



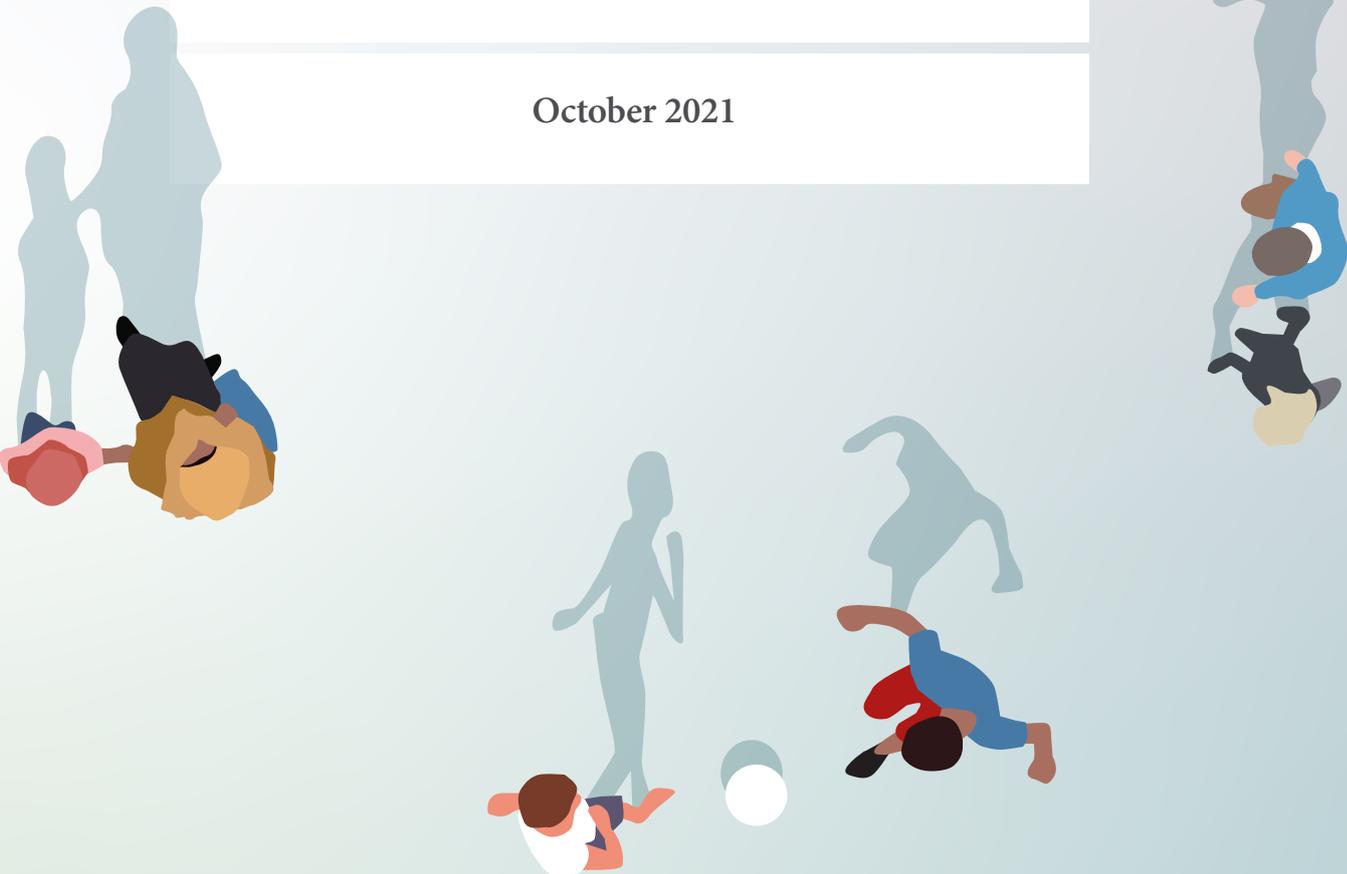
What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**



SPRINGBOARD

Supporting care experienced
young people with their next
steps in further and
higher education

October 2021





What Works for Children's Social Care

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About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social

care sector. We generate, collate and make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

To find out more visit the Centre at: [whatworks-csc.org.uk](https://www.whatworks-csc.org.uk)

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Whilst estimates vary, young people with care experience are underrepresented in higher education (HE). What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) partnered with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), Become (the national charity for children in care and young care leavers), and the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) to develop the Springboard Programme in an attempt to widen access to HE and further education (FE) for care-experienced young people.

