

# Being a care leaver in the pandemic: Injustice within the system and opportunities for change

 [boingboing.org.uk/care-leaver-pandemic](https://boingboing.org.uk/care-leaver-pandemic)

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## **A blog about being a care leaver in the pandemic; experiences of amplified injustice within the system and highlighting opportunities for change.**

This blog is co-authored by Charlotte, 24 and Caitlin, 20 who teamed up with other chums from the Resilience Revolution's pilot in Blackpool to share experiences and perspectives of being a care leaver in the pandemic. Like all things Resilience Revolution, we are using our lived experiences – in this case our expertise of the care system and what it's like to live in and leave care – to look at mechanisms to support individual resilience building (something we call 'beating the odds' through making Resilient Moves), whilst also taking the opportunity to disrupt and change systems for the many (we call this 'changing the odds').

Covid-19 was supposed to be the big leveller – the virus that doesn't discriminate. But can we really lay our heads on our pillows at night – if we're lucky to have one – and say that everybody's experiences of this pandemic have been the same? To the contrary, [much points](#) to an amplification of pre-existing societal and structural inequalities. This can be seen in the realities of [workplace inequality](#), and [who is more likely](#) to have the

option to follow the “**work from home if you can**” guidance; those on zero hour contracts or the government’s defined ‘lower skilled jobs’ often having no other choice than to go out and face the virus with no assurances or protection from those in power. It can be seen too in the realities of those **with pre-existing health conditions who are at higher risk of contracting the virus** – a risk impacted on by poverty as highlighted in the British Medical Association report that suggests that those living beneath the ever enveloping poverty line are more likely to have pre-existing health conditions. We also know that those in poverty are more likely to be living in poor housing, are more likely to live in houses with multiple occupancy, are more likely to have to leave the house to work or to get supplies from foodbanks. And yet this was supposed to be the virus that didn’t discriminate.

The list goes on in terms of inequalities and the impact of Covid-19, as evidenced in this report by Boingboing, the CRSJ and Blackpool Headstart examining the impact on people with disabilities. In this blog though, we’d like to concentrate on our experiences as care leavers in this pandemic and the impact that some of the restrictions and snappy guidance statements have had on us.

***Caitlin has been thinking specifically about what the “stay at home, save lives” message has meant for her. Being safe and having access to good housing are two Resilient Moves from the basics section of our Resilience Framework, but did you know that in a survey completed by Coram Voice, 37% of care leavers do not feel safe in their homes. Add this to further reports about care leavers feeling lonely and isolated and feeling unsettled whilst not having a trusted person or good friend around and staying at home for many perhaps feels more like a ticking time bomb, than a life preserving luxury.***

*Sure, those in more privileged positions may have also felt many of these feelings too, but the number of people within their support circles will likely stretch beyond a solitary one. And each night when the dust settles from another press conference or news briefing, there is likely to be somebody to talk to other than our mirror. In ‘normal’ times The Core in Blackpool is a safety blanket for me. It’s a place to go in the heart of the town centre, to see mentors and get support and guidance from our PAs [Personal Advisors]. We can see our friends there and get help with things like a house or flat, or jobs, applications, food and transport. During Lockdown I have missed it massively and without the ability to lean on others when necessary, I have found myself often in isolation when trying to deal with any problems that arise.*

So, you might think that given these survey results and insights like this from Caitlin, that the support and protections offered to care leavers would be increased during the pandemic. Think again. We read this article where Just for Kids Law and other charities are challenging Gavin Williamson (who is the Education Secretary) on advice given by the Department for Education that says local authorities, who act as the legal parents for young people who are looked after and have responsibilities for care leavers, to simply “do their best” to meet statutory duties to care leavers and that sometimes it will not be possible to meet those requirements, so to prioritise the most vulnerable. We agree with the Just for Kids Law challenge that such advice is unacceptable.

