 | 8.93 | 17.08 | 43.05 | 30.94 | 34.57 | 23.99 | 18.08 | 23.36 |

Source: ONS (2023)

7.3.3 Well-being by age

Table 22: Mean well-being scale scores by age (2021-24)⁷⁰

| Well-being measure | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25+ | 11-25+ |
|--------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|--------|
| Mean Life Satisfaction | 7.73 | 7.63 | 7.34 | 6.89 | 6.72 | 6.58 | 6.68 | 5.83 | 5.70 | 5.85 | 5.64 | 5.60 | 5.50 | 5.64 | 5.57 | 6.26 |
| Mean Happiness Yesterday | 7.60 | 7.35 | 7.20 | 6.92 | 6.65 | 6.53 | 6.83 | 5.99 | 6.00 | 6.12 | 5.78 | 5.62 | 5.50 | 5.84 | 6.10 | 6.35 |
| Mean Things you do worthwhile | 8.11 | 7.76 | 7.48 | 7.20 | 6.87 | 6.77 | 6.99 | 6.08 | 5.99 | 6.07 | 6.02 | 5.94 | 5.91 | 6.13 | 6.15 | 6.53 |
| Mean Anxiety | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 3.73 | 3.61 | 4.07 | 4.29 | 4.18 | 4.46 | 4.79 | 4.93 | 4.61 | 4.42 | 4.32 |
| Mean Positivity about future | 7.81 | 7.68 | 7.44 | 7.31 | 6.95 | 6.98 | 7.02 | 6.38 | 6.40 | 6.43 | 6.25 | 6.12 | 5.98 | 6.20 | 6.37 | 6.71 |
| Mean Happiness with appearance | 7.44 | 7.53 | 7.21 | 6.87 | 6.73 | 6.52 | 6.76 | 5.74 | 5.71 | 5.73 | 5.70 | 5.10 | 5.00 | 5.26 | 5.55 | 6.17 |

7.4 Well-being compared to the general population

| <div>Table 1: Percentage of children in care and care leavers in the population aged 16-19, 20-24 and 25+ in 2021-24</div> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--|---|-----|------|---------|----------------------------------|------|--|-----|---|-----|--|---------|------------------------------|------|-------------------------------|-----|------|---------|-----|
| | | General population ⁷¹ (10-17) 2024 | | | | Children in care (11-17) 2021-24 | | General population (16-19) ⁷² 2022-2023 | | Children in care and care leavers (16-19) 2021-24 | | General population (20-24) ⁷³ 2022-23 | | Care leavers (20-24) 2021-24 | | Care leavers (16-25+) 2021-24 | | | | |
| | | Average | Low | High | Average | Low | High | Average | Low | Average | Low | High | Average | Low | High | Average | Low | High | Average | Low |

⁷⁰ In this table, young people aged 16-18 includes both children in care and care leavers.

⁷¹ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/Good%20Childhood%20Report-Main-Report.pdf> . Latest ONS measures of overall well-being for children aged 10 to 17, p.26, Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 23, April to June 2024, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/well-being/datasets/childrenswell-beingmeasures>

⁷² Source: ONS (2023) Annual personal well-being estimates: Individual characteristics and circumstances edition of this dataset - Available at
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/well-being/datasets/headlineestimatesofpersonalwell-being>

⁷³ Source: ONS (2023) Annual personal well-being estimates: Individual characteristics and circumstances edition of this dataset - Available at
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/well-being/datasets/headlineestimatesofpersonalwell-being>

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----|----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|------|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|
| Life satisfaction | 7.6 | 6% | 7.03 | 14% | 7.5 | 5% | | 6.13 | 24% | | 7.4 | 4% | | 5.69 | 29% | | 5.73 | 29% | |
| Happiness | 7.7 | 6% | 6.95 | 16% | 7.3 | 8% | | 6.29 | 23% | | 7.2 | 8% | | 5.84 | 28% | | 5.94 | 27% | |
| Worthwhile | 7.7 | 6% | 7.26 | 10% | 7.5 | 5% | | 6.39 | 21% | | 7.5 | 5% | | 6.02 | 25% | | 6.04 | 25% | |
| Anxiety | | | NA | NA | 3.3 | 55% | 25% | 4.12 | | 33% | 3.5 | | 24% | 4.49 | | 39% | 4.32 | | 37% |
| Positive about future | | | 7.28 | 10% | | | | 6.64 | 19% | | | | | 6.25 | 24% | | 6.32 | 24% | |
| Happiness with appearance | | | 7.01 | 15% | | | | 6.11 | 27% | | | | | 5.48 | | | 5.59 | 34% | |