As part of the Springboard Programme, we provided the following to 16- to 18-year-olds in care:

1. A letter from a care-experienced young person who was in FE or HE to show them that FE and HE is a pathway open to them and to signpost them to support.
2. Access to a professional specialising in supporting care-experienced young people with FE and HE queries. This professional was recruited by Become and funded by WWCSC.
3. Videos from care experienced young people in FE or HE posted to the Become website.

This report describes what we did and what we learnt from implementing the programme. Participating Virtual School Heads (VSHs) who distributed the letters to young people, found the process straightforward and there was positive feedback on the support provided by Become. The programme was low cost. The report highlights a number of recommendations to improve support for young people in this area:

- The quality of the data and data infrastructure should be improved to provide accurate data on care leavers attending FE and HE up until the age of 25 and beyond as data becomes available.
- Programmes aiming to increase care leavers' attendance in FE and HE should consider both support required to raise young people's attainment at an earlier age and support to help older care leavers access FE and HE at a later stage.
- Support should be in place to ensure VSHs have the resources they need to assist young people in care aged 16-18 with their next steps in education.

2. WHAT'S THE CURRENT PICTURE?

Young people with care experience are underrepresented in HE. In 2019 only 13% of children who were looked after for a year or more progressed to HE by the age of 19 compared to 43% of their peers.^{1,i} They were even less likely to go on to a high tariff university.²

Research shows that the overall number of care experienced people accessing HE is higher than suggested by these figures.ⁱⁱ Indeed, current available statistics only record progression to HE by age 19³, however adults with experience of care often enter HE beyond this point. These students will therefore not be identified in this data. Furthermore, the impact of measures to improve access to HE for this group may not be captured. Data on care leavers in FE is sparse and little is known about barriers to access.

What is clear, is that a large gap remains between the educational attainment of care leavers and their peers. This is important as it can have a significant impact on a person's life, with education being central to an individual's chances of high earnings, a satisfying job and good health.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are many causes of this gap. The vast majority of children in care experience abuse and neglect before entering care, which likely impacts later outcomes. In addition, research has shown that children in care have high levels of special educational needs including social, emotional and mental health needs,^{iv} which further compounds

these difficulties. Many children in care also change placement and social workers multiple times, creating further instability. As they near 18, young people in care may move to supported accommodation and lose their support network in their school or community.

These experiences contribute to low attainment at GCSE. In 2019 (the most recent academic year not impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic), only 7.2% of children in care passed their English and mathematics GCSE (achieving grade 5 or above), compared with 40.1% of non-looked after children.^v This can then have significant impact on young people's ability to access HE.

In addition to these factors, the Government has also noted that *"many simply do not believe that higher education is for them"* with young people *"lack[ing] positive role models, real encouragement to aspire to take part in what can seem a strange world, and confidence that they will be able to meet the cost of higher education."*^{vi}

This concern was central to the design of the Springboard Programme. The programme was developed following research by the Behavioural Insights Team which found that sending a personalised 'nudge' letter to students eligible for free school meals from someone they could identify with, was effective at raising the number who apply to, and accept offers from, selective universities.^{vii}

1. These statistics do not use the statutory definition of care leaver but look at those children in care continuously for the 12 months up to 31st March in the academic year when they turned 16 and their progression to HE by the age of 19.

2. High tariff providers are the top third of higher education providers when ranked by average tariff score of UK undergraduate entrants.

3. Local Authority data (SSDA903) does collect information up until 21 but is missing data for around 10% of care leavers and provides only a snapshot of those in HE at a point in time (it does not include those who have entered and left).

3. THE SPRINGBOARD PROGRAMME

The Springboard Programme aimed to increase interest and access to FE and HE programmes through the following three components:

1. Letter

The first part of the programme involved sending letters from care leavers in FE and HE to young people aged 16-18 who were in care at the time of

the project. The aim of the letters was to provide a message from a relatable role model to help young people to see their social identity as compatible with FE or HE and to increase their confidence in applying.

Example of HE letter sent

A message from a care-leaver and graduate of Keele University.