And it doesn't stop there. This ambiguous advice coincides with the overnight introduction of The Adoption and Children Coronavirus Amendment Regulations (Statutory Instrument 445), which remove and weaken many support and safeguarding measures for children in care. For example local authorities are now allowed to reduce social worker visits and even a six weekly phone call is no longer being mandatory. We know how much spending time with people we can rely on can support our resilience, so how much damage has this ruling done to those with limited support networks to count on?

The open letter to Mr Williamson from Just for Kids Law, also signed and supported by 45 other charities who work alongside children and young people, continues to explain that many care leavers in similar positions to us have shared that they are struggling with finances, cramped housing, lack of food, anxiety and isolation. All amalgamating into a huge burden upon mental and emotional health at this difficult time.

**So, instead of diluting our support and care towards care leavers, perhaps in retrospect, the government should have led the way in advocating more support should be made available as this difficult time.**

For Caitlin, her experience of ongoing support has varied; *"my PA, Danny, has been a life saver helping me with lots of things, especially my university application for next year, as well as supporting me with an unexpected job hunt. Prior to lockdown, I was happy working for an agency as a teaching assistant within placements across Blackpool and the surrounding areas, as well as working for a popular sandwich shop chain on a zero hours contract. Since lockdown, this has dramatically changed, with the agency work tailing off for obvious reasons. The surprising thing for many will be that despite covering multiple shifts in their time of need, the popular sandwich shop ceased my employment due to two shifts missed with illness, regardless of the absence being taken after advice sought from 111. This left me with no employment, no rights and no further source of income beyond statutory allowance, meaning that having enough money to live became an additional thing to worry about.*

*My PA is a life saver, as I'm sure many others are, in fact in the Coram Voice survey, 96% of care leavers stated that they trust their worker and can contact them most of the time. But what about those care leavers who are deemed to not require support? When I first left care at 18, I was left to it. I had a job and a place to live so it was assumed I would be ok. But many of us have other needs, like our mental health. I went looking for support and thankfully was assigned a PA straight away."*

This does pose the question as to how many care leavers across the country are without that direct line of support due to a lack of resource, funding or identification and perhaps draws consideration as to what 'support' should look like, in particular during a global pandemic.

We'd like to ask you to think about your experiences of lockdown for a minute. Despite many challenging obstacles to overcome, have you had the comfort of a FaceTime call with a family member? Have you managed to find time for some new interests? Has

somebody dropped off a Shepherd's Pie on the doorstep because you're struggling with working from home and home schooling the kids? Has your furloughed wage enabled you to go to the supermarket and put food in the fridge and cupboards – even if it's just the bare essentials – and don't forget toilet roll in abundance! Many care leavers haven't had such support; often estranged from family members and friends, some living in empty accommodation halls at college or university with no home to return to and many living away from their home town based on somebody else's decision – there were 2,010 young people across England living in semi-independent placements outside of their home town in 2018, a 97% increase from 2014 [[The Children's Society](#)].

This is something Charlotte has been thinking a lot about. She resides in a mental health hospital over 130 miles from where her PA is based. *"In 'ordinary' times long distance with my PA is hard, I often miss out on things for care leavers, like opportunities and events, but it even feels like we have reduced support because of the sheer distance. Luckily my PA, Brendan, is sound and we get on great and I know he does his best given how far away he is. It's funny, lockdown has probably brought us closer as we video call more frequently, so I get that face to face contact that I missed out on before. I think this should continue for all care leavers who live out of area even after lockdown, it makes a big difference seeing somebody's face."*

Following feedback such as this, Blackpool Council Children's Services are implementing a change to practice. Despite the reduced statutory expectations from the government we mentioned above, Blackpool instead are opting to increase their contact to weekly where possible, providing care leavers with regular, informal contact. As well as virtual contact, PAs have also been increasing face to face contact where possible, adhering to social distancing guidelines of course, with some care leavers receiving daily contact where needed. It comes with a recognition that casual conversation is something that we all need and can go a long way to easing feelings of loneliness and isolation. Care leavers are no different; contact doesn't always need to be about addressing safeguarding worries, sometimes it can just be to chat. Additional support has also come in the form of food parcels, mobile phones and gas and electric top-ups if required.

