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United and unique: amplifying the voices of care leavers in South Africa and Northern Ireland – Youth Report

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UNITED *and* UNIQUE

Amplifying the voices of care leavers in
South Africa and Northern Ireland – Youth Report



WHO | WHAT WE | WE ARE | DO

We are a community of care-experienced young people from South Africa (SA) and Northern Ireland (NI). We have come together as care leavers to connect, share, and advocate for change. Although we live in different parts of the world, we are united by our experiences of growing up in, and transitioning to adulthood from, alternative care, and by a shared commitment to making things better for those who come after us. Our Learning Community brings together young people, researchers from Queen's University Belfast and the University of Cape Town, and staff from two organisations that walk alongside care leavers — Mamelani Projects in Cape Town and Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) in Belfast. Together, we have been learning from one another: sharing our journeys, recognising our differences and similarities, and exploring how we can use our voices to push for change.

It all started with online conversations, where we met across time zones, spoke about our lives, and discovered how much we had in common. Through five online workshops, with live connections between Cape Town and Belfast, we built a space of trust where care-experienced young people could lead the conversations. We spoke about transitions, relationships, identity, and the challenges of leaving care. We reflected, laughed, sometimes cried, and always learned from each other.



But talking online wasn't enough and we wanted to experience each other's worlds more fully. Thanks to support from Queen's University Belfast, we were able to organise an international exchange and a filmmaking project. In 2024, care-experienced young people travelled between South Africa and Northern Ireland. We visited important places, shared meals, explored local cultures, met practitioners and policymakers, and most importantly, had real conversations about what leaving care looks like in each of our countries.

Throughout this journey, we realised that while our systems might look different, many of the challenges we face are the same: stigma, lack of support after leaving care, and the importance of relationships that don't just end when we leave the system. We also discovered strengths in our stories and lessons about community, resilience, and hope.

In this paper, we share the issues that matter most to us as care leavers, and our ideas for how things could change.

This is not just research. It's our lives, our hopes, and our invitation to the world: to listen, to understand, and to walk with us towards better futures for care-experienced young people everywhere.

SOME LEAVING CARE CHALLENGES

Life after care requires preparation and support to ensure a smooth transition. There are key areas to focus on, such as practical skills for independent living, financial literacy, education and employment, alongside the emotional and mental health challenges that are more common for young people leaving care. Some young people leave care without a stable place to live, with very little money, or without anyone they can call on for help.

As youth, we need to learn ourselves - exploring options, budgeting and securing stable accommodation, and also accessing healthcare services, developing healthy habits and managing chronic physical and mental health conditions. Although there are programmes to develop independence skills and get ready for leaving care, we don't all feel prepared for real-life, and don't know how to be an adult. Even when you have dreams and plans, the transition can feel overwhelming, lonely, and full of invisible barriers. It feels like being thrown into the deep end not knowing how to swim - some sink and some float.

Overleaf we summarise some of the main challenges for care leavers.



LEARNING PRACTICAL SKILLS AND KNOW-HOW FOR LIVING ON YOUR OWN

Many young people are keen to leave care and have time to prepare, while for others their placements end unexpectedly. In both cases, young people can feel underprepared to live on their own. There is not enough practical training before leaving, for example, how to cook, budget, or clean. Preparation for leaving care should also include how to manage finances and take care of your mental health.

"You think you are ready because you have had some training. I thought I was my own grown person and I wanted to move on."

In SA, living in the child and youth care centre youth are sheltered from real life. In care in NI, also, young people feel coddled up to the age of 18 - everything is done for them, every meal is prepared for them, everything is bought for them for example travel, accommodation and clothes. As a result, young people don't learn how to budget or how much is needed for food and essentials. This means often young people don't know how to shop, where or how to buy electric, or how to cook, and it is hard to remember to save for clothes and electricity. The danger is that young people can end up living on take-aways that are expensive and unhealthy. Youth leaving care often don't even know how to phone a doctor because they have never done it before as the social worker has arranged all their check-ups routinely. This can mean that young people might not get the treatment they need when they need it.

"You need someone to do life with you not just tell you how to do it; you need someone to ask as you go to do things for the first time."