7.5 Regression analysis

7.5.1 Methods

We used logistic regression models to examine the odds of care experienced children being in a low well-being (unhappy for children aged 4-10 years) or very high well-being category based on their responses to other Bright Spots survey questions. The data was cleaned so that cases with missing predictor variables were removed. It was not possible to calculate low well-being for the youngest age group (4-10 years) without omitting almost all variables as predictors in the regression model. Therefore, we instead used happiness yesterday as the outcome variable in this model, where children were scored as 'unhappy' if they answered 'Quite unhappy', or 'Very unhappy' to the question 'How happy did you feel yesterday?'. For secondary-school aged young people (11-18 years) and care leavers, the well-being categorisations are described in the Methods on page X.

A number of predictor variables could not be used in the primary school aged regression model (4-10 years), as the questions were not asked in both in the surveys for younger (4-7 years) and older (8-10 years) children. A number of predictor variables were also not included in the 11-18-year-old (such as worrying about feelings) and the care leaver regression model (such as feeling full of energy) as they were seen as too integral to the construct of well-being. We also reviewed the variance inflation factor (VIF) to check for multicollinearity amongst the predictors, and two predictors were excluded from the care leaver model on this basis. There was only one linear predictor (age) and linearity was assessed graphically and the inclusion of an interaction term. For the 11-18-year-old high well-being model, age was transformed into two categories as the linearity assumption was violated. Some questions were not included as predictors as they were dependent questions and would have excluded cases from the model e.g., receiving help for bullying. Some questions were not included as there were too many response options that could not be collapsed into meaningful categories. The tables below show which

questions were used as predictors of well-being and how these were grouped as categorical variables in the regression models, as well as reasons predictors were not included in the models.

We used stepwise selection to arrive at our final models outlined below using the step() function in R, which iteratively evaluates models by adding or removing predictors based on the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC). We used this approach as it balances model fit and complexity, selecting the model with the lowest AIC as the optimal trade-off between explanatory power and parsimony. In the main body of the report, we report odds ratios for only the significant predictors in each of these final models.

7.5.1.1 Variables included as predictors in the 4–10-year-old regression model

| Variable | Inclusion in model | Reasons | Categories | Excluded from model |
|------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--|----------------------------|
| Sex | Yes | | Male, Female | Missing, Prefer not to say |
| Age | Yes | | Numeric | Missing |
| Ethnicity | Yes | | White, BAME | Missing |
| Location | Yes | | Family/Parents, Residential home, Foster carers, Other | Missing |
| Time in care | Yes | | Less than one year, More than one year/I don't know | Missing |
| Like bedroom | Yes | | Mostly yes, Mostly no | Missing |
| Settled in home | Yes | | Yes (always), No (sometimes/hardly ever/never) | Missing |
| Safe in home | Yes | | Yes (always), No (sometimes/hardly ever/never) | Missing |
| Pet | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Care explanation | Yes | | Explained (yes), Not fully explained (no) | Missing |
| Know social worker | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Trust social worker | Yes | | Always (yes), Sometimes/hardly ever/never (no, don't know social worker) | Missing |
| Trust carers | Yes | | Always/sometimes (yes), Hardly ever/never (no) | Missing |
| Adults notice feelings | Yes | | Always/sometimes (yes), Hardly ever/never (no) | Missing |
| Like school | Yes | | A lot/bit (yes), Not very much/at all (no) | Missing |
| Have fun weekends | Yes | | Always/sometimes (yes), Hardly ever/never (no) | Missing |
| Good friend | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |

| | | | | |
|---------------------------|----|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Happy yesterday | No | Used as indicator of well-being | | |
| See Mum | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| See Dad | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| See siblings | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Worry about feelings | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Help for worries | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Life getting better | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Trusted person | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Adults interest in school | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Speak social worker alone | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Say in decisions | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Bullying | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Help for bullying | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Help teacher | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |
| Time outdoors | No | Not in 4-7 data | | |