Dear [first name]

Back in 2014 I was in a similar position to you. I was in care, about to finish college, and not sure what to do next. I wasn't sure if university was right for me – I didn't think I had the grades, and I was worried about the financial impact. I was lucky that I had teachers in my school who supported and encouraged me to think about university, so I wanted to do the same for you.

I'm really glad I went to university. Not only did I meet some wonderful people and have a great time, I also gained the knowledge and skills I need for my future career. I've recently started a job as a children's nurse – something I could never have done without going to university.

Many universities – like Keele, where I studied – offer dedicated support to care leavers to help you succeed. This can include pre-application help, personal guidance to help with your transition to university, year-round accommodation, and a named contact for care-leavers to go to for advice and support. If you're worried about money, there are grants, bursaries and scholarships, specifically for care leavers. These could be from your local authority, your college, university, or other organisations. You can also get a student loan, which you don't have to pay back until you're earning a certain amount.

You can find lots more information about the application process, funding available, and what support individual universities offer care leavers on propel.org.uk – a website run by Become, the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. I also wanted to tell you that you can call the **Become Care Advice Line** for free on **0800 023 2033** (open 10am-5pm, Monday to Friday), or email advice@becomecharity.org.uk, for answers to your questions and specific advice. The Become advisors are there to help young people like us figure out our next steps.

Going to university was one of the best decisions I ever made. I really enjoyed my time there, and the support given to care-leavers made me feel really welcome and like I belonged.

Remember – you are not alone. There is help and support available from your school, college, local authority, and Become.

Wishing you the best of luck in with your next steps.

Example of FE letter sent

A message from a care-leaver and student at Kingston College.

Dear [first name]

Back in 2015 I was in a similar position to you. I was in care, finished school, and not sure what to do next. I was lucky that I had a support system that encouraged me to think about continuing in education. I want to offer you some support and encouragement too.

You have lots of options for continuing your education or training. Getting a qualification will help you succeed in your future career. When I was 17 I started a Level 3 qualification in Sports and Exercise Science at Kingston College. I felt really supported by them, so decided to continue my education there. I'm now about to complete my Higher National Diploma in Sports Science.

Lots of colleges offer extra support to care leavers. The support I received helped me adapt to college life, to understand that I'm not alone, that everyone feels anxious or unsure at times, but if I believe in myself and work hard, I can achieve my goals. The college also helped me with practical things, like financial support and finding a job. Grants, bursaries and scholarships, specifically for care leavers, are also available if needed. These could be from your local authority, your college, university, or other organisations. For university, you can also get a student loan that you don't have to pay back until you're earning a certain amount.

I also wanted to let you know that you have access to free support and advice from Become – the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. They run a **Care Advice Line** on **0800 023 2033** (open 10am-5pm, Monday to Friday). You can call their dedicated advisors and they'll answer your questions and give you advice on your next steps. You can also email advice@becomecharity.org.uk or visit propel.org.uk, which has lots more information about the application process, funding, and what support colleges and universities offer care leavers.

Going to college was a great decision. I have been able to continue my education in a really supportive and encouraging environment.

Remember – you are not alone. There is help and support available from your school, college, local authority, and Become.

Keep going, and keep smiling.

The letters were accompanied by a leaflet signposting young people to Become's **Care Advice Line**, a free help and advice line for care-experienced young people, and their **Propel website** which collates the support available to care leavers from colleges and universities across the UK.



Thinking about your next steps in education can be overwhelming, particularly if you are care experienced

It's normal to have lots of thoughts, questions and emotions about your future

Become is here to help.

Our specialist advisor is here to give you one-to-one, tailored advice on making your choice, applying, accessing support and much, much more, so you can start your journey into Further or Higher education with confidence

Call the Become Care Advice Line for **FREE** on **0800 023 2033** (open 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday), email **ADVICE@BECOMECHARITY.ORG.UK** or check out our Propel website **WWW.PROPEL.ORG.UK** for more information on further and higher education support for care experienced people

Which college or university is best for me?

How do I apply?

What support is offered?

How do I fill in the application forms?

Where will I live?

What about travel costs?

What course should I apply for?

Can I get a grant and/or a bursary?

Will I make friends?

What about costs and fees?

Will the teachers understand me?

propel

The letters were distributed to young people via their VSHs, who used their knowledge of the young people's educational trajectory to decide whether to send them a FE or HE letter.

