

# CONSULTATION RESPONSE: DEVELOPING A UNIVERSAL DEFINITION OF 'CARE EXPERIENCE'

This paper was submitted in January 2025 in response to the Scottish Government's consultation [Developing a universal definition of 'care experience'](#). The consultation response is informed by focus groups and conversations with care experienced young people and young people who have been on the edges of care.

## SECTION 1: DEVELOPING A UNIVERSAL DEFINITION OF 'CARE EXPERIENCE'

### 1. Do you agree or disagree that there is a need for a universal definition to describe 'care experience'?

- Agree strongly
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree strongly

### 2. What are your views on the potential advantages of developing a universal definition of 'care experience'?

Cyrenians is an organisation dedicated to tackling the causes and consequences of homelessness by taking a public health approach. Cyrenians works with young people from a range of backgrounds and experiences. This consultation response has been heavily shaped by young people with care experience and young people who have been at the edges of care, who shared their insights and perspectives. The consultation is also informed by staff perspectives on supporting young people to navigate the system.

The young people we spoke to about this consultation all agreed that a universal definition would be helpful to provide clarity around rights and entitlements across different sectors. Both young people and staff find the current system, with its many slightly varying definitions, confusing and difficult to navigate. It means that some young people might not be aware of or able to access the support they are entitled to. We believe that a broad, universal definition might go some way to address this and help create a shared, mutual understanding across sectors and professional roles.

Some current definitions also don't feel person-centred but instead seem to be designed to meet the needs of a system, rather than the needs of people.

One young person noted that a definition could help increase understanding and awareness of what it means to be care experienced:

*"Education around what care experience is will be really helpful, so having a definition means that people know what is happening and what they are entitled to. You need that clearness as currently it's really confusing."*

Young people were all acutely aware of the pressures on social work and shared how this could make them feel like a burden. Currently they felt that asking for help sometimes "comes with a side of judgment" and hoped that having clearer definitions of what they are entitled to would help.

From a homelessness prevention perspective, a shared, cross-sector definition of care experience might make it easier to identify care experienced young people and enable stronger cross-sector collaboration and coordination. This is vital to make sure the right support provisions are in place, especially at the critical transition point to adulthood where many young people find themselves at risk of or experiencing homelessness. It would also make it easier for staff who support care experienced young people to understand what their rights and entitlements are so they can advocate on their behalf, which can help their transition to adulthood.

### **3. What are your views on the potential disadvantages of developing a universal definition of 'care experience'?**

The main point made by young people we spoke to, is that they don't want any children and young people to miss out on support because they fall slightly outwith a definition. So, while a definition will be useful to provide clarity, there is also a need for flexibility to include cases that might not exactly fit the criteria, if those young people still need support.

The young people we support were adamant that there is a need for a wider safety net for everyone who grows up with adverse childhood experiences that might not have been identified in time, and therefore did not have local authority involvement or other support during their childhood. For example, young people who become homeless after they turn 16 due to adverse experiences at home might have very similar experiences to young people who have been through the care system, but they are not able to access continuing care and aftercare support if they are still living in the family home at that point.

#### 4. Do you have any views on the definition of 'Care Leaver' as set out in the consultation paper?

Cyrenians believes that young people who are not "looked after" on their sixteenth birthday but have other types of care experience, i.e. informal kinship care, should still have access to aftercare. Ideally, any young person who have been in care during their childhood, even if briefly and not around their sixteenth birthday, or had social work involvement, should still be able to access additional support as young adults:

*"There shouldn't even be a cut-off point, if you are legally recognised as being in care or being supported by social work it should still count. If your parents for whatever reason cannot care for you the way you need to be a healthy child, even if you get to stay in your family, then it should count."*

Choice is important in these cases, young people told us they want to know that the support is there when they need it and to feel like there is a safety net to fall back on. The current definition of 'care leaver' evoked strong emotions from the young people we spoke to who felt that 16 is too young to insert what feels like an arbitrary cut-off point in support:

*"Age is a huge factor, especially around the age when you become a care leaver – suddenly because you turn 16 you're out, but your situation might be no different from when you were 15."*

Several young people highlighted that the age 16-21 is probably when they need the most support due to all the changes that are happening in their lives – going through puberty, leaving school, transitioning out of a placement etc. and not feeling prepared for adulthood. Young people also pointed out that 16-year-olds don't get the same wages as adults which means they might struggle in a tenancy on their own: "You are de facto an adult but without the rights." One young person described it as having "life on hard mode".