7.5.1.2 Variables included as predictors in the 11-18-year-old well-being regression models

| Variable | Inclusion in well-being models | Reasons | Categories | Excluded from model |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------|---|----------------------------|
| Sex | Yes | | Male, Female, Other | Missing, Prefer not to say |
| Age | Yes | | Numeric | Missing |
| Ethnicity | Yes | | BAME, White | Missing |
| Location | Yes | | Family/friends, foster carers, parents, residential home, other | Missing |
| Time in care | Yes | | Less than one year, More than one year/I don't know | Missing |
| Number placements | Yes | | 1 placement, More than one placement/Don't know | Missing |
| Like bedroom | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|--|---------|
| Settled home | Yes | | Always, Sometimes/hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Safe home | Yes | | Always, Sometimes/hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Pet | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Care explanation | Yes | | Explained, Not fully explained | Missing |
| Embarrassed care | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| See Mum | Yes - composite | | Composite (see either parent right, wrong or both passed away) | Missing |
| See Dad | Yes - composite | | Composite (see either parent right, wrong or both passed away) | Missing |
| See siblings | Yes | | Right, Wrong, No siblings/cannot see | Missing |
| Life getting better | No | Too integral to well-being | | |
| Happy appearance | Yes | | Low, Mod/High/Very high | Missing |
| Worry feelings | No | Too integral to well-being | | |
| Help for worries | No | Dependent question | | |
| Trusted adult | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Good friend | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Talk to carers | Yes | | Most days/more than once a week, Less than once a week/Never | Missing |
| Trust carers | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/Never | Missing |
| Carers notice feelings | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Carers interested in school | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/Never, Not in school | Missing |
| Number social workers | Yes | | One, Two or more/None | Missing |
| Know social worker | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Trust social worker | Yes | | Always, Sometimes/Hardly ever/Never/don't know SW | Missing |
| Get in touch social worker | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never/don't know SW | Missing |
| Speak social worker alone | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Included in decisions | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Like school | Yes | | A bit/A lot, Not very much/at all | Missing |

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|------------------------------|---|---------|
| Bullying | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Bullying help | No | Dependent question | | |
| Internet | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Show trusted | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Practice life skills | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Outdoors | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never or Everyday/More than once a week, Once a week/never | Missing |
| Similar friends | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Hobbies | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Satisfied life | No | Scored as part of well-being | | |
| Happy yesterday | No | Scored as part of well-being | | |
| Positive future | No | Scored as part of well-being | | |
| Life worthwhile | No | Scored as part of well-being | | |

7.5.1.3 Variables included as predictors in the care leaver well-being regression models

| Variable | Inclusion in well-being model | Reasons | Categories | Excluded from model |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|---|----------------------------|
| Sex | Yes | | Male, Female, Other | Missing, Prefer not to say |
| Parent | Yes | | Yes (pregnant or parent), No | Missing |
| Ethnicity | Yes | | White, BAME | Missing, Prefer not to say |
| Age | Yes | | 16-20 years, 21+ years | Missing |
| Disability | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing, Prefer not to say |
| Time in care | Yes | | Less than one year, More than one year/I don't know | Missing |
| Care explanation | Yes | | Yes (including like to know more), No | Missing |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---|---|---------|
| Involved pathway planning | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never/don't know/don't have one | Missing |
| Number care workers | Yes | | One, None/two or more | Missing |
| Know care worker | No | Issue of multicollinearity | Yes, No | Missing |
| Get in touch care worker | Yes | | Always, Sometimes/Hardly ever/Never/don't know SW | Missing |
| Trust care worker | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never/don't know SW | Missing |
| Good friend | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Partner | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Pet | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Trusted person | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Person for emotional support | No | Too many options | | |
| Listens | Yes (low) / No (high) | Not included in high well-being model due to masking/borderline multicollinearity issue | Yes, No | Missing |
| Done well | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Believes success | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Location | No | Too many options | | |
| Settled at home | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Safe at home | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Safe neighbourhood | Yes | | Always/sometimes, Hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Live right | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Coping financially | Yes | | Comfortable/getting by, Very/quite difficult | Missing |
| NEET | Yes | | EET, NEET | Missing |
| Why NEET | No | Free text | | |
| Doing in spare time | No | Too many options | | |
| Internet | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |
| Smartphone | Yes | | Yes, No | Missing |