2. FE/HE Advisor

The second part of the programme involved the recruitment of an FE/HE Advice and Support Officer, who was hired by Become and funded by WWCS for one year. Their role was to provide

tailored advice and support to students and professionals around FE or HE matters for young people in care or care leavers.

Case study: Zainab*

Zainab was referred to the Advice and Support Officer for Further and Higher Education in January 2021. Zainab, 22, needed information on moving out of her current accommodation and into university.

There were a number of concerns about Zainab's current relationship with the family member she lived with. She wasn't allowed out of the home alone. Zainab did not want anyone to know that she was seeking support from Become or that she was planning on leaving to attend university. She lived a considerable distance from her responsible authority and did not have any local leaving care support.

Become provided her with support to re-open her leaving care case so that she could have a personal advisor assigned to her. They also provided information about university accommodation and applying for student finance. Information was shared with Zainab on other agencies who could support her, including a referral to the forced marriage unit. The Advice and Support Officer is continuing to support Zainab so she is prepared to start this autumn.

*Names have been changed for confidentiality

3. Videos

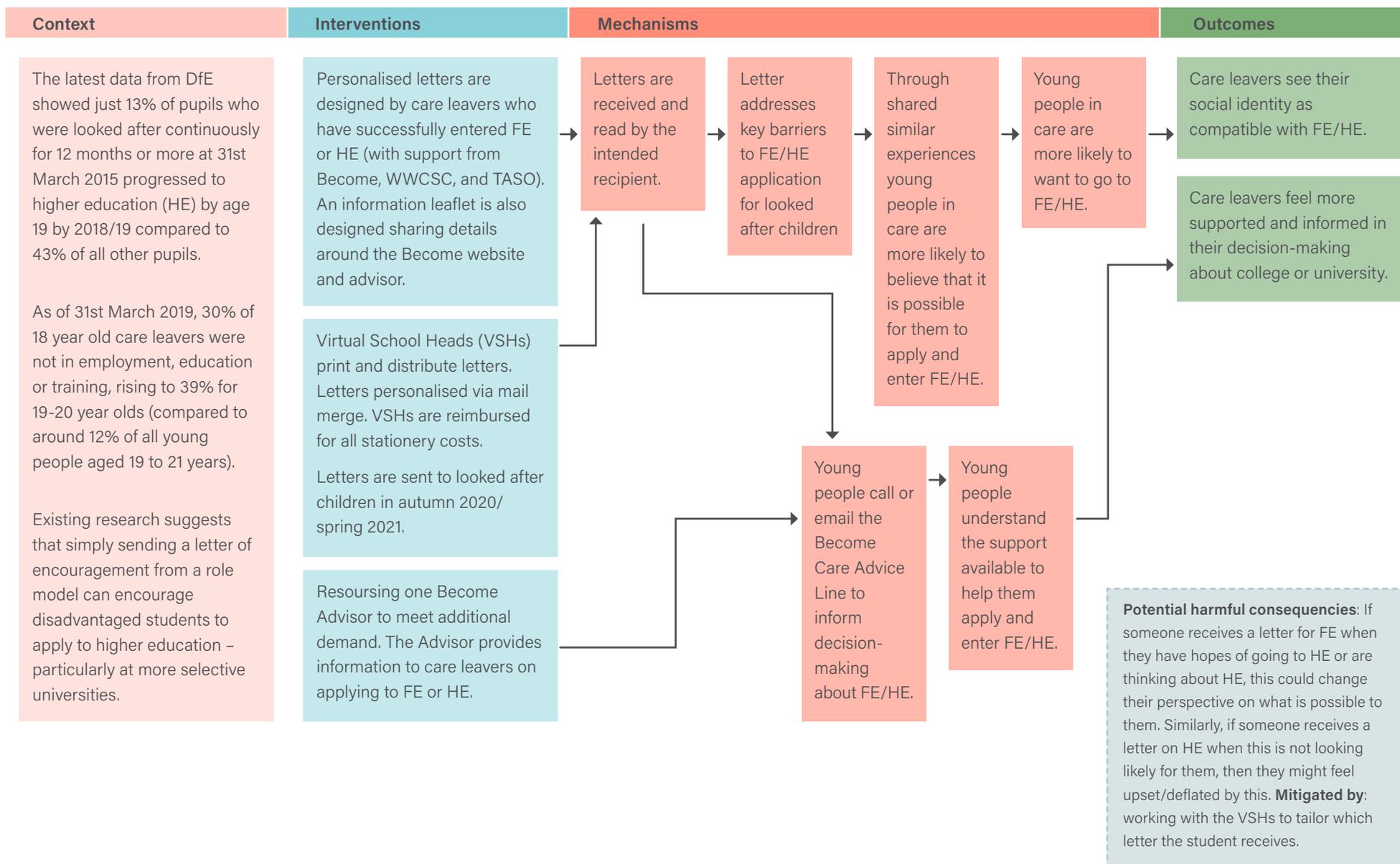
The third part of the programme involved a number of young care leavers sharing their experience of FE or HE in **short videos** published on the Become website. As with the letters, the rationale was to