LEAVING THE RULES AND ROUTINES

Because social workers and carers manage day-to-day life, care leavers can find it hard to set up their own routines and establish healthy boundaries and lifestyle choices. In SA the rules in the child and youth care centre are very regimented as everything runs to a schedule around going to school, coming home, and going to bed at set times – this doesn't prepare young people to live on their own and manage their own time.

In Northern Ireland too, youth in care are so used to someone else telling them what time to come home and not to drink alcohol or smoke – it can be hard to make these decisions for themselves when they are on their own.

"I was ready to party, and wanted freedom."

In residential and foster placements, in SA and NI, there are rules that have to be followed – by young people, their carers and social workers. The rules that are put in place to ensure that placements run safely and smoothly can seem restrictive for teenagers. While in care there are time limits for coming home in the evening and strict procedures about absence, so there can be drama if a young person comes home late as s/he is deemed to have absconded, and the police are called. The rules can make it difficult for young people to see friends, especially in the evening.

In NI sleep-overs at friend's house are very difficult because of having to get formal permission. They may even have to get permission from a social worker to date a boyfriend or girlfriend. This can mean that by the time they are leaving care young people feel excluded from friendship groups. This can lead to loneliness and create anxiety about being in friendship groups. After leaving care, young people can be reluctant to stay at their friends' houses because they have become so used to being told 'no' or avoiding the paperwork that would be needed.

"Every breath you take has to be mandated! But after 18- completely free"

VOYPIC

Welcome Mamelani!

"I'm used to someone else making rules for me like okay 'you must go out and come back at this time' and now I have to make the rules on my own I'm like okay 'I'm going out what time am I going to come back is it safe can I stay for that long'?"

FINANCES

Money is a big issue for everyone leaving care. One SA young person noted their first budget for food was below the official food poverty line. In NI when care leavers are still in full-time education they can't claim welfare benefits. Both groups agreed we can have a toxic mindset towards money as we think now we have money of our own we can buy clothes but we forget to budget and save for gas, electricity, travel and food because it is all provided for us in care and we don't think to ask. It is especially hard to budget on a zero hours employment contract when we don't know how much money we will have coming in.

MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES OF LEAVING CARE

Both groups agreed that the transition out of care was hard and can impact on mental health. The stress and uncertainty of moving out of a stable place can be very daunting and can make existing mental health difficulties even worse.

In NI there are public health services, but it can take months for anyone to get an appointment, especially in the mental health services which are in crisis, and youth are left feeling emotionally vulnerable while waiting. In SA youth can get access to mental health services while they are living in the child and youth care centre but this is very difficult to access after leaving care.

"Shifting messes you up! I grew distant from people. I didn't want to burden people or share my difficulties so I struggled on my own."

SUPPORT FOR LEAVING CARE

Ongoing support and resources, such as aftercare programmes, mentorship, and supported living accommodation are crucial for a successful transition. Community and social connections, building relationships, engaging in community activities and staying connected with caregivers are all very important.

In NI there is preparation for leaving care from 16 onwards with pathway reviews. In NI, young people are allocated a personal advisor (PA) to help prepare before they leave care and to continue to offer support after care. The PA can support with independent living tasks, applying for jobs, or benefits, securing accommodation, budgeting or even homework. These individuals are government employees and part of the social work team but they do not do statutory social work, and they have a keyworker/mentorship relationship with the young person. Some care leavers will continue to get support from a social worker if they have particular needs. In NI, if they remain in education or training they are supposed to get support until they turn 24. Sometimes the PA can be a good person to talk to about challenges because they are not a social worker and seem to be less of an authority figure. However, some young people find it hard to build this relationship because of staff shortages and changes of worker. In NI there are some very good initiatives to support care leavers. For example, the H.O.P.E. team (Holistic Outcomes and Positive Experiences for Young People and Children in Care) in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust helps young people to get internships, apprenticeships and jobs in with local government services and tutoring for young people still at school. The Going the Extra Mile (GEM) scheme in NI helps some young people to stay longer with their foster carers until they are aged 21 – if they and their foster carers want this arrangement. However, this arrangement is not possible for everyone.

In SA, the law says that youth must leave the child and youth care centre when they turn 18, but can stay longer if they are completing full-time education or training, provided that the caregiver or centre has capacity for them to stay. The law in SA says that a child and youth care centre *may* help a young person with the transition when leaving the centre after reaching the age of 18. However, there is no right to support from government for care leavers, and the law does not oblige child and youth care centres to support young adults after they leave care at age 18.