Other positive news comes from Stockport who are one of the areas to reap the benefits of a Department for Education scheme to provide disadvantaged young people with the means to connect digitally through laptops, tablets and Wi-Fi routers, in an effort to combat the 'digital divide'. [Stockport Council report](#) that care leavers have been able to receive the equipment to continue their contact with education and support services. Fantastic news for Stockport young people and credit to the leaving care team doing such fantastic, timely work.

Unfortunately, not all young people affected by the digital divide have been so fortunate. Digital exclusion is one of many disadvantages care leavers can face, coupled with many still coming to terms with the huge transition of how to live independently. We know and appreciate that the government have talked about schemes to get equipment out to people who may be facing digital exclusion, but these things are often so slow and it can

be confusing to know what to actually expect in reality. For example, despite announcing a scheme to help in April, figures released in mid-June showed that there were still loads of the 230,000 devices promised for young people (including care leavers) to deliver.

Uncertainty has been a huge burden for many during Covid-19, but where care leavers have been getting ready to (or sometimes needing to) take the next step towards independence, this difficult and testing time has been compounded with delays and confusion as to what happens next in their lives. Confidently mapping out and planning our future is a vital resilient move for many. Usually, a process takes place where care leavers are supported into independence both in terms of finding and viewing a place, life skills, as well as a small care leavers' grant [[The Care Leavers Foundation](#)]. Charlotte says that her 'move-on' process has been delayed and, whilst she understands why, it has left her feeling confused and uncertain. *"I've got no idea when my move-on will take place, nor if I'll get an extension and I can't seem to access my care leavers' grant. The agency responsible for supporting me with it has changed three times and it's added lots of additional worry."*

**So, we have shared some of our personal reflections on our experience as care leavers and what has been a challenge for us during lockdown plus a few things that have worked well. But what does this mean for care leavers more generally....if we could change one thing to make things easier, then, now and in to the future, what would it be?**

*For me [Caitlin] if there could be a magic wand type of solution, then support to help spend time with friends safely would be at the top of my list, even if virtually.*

*For me [Charlotte] I would wish for some clarity on who is responsible for helping me with my move into independence and a creative way of enabling my supported move-on process to continue virtually.*

So whilst it is clear to us that radical change is required in terms of levelling out the playing field so that care leavers have opportunities, safety and support to thrive, not just survive, it is also clear some of the short-term solutions to making things better aren't as farfetched as we're often led to believe. Our wish for communication and digital creativity are at the core of subtle changes that could have made a huge difference to our experiences during lockdown and beyond. Could we be so bold to suggest that decision makers, policy makers and government officials step outside of their bubbles and engage in meaningful conversation with care leavers to co-design the future of the system within which they are so often overlooked? Our solutions, we think, are pretty straight forward to achieve. It starts with listening to and hearing the voices of care leavers.



The Resilience Revolution Final Research Report 2016-2022

## **Resilience Revolution's Final Research Report 2016-2022**

This report presents the research and evaluation of the Resilience Revolution programme (2016-2022).

The Resilience Revolution is an innovative whole town approach to building resilience, made possible by funding from The National Lottery Fund's HeadStart programme. Funding was available between 2016 and 2022, across 6 areas nationally in the UK with the purpose of testing and learning new ways to support young people's mental health (ages 10-16).

In Blackpool, the programme took the bold step of developing a vision for the whole town; giving everyone who lived, worked or volunteered in the town the opportunity to get involved. The Resilience Revolution embraced co-production as a way to design and test innovative projects. Co-production meant a range of people, with different expertise, working together, as equals towards shared goals.