share the experiences of relatable role models to demonstrate to care-experienced young people that attending FE or HE was a pathway available to them.

4. Become. (n.d.). Is higher education for me? <https://propel.org.uk/UK/is-higher-education-for-me/#inspiration>

Theory of change

The diagram below depicts the theory of change for the Springboard Programme.



4. WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME?

To understand how the programme worked in practice we did two surveys: one seeking feedback from VSHs on the process of sending the letters and one requesting data on the number of FE and HE letters sent. In addition, semi-structured interviews were completed with Become's FE/HE Officer and their Senior Advice and Support Officer. We did not conduct an impact evaluation. This was in part because the population of young people eligible for HE was too small (though we did include FE for the programme) and in part because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on VSHs ability to take part.

In total, 23 local authorities participated in the programme. Of the 18 who provided data, a total of 3,036 letters were sent out. Of these, 1,977 letters were from a care experienced young person in FE, and 1059 letters from a care experienced young person in HE.

VSHs found letter distribution straightforward

VSHs told us that distributing letters was straightforward and they were satisfied with the guidance and stationery provided to send the letters and leaflets. There were some barriers to delivering the programme.

One identified barrier was resourcing the administration of the letters. Support to promote the education of children and young people in care is funded through the Pupil Premium Plus. VSHs use this funding to provide individual support to children in care (or children who have left care because of adoption, a special guardianship order or child

arrangement order) up until the age of 16 in line with their Personal Education Plan. Personal Education Plans are a statutory requirement until the age of 18. This means that for young people aged 16-18, despite the requirement to remain in education of some form, there is limited funding for VSHs to support them. During the Springboard Programme the need for additional resources was highlighted, with some VSHs requesting support from other teams. The recent introduction of a Pupil Premium Plus Post-16 pilot to fund VSHs to support children in care in FE colleges is therefore a welcome development.^{viii}

Become's FE/HE Officer and Senior Advice and Support Officer felt that hardcopy letters may also be a barrier to young people accessing the programme. They shared that from their experience, young people do not tend to open paper mail so the method of delivering letters may need further consideration.

There was positive feedback about Become's support

The FE/HE Advice and Support Officer responded to 133 FE and HE queries between the 14th December 2020 and 9th July 2021. Of these calls, 118 were in relation to HE support and 15 regarding FE support. More than half these queries were about finances (51%), followed by accommodation (38%). The majority of calls came from young people (83 for HE, 9 for FE) however calls were also received from professionals, foster carers and family members.

Although the data received indicated that nobody receiving a letter had contacted the helpline, we do not know if young people had visited the website as there was no way of capturing this information.

The Officer also delivered workshops to professionals about FE and HE and co-created six information leaflets to support young people with

their educational journey. These include a guide on mental health while studying, information on the clearing process, how to write a personal statement, managing your finances and settling into university.

Become received positive feedback from young people and professionals who accessed support for FE and HE enquiries:

“I am so excited to finally start living my life, thank you so much.”

Care experienced 23-year old starting university who received support from Become

“Thank you for your presentation, it is much appreciated. It was really useful for our students and staff alike. Thank you for also highlighting the local offers, we can ensure we look at these when working with our students.”

Feedback from a designated contact in a FE institution

Additionally, there have been positive outcomes for young people supported by Become. Of the 23 young people supported on a one-to-one basis by the FE/HE Officer, 17 have been offered places at

their chosen FE and HE institutions. However, we cannot know how much to attribute the outcomes to the support provided by Become because we did not conduct an impact evaluation.