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|---|---------|
| Full of energy | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Optimistic | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Proud | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Angry | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Lonely | Yes | | Often/always, Sometimes/hardly ever/never | Missing |
| Afraid | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Control important things | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Handle personal problems | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Going your way | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Difficulties piling up | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |
| Anxiety | No | Scored as part of well-being | | |
| Happy appearance | Yes | | Medium/high, low | Missing |
| Life satisfaction | No | Scored as part of well-being | | |
| Life worthwhile | No | Scored as part of well-being | | |
| Happy yesterday | No | Scored as part of well-being | | |
| Positive future | No | Too closely related to well-being | | |

7.5.2 Results

7.5.2.1 Regression model for unhappiness for 4–10-year-olds (n=1,902)

| Indicator | Responses | Regression coefficient | Odds ratio (Expb) | Confidence interval | P (sig) |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------|
| Intercept | | -3.00 | 0.05 | 0.01-0.16 | <0.001 |
| Sex | Female (ref) | | | | |
| | Male | 0.33 | 1.39 | 0.98-1.99 | 0.06 |
| Time in care | Less than one year (ref) | | | | |
| | More than one year / I don't know | 0.37 | 1.45 | 0.96-2.15 | 0.07 |
| Settled at home | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.48 | 1.61 | 1.02-2.50 | 0.04 |
| Safe at home | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.94 | 2.56 | 1.56-4.15 | <0.001 |
| Know social worker | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.52 | 1.68 | 1.00-2.71 | 0.04 |
| Trust carers | No/don't know social worker (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.85 | 2.34 | 0.86-6.19 | 0.09 |
| Adults notice | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.63 | 1.87 | 1.03-3.27 | 0.03 |
| Like school | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.91 | 2.49 | 1.66-3.67 | <0.001 |
| Fun at weekends | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.62 | 1.86 | 0.89-3.70 | 0.09 |
| Good friend | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.73 | 2.07 | 1.13-3.62 | 0.01 |

7.5.2.2 Regression model for low well-being for 11-18-year-olds (n=2,561)

| Indicator | Responses | Regression coefficient | Odds ratio (Expb) | Confidence interval | P (sig) |
|-----------|------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------|
| Intercept | | -7.24 | <0.005 | <0.001-<0.005 | <0.001 |
| Sex | Male (ref) | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-------|------|-----------|--------|
| | Female | 0.62 | 1.86 | 1.35-2.57 | <0.001 |
| | Other | 0.54 | 1.72 | 0.64-4.42 | 0.27 |
| Time in care | More than one year / I don't know (ref) | | | | |
| | Less than one year | 0.43 | 1.54 | 1.02-2.30 | 0.04 |
| Age | | 0.13 | 1.14 | 1.05-1.25 | <0.005 |
| Number of placements | One (ref) | | | | |
| | More than one / I don't know | 0.39 | 1.48 | 1.04-2.13 | 0.03 |
| Settled at home | Always (ref) | | | | |
| | Sometimes / hardly ever / never | 0.79 | 2.20 | 1.53-3.15 | <0.001 |
| Safe at home | Always (ref) | | | | |
| | Sometimes / hardly ever / never | 0.43 | 1.53 | 1.01-2.31 | 0.04 |
| Reason for being in care explained | Not fully explained (ref) | | | | |
| | Fully explained | 0.26 | 1.30 | 0.92-1.87 | 0.15 |
| Contact with siblings | Right (ref) | | | | |
| | Wrong | 0.37 | 1.45 | 1.04-2.02 | 0.03 |
| | Cannot see / do not have | -0.15 | 0.86 | 0.38-1.81 | 0.71 |
| Talk to carers | Frequently (ref) | | | | |
| | Infrequently | 0.58 | 1.78 | 1.30-2.45 | <0.001 |
| Speak to social worker | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.91 | 2.48 | 1.36-4.42 | <0.005 |
| Involved in decisions | Always / sometimes (ref) | | | | |
| | Hardly ever / never | 0.76 | 2.13 | 1.46-3.09 | <0.001 |
| Like school | A lot / bit (ref) | | | | |
| | Not very much / at all | 0.99 | 2.68 | 1.98-3.64 | <0.001 |
| Outdoors | Always / sometimes (ref) | | | | |
| | Hardly ever / never | 0.39 | 1.47 | 1.05-2.06 | 0.02 |
| Trusted | Always / sometimes (ref) | | | | |
| | Hardly ever / never | 0.83 | 2.29 | 1.23-3.10 | <0.001 |