**NIHR** | National Institute for  
Health and Care Research



## **The Research Ready Communities pilot continued**

For the past year and a half Boingboing has been working on a Research Ready Communities pilot project in Blackpool alongside the National Institute for Health Research as part of their Under-served Communities programme. Typically, much of the funding for health research in the UK goes to universities in London, Oxford and Cambridge, but health research is needed the most in places like Blackpool, where the harmful impacts of health inequalities are worst felt.



## **Loops – a review**

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On 22nd February Grace and Lauren, members of the Activist Alliance, attended the show Loops at the Blackpool Grand Theatre. It was a play made in collaboration with Liverpool Everyman + Playhouse, 20 Stories High theatre company and, “a brilliant group of activists and artists who all shared important stories of what their experiences were, with courage, honesty and jokes”.



## **Watch our workshops: how to do community co-research on health equity.**

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Created as part of the ongoing Community Solutions for Health Equity project that Boingboing Foundation are proudly part of, we are pleased to share recordings of a series of workshops held recently in Blackpool. These workshops are free resources to be taken advantage of by any community members or organisations looking for a beginner’s guide to developing the research skills and knowledge needed to explore health inequalities in coastal areas.



Resilience Framework (Children & Young People) Oct 2015 – adapted from Hart & Risman 2007 www.boingboing.org.uk				
SPECIFIC APPROACHES	BASICS	BELONGING	LEARNING	COPING
	Good enough housing	Find somewhere for the child/YP to belong	Make school/college life work as well as possible	Understanding boundaries and keeping within them
	Enough money to live	Help child/YP understand their place in the world	Engage mentors for children/YP	Being brave
	Being safe	Tap into good influences	Keep relationships going	Taking problems
	Access & transport	The more healthy relationships the better	Map out career or life plan	Putting on rose-tinted glasses
	Healthy diet	Take what you can from relationships where there is some hope	Help the child/YP to organise her/himself	Fostering their interests
	Exercise and fresh air	Get together people the child/YP can count on	Highlight achievements	Calm down & self-soothing
	Enough sleep	Responsibilities & obligations	Develop life skills	Remember tomorrow is another day
	Play & leisure	Focus on good times and places	Learn on others when necessary	Have a laugh
	Being free from prejudice & discrimination	Make sense of where child/YP has come from		
NOBLE TRUTHS				
ACCEPTING      CONSERVING      COMMITMENT      ENLISTING				
CORE SELF				
				Instill a sense of hope
				Support the child/YP to understand other people's feelings
				Help the child/YP to know her/himself
				Help the child/YP take responsibility for her/himself
				Foster their talents
				There are tried and tested treatments for specific problems, use them

## The Boingboing Resilience Framework

The Resilience Framework is a handy table that summarises ‘what works’ when supporting children and young people’s resilience according to the Resilience Research base. The Resilience Framework forms a cornerstone of our research and practice. On this page we have pulled together lots of useful links so you can find out all about the Resilience Framework.



## Prevention in Health and Social Care Inquiry Submissions

Co-leaders of the Resilience Revolution made not one, but two submissions to the UK Parliament ‘Prevention in Health and Social Care’ inquiry last month. The inquiry is about preventing ill health, now and in the future.



## A guide to becoming more eco-friendly in Blackpool and the Fylde Coast



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Hi, I'm Maya, and I wanted to say a big thank you to you for reading. These guides were created to help people in Blackpool and the Fylde Coast become more environmentally friendly, without feeling too overwhelmed by climate issues. They were produced as part of the Boingboing Activist in Residence project, which gave me the opportunity to work as an Eco-activist in Residence at Blackpool Victoria Hospital. I decided that I wanted to use this role to make two guides: one for local residents, and another for Blackpool Teaching Hospitals' Green Champions.



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## **An introduction to the Research Ready Communities pilot**

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## **Online Resilience Forum – 3rd April 2023 – Psychological distress and resilience among a population affected by conflict**

This Online Resilience Forum from CRSJ and Boingboing is for anyone interested in resilience research. This month's forum is on 'psychological distress and resilience among a population affected by conflict' presented by University of Brighton PhD student Omar S Rasheed.

[Older Entries](#)