In the child and youth care centres we have access to support all the time. It is easy to get a child and youth care worker, social worker or mental health professional. But when we leave there are few structured programmes, and support is relationship based - our child and youth care worker or social worker helps because they have a relationship with us. They say that the door is open but we must ask for help, there are no regular contacts. You go back in December and every year they say that we are part of the house but they have new children and young people and we are not a priority. Any support is discretionary, not mandatory.

When young people in Northern Ireland leave care they get a Personal Advisor, who is like a mentor, but in South Africa we must find our own mentor. Social workers in SA have very little time to help young people with their family relationships or to run any kind of independent living or transitional programmes. A few NGOs like Mamelani work with child and youth care centres and have provided essential support services that facilitate the transition to independent living, focusing on life skills development, educational opportunities, and emotional support. The individual mentoring support we get from organisations like Mamelani is very valuable, but not all care leavers have this.

Because after care support in SA is discretionary, care-experienced youth have campaigned to make after care support compulsory, and to reword the law - **#MustNotMay**.

"Having someone who didn't judge me, but truly listened, who helped me map out my goals and supported me without trying to control me gave me the confidence to believe in my own decisions."



SUPPORTED LIVING

Supported living allows care leavers to have their own flat or room that we are responsible for, but still have ready access to support workers and the company of other young people. This can be really helpful to ease us into more independent life. The accommodation is time limited and you eventually have to move out, but it helps to take the transition more slowly.

In NI care leavers can live in supported accommodation for approx. 2 years after leaving placement. Social services and the provider of the accommodation jointly decide who gets these rooms. Young people are assessed by a panel of experts to determine if they are eligible for supported living and where they can be placed. The young people can be offered a place or told that there are no beds available. There is not enough supported living so some young people live in accommodation for adults that is unsuitable. If they get offered a place in youth supported living, they will have their own furnished flat or room with others in the facility including staff who provide supervision and support. In supported living, we have our freedom, but we also have help with basic needs e.g. cooking, cleaning, shopping, or making a budget. There is a house meeting every week with other young people and staff to set rules, and resolve any problems – there are also opportunities to cook and eat together and this can be good for building a support network with our peers.

There are also assisted living programmes for care leavers in SA, where sometimes we are given our own room, other times we have to share. It depends on the set up of the place we move to. While basic furnishings like a bed are provided, most other spaces are shared, including the kitchen and bathrooms. There is a weekly community dinner where everyone comes together, but for the rest of the week, we are responsible for ourselves — cooking, cleaning, and managing our own time. The leaders are there to support and listen to us but we are treated as an adult, and the responsibility for our life decisions rests with us.

“When I left the children’s home, I moved into an assisted living community. This was a positive step for me because I was surrounded by other young people who had also grown up in children’s homes or came from similar backgrounds.”

In SA, assisted living is meant for young people who do not have a stable place to stay after leaving care. The basic requirements are that the young person must be either working or studying and be able to contribute towards rent. If we lose our job or are unable to study, the staff try to support us but, unlike in a children's home, support is offered rather than imposed — it is our choice to accept it. We are free to leave if we wish, but we also have the opportunity to stay and rebuild.

Living in an supported environment comes with shared responsibilities. Keeping the shared spaces clean and helping to create a positive living environment is very important. Commitment to responsibilities is essential because we are part of a community.

"Assisted living has helped me transition into adulthood by giving me both freedom and responsibility in a supportive environment."

ONE NI EXPERIENCE OF LEAVING CARE

One NI participant described their experience of leaving care: "At the age of 18 my kinship care placement broke down. My foster parents expected me to pay rent whilst working on a zero hours contract. My brother had moved out to be with my mum, so I was on my own. The relationship with my foster parents became toxic, and we were fighting all the time, and I wanted out. I called my social worker and they set up an assessment and I was offered a place in supported living. Because I wasn't expecting to move so quickly, I didn't get any practical support to build the skills to live independently. I knew how to cook two meals – curry and spaghetti Bolognese, because I had learned these in school – and knew how to iron clothes but didn't know how to use a washing machine! I only got to know about my rights when joining VOYPIC a year after leaving care".