Case study: Zayan*

Zayan was referred to the Advice and Support Officer for Further and Higher Education in January 2021. Now aged 23, he had a difficult childhood and spent time in the youth justice system between the ages of 12 and 18. Zayan wants to start an FE course but is having difficulties as he must submit evidence of qualifications, which he needed help to find. He also wanted information on the financial support available to him.

Become telephoned Zayan's VSH to identify what qualifications they held for Zayan. They also located Zayan's awarding body and education provider so he could contact them. Together, Become and Zayan have managed to retrieve copies of four of his qualification. His case is still ongoing. The next steps are to identify what other qualification certificates are necessary for his application or to see if there is another route onto the course, as he is a mature student.

*Names have been changed for confidentiality

The programme is low cost

The programme is low cost and straightforward. The total cost of the letter component was £4,488 which amounted to £2 per letter sent to a young person. The video component of the intervention was £5,710. The total cost of the Become advisor role was £34,000. For full cost details, please see the Appendix D.

We found no evidence of adverse effects of the programme and conclude that the programme can be replicated at low cost. Future implementation should consider an impact evaluation.

The following template could be used by VSHs and designated teachers who wish to generate their own letters using care leaver role models from their local areas:

Dear [name]

[Introduction – author explains how they are from a similar background as the letter recipient and establishes themselves as sufficiently relatable to act as a role model]

[Role model story – author explains that they are currently in FE or HE and describes a challenge faced in getting there but how they are now flourishing]

[Future options – why it is important to consider a wide range of options, and the benefits of FE and HE]

[Support is available – provide reassuring messages about the cost of FE or HE and the financial/other support which is available]

[Access to Become support – framing the advisor as a service which has been provided and they should take a look at]

[Social identity reassurance – link back to the author's identity and experience of social care – closing statement emphasising that the recipient should consider FE or HE and that there is support available]

[Sign off]

5. CONCLUSION

This project explored the possibility of using relatable role model letters to encourage young people in care to consider going on to FE or HE. We found that the intervention was straightforward to implement and low cost. We were not able to conduct an impact evaluation because of the difficulty in recruiting a big enough sample. The programme also highlighted barriers around data availability and resources that need to be addressed to help future work in this area. Most notably:

- The quality of the data and data infrastructure should be improved to provide accurate data on care leavers attending FE and HE up until the age of 25 and beyond as data becomes available.
- Programmes aiming to increase care leavers' attendance in FE and HE should consider both support required to raise young people's attainment at an earlier age and support to help older care leavers access FE and HE at a later stage.
- Support should be in place to ensure VSHs have the resources they need to assist young people in care aged 16-18 with their next steps in education.

6. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Tables

Table 1: Letters and leaflet

	1st Wave (Nov-Dec 2020)	2nd Wave (April – May 2021)
VSHs who returned admin data	18	15
FE letters sent by VSHs	1,056	921
HE letters sent by VSHs	614	445
Total number of letters sent	1,670	1,366

Table 2: FE/HE Advice and Support Officer

Types of FE/HE Queries	Number of professionals and families seeking advice and support	Number of young people seeking advice and support
Accommodation	11	21
Applications	8	15
Finance	15	28
Other	0	9
Postgraduate	6	19
UASC	4	Not recorded

Table 3: Cost of letter, video and advisor components on the programme

Activity	Cost included	Unit cost	Number	Total
Development of letters ⁵	Payment to participants	£11	4	£43
Development of letters	Staff time to interview participants and finalise the letter	£29	4	£115
Dissemination of the letters	Postage and stationery			£4,330
Total (letters)				£4,488
Development of videos	Payment to participants	£86	10	£860
Development of videos	Staff time to record the videos and edit	£30	30	£900
Development of videos	External resource to edit the videos	£395	10	£3,950
Total (videos)				£5,710
Become Advisor	Salary for one year	£34,000	1	£34,000
Total				£44,198

5. The young people who developed the letters were a subset of those who developed the videos. Only an additional hour or so of their time was required as most of the work had been conducted during the development of the video.

End notes

- i. Department for Education (2020), Widening Participation in Higher Education <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>
- ii. Neil Harrison (2020) Patterns of participation in higher education for care-experienced students in England: why has there not been more progress? Studies in Higher Education, (45)9, 1986-2000. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1582014
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- viii. Department of Education, Pupil Premium Plus post-16 pilot, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium-plus-post-16-pilot-submit-an-expression-of-interest>



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