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|------|------|------------|--------|
| Trust carer | Always / sometimes (ref) | | | | |
| | Hardly ever / never | 0.58 | 1.78 | 1.02-3.11 | 0.04 |
| Trusted person | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.67 | 1.96 | 1.23-3.10 | <0.05 |
| Happiness with appearance | High/medium (ref) | | | | |
| | Low | 2.01 | 7.44 | 5.41-10.27 | <0.001 |
| Hobbies | Always / sometimes (ref) | | | | |
| | Hardly ever / never | 0.41 | 1.50 | 0.96-2.34 | 0.07 |

7.5.2.3 Regression model for high well-being for 11-18-year-olds (n=2,561)

| Indicator | Responses | Regression coefficient | Odds ratio (Expb) | Confidence interval | P (sig) |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------|
| Intercept | | -7.88 | <0.001 | <0.001-<0.005 | <0.001 |
| Sex | Female (ref) | | | | |
| | Male | 0.34 | 1.40 | 1.16-1.70 | <0.005 |
| | Other | -0.49 | 0.61 | 0.18-1.77 | 0.39 |
| Ethnicity | Globalised majority (ref) | | | | |
| | White | 0.22 | 1.25 | 1.00-1.55 | 0.05 |
| Age | 15-18 years (ref) | | | | |
| | 11-14 years | 0.41 | 1.51 | 1.24-1.82 | <0.001 |
| Settled at home | Sometimes / hardly ever / never (ref) | | | | |
| | Always | 0.98 | 2.66 | 2.01-3.55 | <0.001 |
| Safe at home | Sometimes / hardly ever / never (ref) | | | | |
| | Always | 0.99 | 2.70 | 1.69-4.45 | <0.001 |
| Good friend | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.72 | 2.06 | 1.41-3.05 | <0.001 |
| Talk to carers | Infrequently (ref) | | | | |
| | Frequently | 0.67 | 1.95 | 1.57-2.42 | <0.001 |

| | | | | | |
|---|--|------|------|------------|--------|
| Know social worker | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.67 | 1.96 | 1.19-3.26 | <0.05 |
| Trust social worker | Sometimes / hardly ever / never / don't know social worker (ref) | | | | |
| | Always | 0.77 | 2.15 | 1.73-2.68 | <0.001 |
| Get in touch with social worker | Hardly ever / never / don't know social worker (ref) | | | | |
| | Always / sometimes | 0.23 | 1.26 | 0.91-1.74 | 0.16 |
| Like school | Not very much / at all (ref) | | | | |
| | A lot / a bit | 0.81 | 2.24 | 1.77-2.85 | <0.001 |
| Afraid of going to school due to bullying | Always / sometimes (ref) | | | | |
| | Hardly ever / never | 0.33 | 1.38 | 1.08-1.78 | 0.01 |
| Life skills | Hardly ever / never (ref) | | | | |
| | Always / sometimes | 0.38 | 1.47 | 0.96-2.28 | 0.08 |
| Outdoors | Hardly ever / never (ref) | | | | |
| | Always / sometimes | 0.22 | 1.24 | 0.98-1.57 | 0.07 |
| Happiness with appearance | Low (ref) | | | | |
| | High / medium | 1.93 | 6.89 | 4.52-10.93 | <0.001 |
| Hobbies | Hardly ever / never (ref) | | | | |
| | Always / sometimes | 0.40 | 1.49 | 0.94-2.42 | 0.10 |