ONE SA EXPERIENCE OF LEAVING CARE

One SA participant described their experience of leaving care: "When I left the child and youth care centre, it felt like standing at the edge of a cliff with no idea what came next. For so long, everything had been structured: meals, schooling, where I could go, who I could speak to. Suddenly, stepping out meant figuring it all out on my own. I was scared, excited, and honestly a little lost. That's when Mamelani came into my life. What started as just "joining a programme" became one of the most important parts of my life after care. I learned things I didn't even know I needed to know, like how to budget my money, how to plan a grocery list, and how to navigate things like applying for jobs or finding accommodation. Those skills seem small, but when you're out there on your own, they're everything. I wasn't just surviving anymore. I was starting to build a life. Mamelani also supported me practically with a bursary so I could finish my studies, food support, and encouragement when things felt overwhelming. Today, because of the support I got from Mamelani, I can stand on my own two feet. I know how to get up when life knocks me down. I know how to advocate for myself, and for others still in the system".

PROBLEMS WITH THE TIMING AND THE NATURE OF THE SUPPORT

Both NI and SA youth agreed that preparation before leaving care can only prepare you so far and that, while programmes can tell us how to do it, we don't really learn until we have to do it ourselves and at that point there is no-one to help.

You never going to know how until you have to do it. Support organisations like Mamelani in South Africa and Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) in Northern Ireland both offer experiential learning through cooking and socialising as a group with staff and peers e.g. going to the shop, making food and eating together regularly. This is really helpful for developing social and practical skills and it's more fun to learn together.



**"You never
going to know
how until you
have to do it."**

Young people often do not know about the support that is available for leaving care or how to access it. Sometimes we only learn our rights and what is there for us after it's too late to be helpful. Even in NI where there are good policies and laws for supporting care leavers, they don't necessarily work in practice - not all young people know what they are entitled to and services don't always have the right amount of resources. VOYPIC's group and individual advocacy helps young people to know what they are entitled to.

Young people can be afraid to ask for help from services because they may have to say that they are care-experienced and are worried about negative stereotypes and that this might affect the response they get. This may prevent them getting the support they need.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS FOR CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

Everyone's family relationships are different. Some people have had difficult experiences and may have been brought into care because of neglect, or abuse, or their parents misused drugs and alcohol, had mental illness or financial problems, or just were not ready to look after kids. Families can be complicated – we can have mixed feelings about them and visiting them can be stressful– but still they are important. While in care, someone else makes the final decision about if and when we can see our family. The rules they put in place can be to keep a young person safe, but can feel unnecessarily strict.

Social workers in Northern Ireland try to make sure we can live with our family or stay in touch with them. Social workers and the court will decide how often we can see our family and what the rules for the visits are. Time with our family can be extremely limited, workers often sit in on the visit and it can take months to arrange a family visit due to the strict procedures. This can make it hard to build a good relationship and it sometimes does not feel like family.

In South Africa most children and young people in care go home during school holidays. Although some of these homes might not have adequate space to accommodate them, the centre has no choice but to send them back into their community. In rare cases, the centre social worker visits the homes before holidays and during weekends and ensures that the young people will be safe in that environment. While we are there, the social worker will write a report and give feedback to the centre manager. Upon sending us home, family members of the children must sign an indemnity form to state that we are now their responsibility until holidays are over; they are also responsible for anything that happens to us. Before sending us to those families or relatives, the centre should ensure that we are sent with parcels of food or anything extra that is needed while we are there during the holidays.

Keeping in contact with siblings is important – even though some brothers and sisters do not feel close, it's sometimes easier to be open with our siblings than

with others. In South Africa, most child and youth care centres are encouraged to not separate brothers and sisters as it might cause some siblings to act out and feel neglected. Therefore, they try to ensure that all siblings are accommodated in one centre, and this makes it easier for the centre to monitor them while living together. Siblings may visit their relatives together on weekends and during holidays.



In Northern Ireland, there is also an obligation to try to keep brothers and sisters living together but often this is not possible because foster homes are too small and children's homes have age limits so it's hard to find a place that suits them all. Sometimes it's not in their best interests to live together. Sometimes it doesn't feel that relationships between brothers and sisters are a priority.

The family we pick for ourselves is important too. In SA, the child and youth care centre becomes a family home for many of us. It has become a safe place where we feel loved and protected. It has become our home. We sometimes build relationships with managers, social workers, and staff. Similarly, young people without siblings also find brotherly and sisterly love with peers there and form bonds that are strong and not easily broken.