On a positive note, some young people also shared how access to continuing care and aftercare, the care leavers bursary, free travel, Young Scot cards etc. has helped them: "It opens up options for me, it means I can volunteer, it means I can have a social life, go outside, I can live as a normal human being".

However, not everyone we spoke to had access to these opportunities, and there was a strong feeling that the narrow definition of 'care leaver' is excluding a lot of young people who would benefit from added support. The wording of the definition also didn't resonate with young people who felt the language was using "fancy words" to exclude some children and young people.

Cyrenians also supports older adults with care experience who are affected by homelessness, addiction, mental health issues and involvement in the criminal justice system. Importantly, to better support this population, we believe that the current cut-off point for aftercare at 26 should be extended and that older adults (26+) should have access to lifelong care, especially around trauma and mental health support.

### 5. Do you have any views on the statutory definition of 'Looked After' as set out in the consultation paper?

Similar to responses above, young people thought the definition should be as broad as possible to not exclude any young people who would benefit from support: "The way I see it if someone other than your mother or father have like taken you to school because of some out of the norm situation that should be considered looked after. That should be included, someone else is looking after you instead of the main caregiver".

There was a strong sense that even a brief intervention could have a big impact on your life going forward.

Young people also shared some thoughts on the wording of 'looked after', suggesting that terms like 'taking care of' or 'meeting your needs' might be better alternatives.

## Potential scope of a universal definition of 'care experience'

### 6. What experience of care would you expect to be covered by any definition of 'care experience'? Please choose all that apply.

- Looked After at Home ✕
- Kinship Care (looked after children who have been placed with kinship carers by the local authority) ✕
- Kinship Care (non-looked after children who live with a kinship carer, these children may be subject to an order under Section 11 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 or may be living in a completely private arrangement with extended family, with no local authority involvement ) ✕
- Foster Care ✕
- Residential Care ✕
- Residential Special School ✕
- Supported Accommodation ✕
- Secure Care ✕
- Adoption ✕
- Other – please provide details ✕

**Please give us your views:**

We think that Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children should be included as well.

We propose a broad definition that includes anyone who has spent any time in care or had social work intervention when they were growing up, even if this did not result in the child being removed from the family home.

**7. Do you have any other comments about a proposed universal definition of 'care experience'?**

The reason we propose a broad and inclusive definition is to make sure that no young people are falling through the gaps and to get rid of arbitrary eligibility criteria that are based on the siloed logic of systems rather than people's holistic needs. We hope that a universal definition can eventually provide a route towards increasing access to rights and entitlements that some people are currently unable to access.

As one young person put it: "Have these people ever experienced the confusion, relief, worry and terror of being a child and suddenly being away from everything you know? There are instances of things that last 5 minutes that can influence the rest of your life so having some mad time criteria to meet feels really not nice."

For adults with care experience, a shared definition could potentially help them access further support. We have previously suggested that establishing a 'care passport' system could allow people to share information without having to retell their story and relive trauma every time they try to access a new service.

Further, we hope that it can help improve awareness of and understanding of care experience across different sectors and public bodies, for example education and health. As a homelessness prevention organisation, we are supportive of the new proposed Ask & Act duties in the Housing (Scotland) Bill if they are implemented and resourced properly. Improving how we identify and support young people with experience of care, and their families, will be key to making these duties work to prevent youth homelessness, and a broad universal definition could potentially support this.

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**8 Do you have any comments on the existing language of care?**

Not applicable.

**9 Do you have any suggestions on potential ways to change and improve the language of care?**

Not applicable.

**10 Are you aware of good practice to change and improve the language of care?**

Not applicable.