7.5.2.4 Regression model for low well-being for care leavers (n=3,987)

| Indicator | Responses | Regression coefficient | Odds ratio (Expb) | Confidence interval | P (sig) |
|-----------|---------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------|
| Intercept | | -3.50 | 0.03 | 0.02-0.04 | <0.001 |
| Ethnicity | Globalised majority (ref) | | | | |
| | White | 0.23 | 1.26 | 1.03-1.55 | 0.03 |
| Parent | Yes (ref) | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|------|------|-----------|--------|
| | No | 0.60 | 1.82 | 1.46-2.28 | <0.001 |
| Disability | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.46 | 1.58 | 1.32-1.89 | <0.001 |
| Time in care | More than one year / I don't know (ref) | | | | |
| | Less than one year | 0.31 | 1.37 | 0.95-1.95 | 0.09 |
| Involved in planning | Always (ref) | | | | |
| | Sometimes / hardly ever / never / don't know / don't have one | 0.21 | 1.29 | 1.08-1.55 | <0.05 |
| Number of workers | One (ref) | | | | |
| | None / two or more | 0.19 | 1.20 | 1.01-1.43 | 0.03 |
| Trust social worker | Always (ref) | | | | |
| | Sometimes / hardly ever / never / don't know worker | 0.21 | 1.23 | 1.01-1.43 | 0.04 |
| Pet | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.18 | 1.20 | 1.00-1.44 | 0.05 |
| Trusted person | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.25 | 1.28 | 0.99-1.65 | 0.06 |
| Someone who believes you're a success | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.60 | 1.82 | 1.38-2.40 | <0.001 |
| Safe home | Always (ref) | | | | |
| | Sometimes / hardly ever / never | 0.43 | 1.54 | 1.27-1.86 | <0.001 |
| Safe in neighbourhood | Always / sometimes (ref) | | | | |
| | Hardly ever / never | 0.49 | 1.63 | 1.21-2.20 | <0.01 |
| Where you live is right for you | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.36 | 1.43 | 1.18-1.74 | <0.001 |
| Coping financially | Comfortable (ref) | | | | |
| | Difficult | 0.83 | 2.28 | 1.88-2.77 | <0.001 |
| NEET | EET (ref) | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|------------|---------------------------------------|------|------|-----------|--------|
| | NEET | 0.27 | 1.30 | 1.09-1.56 | <0.01 |
| Smartphone | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.31 | 1.37 | 0.92-2.02 | 0.12 |
| Appearance | Medium / high (ref) | | | | |
| | Low | 1.41 | 4.11 | 3.47-4.88 | <0.001 |
| Lonely | Sometimes / hardly ever / never (ref) | | | | |
| | Often / always | 1.14 | 3.12 | 2.55-3.82 | <0.001 |

7.5.2.5 Regression model for high well-being for care leavers (n=3,989)

| Indicator | Responses | Regression coefficient | Odds ratio (Expb) | Confidence interval | P (sig) |
|---------------------------------------|---|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------|
| Intercept | | -6.18 | <0.05 | <0.05-<0.05 | <0.001 |
| Age | 21+ years (ref) | | | | |
| | 16 - 20 years | 0.15 | 1.16 | 0.97-1.38 | 0.11 |
| Parent | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.63 | 1.87 | 1.52-2.31 | <0.001 |
| Disability | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.21 | 1.24 | 1.01-1.52 | 0.04 |
| Involved in planning | Always (ref) | | | | |
| | Sometimes / hardly ever / never / don't know worker | 0.41 | 1.51 | 1.25-1.84 | <0.001 |
| Easy to get in touch with care worker | Always / sometimes (ref) | | | | |
| | Hardly ever / never / don't know worker | 0.32 | 1.37 | 0.97-1.93 | 0.07 |
| Trust social worker | Sometimes / hardly ever / never / don't know worker (ref) | | | | |
| | Always | 0.22 | 1.24 | 0.96-1.62 | 0.10 |
| Good friend | No (ref) | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|------|------|-----------|--------|
| | Yes | 0.24 | 1.27 | 0.93-1.75 | 0.14 |
| Trusted person | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.27 | 1.32 | 0.94-1.86 | 0.11 |
| Someone who tells you when you've done well | No (ref) | | | | |
| | Yes | 0.37 | 1.44 | 0.96-2.23 | 0.09 |
| Safe home | Sometimes / hardly ever / never (ref) | | | | |
| | Always | 1.04 | 2.83 | 2.26-3.56 | <0.001 |
| Coping financially | Difficult (ref) | | | | |
| | Comfortable | 0.67 | 1.96 | 1.51-2.56 | <0.001 |
| NEET | NEET (ref) | | | | |
| | EET | 0.22 | 1.25 | 1.04-1.51 | 0.02 |
| Smartphone | Yes (ref) | | | | |
| | No | 0.40 | 1.49 | 0.98-2.23 | 0.06 |
| Appearance | Low (ref) | | | | |
| | Medium / high | 1.44 | 4.20 | 3.33-5.37 | <0.001 |
| Lonely | Often / always (ref) | | | | |
| | Sometimes / hardly ever / never | 0.72 | 2.06 | 1.52-2.85 | <0.001 |

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