It seems easier in South Africa to make connections with other young people in the child and youth care centres, because we have to rely on each other. In Northern Ireland it is harder to connect with the other young people we are living with as the rules prevent us from visiting other rooms in the same home without permission.

In both South Africa and Northern Ireland, organisations such as Mamelani and VOYPIC are very important as relationships with peers and staff in these groups can feel like family – our chosen family.

"At Mamelani, I wasn't seen as "just another kid from a children's home." I was seen as me. The group sessions were life-changing, hearing from others who had also left care helped me realise I wasn't alone."

HOW PEOPLE VIEW US

There is a stigma that our community or society has about young people who lived in residential care/children's homes, or foster care. They treat care-experienced young people as if we are different. Society has this perception of either we are an unloved orphan or problem child, and ask what we did to deserve being placed in care. In NI some young people have heard it said that they must be greedy and just expect everything to be given to them and that they should be more grateful for being cared for. One SA participant described how the Department of Social Development only visited the child and youth care centre when someone in the community had made a complaint about noise, and the behaviour of the young people.

There is a lot of stigma and discrimination in the community. Because of it, we have this fear of being judged or people saying, "aggh, shame" or ask "what did you do wrong" or question whether anyone loved us. There is even stigma in education – people do not expect care leavers to achieve much and are surprised when we get good exam results. This can be very discouraging and make us feel like there is no point in trying.

There are some good initiatives that promote the positivity of being in care, for example, by celebrating International Care Day every February, and UK Care Leavers week in October. In NI the government are trying to help challenge stigma for example by changing the way that care-experience is referred to in schools and colleges, and the media have been supportive in showcasing care leavers' advocacy campaigns.

Teachers, caregivers, society and governments all have a responsibility to end this stigma. One suggestion might be to incorporate lessons about alternative care into the curriculum to help destigmatize it.

"Most of all, I carry the belief that being care-experienced isn't a shameful thing — it's part of my story. And I am proud of that."

GETTING OUR VOICES HEARD



Both groups feel we are a low priority for our politicians and, when there are so many difficult issues in society that need to be addressed, the concerns of care leavers are a bit invisible and overlooked by the people in power. In NI especially there is a feeling that sectarian issues are at the forefront and the government is too busy “fighting over flags”. It should not be like this as the lives of care-experienced young people are as important as any other. Both groups agreed it is very important to make ourselves heard, and are very keen to learn from one another about how to have influence and to empower each other to make a difference.

In NI, VOYPIC has been doing great work to raise the awareness of children and young people in care, they have been lobbying MLAs (politicians) at hustings during the election campaign. They had a tea party at the Northern Ireland Assembly, presented the 12 standards of care (VOYPIC campaign) as solutions. South African youth explained that they had been to Parliament in 2021 and have learned from these experiences and shared their tips: be respectful but do not be a pushover, determination is critical; come from the heart; be real, be yourself; be proud.

We’ve done so much with VOYPIC – we went to our parliament and we’ve done a review and we’re trying to make young people’s lives better for the next generation. We’ve just come so far and I’m very grateful for the experience – VOYPIC have really helped me build up my confidence.

Care leavers can suggest solutions, but they should not have to have all the answers. It is the responsibility of the politicians to solve problems. We should not be afraid to share our challenges, it’s the politicians’ job to listen.

OUR PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

Young people leaving care in South Africa and Northern Ireland both call for:



An end to the stereotyping and negative attitudes that can lead to stigma and discrimination for care-experienced young people.



Opportunities to influence policy, practice and the law and have their voices listened to.



Champions who will make sure that the government pays attention to their needs.



Supportive relationships throughout the process of leaving care and that continue afterwards.



Mental health services that are easier for care leavers to access and that recognise them as a priority group.

BE BRAVE
BE CREATIVE
BE KIND
BE THANKFUL
BE HAPPY
BE YOU

"You are not a product of your circumstances. You are a product of your decisions. As you step into this new chapter, remember you have the power to create the life that you desire."



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You can find out more about the organisations involved in this project, including their contact details, from their websites:

Mamelani Projects: <https://mamelani.org.za/>

Voice of Young People in Care: <https://www.voypic.org/>

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