

***Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology***  
*Programme Director: Vivian Hill*



**UCL, Institute of Education**

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**The needs and experiences of young people from care backgrounds in further education colleges**

**Sacha Grimes**

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**Declaration of own work**

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Signed: S Grimes

## **ABSTRACT**

For young people from care backgrounds, the transition to college coincides with the transition to independence whereby they are expected to learn the skills needed for adult life against a backdrop of challenging life circumstances. Educational psychologists (EPs) are increasingly finding themselves working within further education (FE) and therefore have a role to play in supporting this group of young people. This research aimed to identify the needs of young people from care backgrounds, what colleges are doing to support them, how this support is experienced and the potential role for EPs.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 college professionals from two colleges, one virtual school head and ten young people from a care background attending college, one of whom had withdrawn from college. Thematic analysis was used to highlight patterns within the data set.

Findings highlight the needs of young people from care backgrounds including; specialised information from discreet services, quality student-professional relationships, supportive peer-networks, flexible boundaries, multiple chances to succeed and support managing daily routines. A lack of homogeneity was found particularly with regards to the differing needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors, demonstrating a need for individualised assessment and tailored support. A variety of formal systems appeared to be in place to support students including a designated teacher and the development of enhanced communication systems with virtual schools to aid better identification of students. EPs appeared to be a relatively scarce resource and limited to statutory work.

This research has implications for EPs, highlighting a need for them to be more involved in supporting transition and promoting well-being for students from care backgrounds in colleges. It also encourages colleges to reflect on what they are doing to support this group of young people and identifies an acute need for statutory guidance targeted at the sector.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Rationale**

Young people from care backgrounds often experience poorer outcomes than their non-looked after peers. In 2017 17.5% of students in care achieved a pass in English and maths at key stage four compared to 58.9% in the general population (DfE, 2017a). School exclusions are higher for those from care backgrounds, 10.44% receiving a fixed term exclusion in 2016, compared to 2.11% of their non-looked after peers (DfE, 2017b). Outcomes permeate beyond schooling with many school leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET), some entering custody (DfE, 2017b). Of the 26,340 care leavers in 2016, 40% were NEET at ages 19, 20 and 21 compared to 13% in the general population (DfE, 2017b).

FE serves as a platform to employment, higher education (HE) and training for care leavers transitioning to adulthood. Given low GCSE attainment and disproportionate representation among those who are NEET, a key government priority is to establish how FE providers can support young people from care backgrounds, ensuring successful completion of courses. Research is needed to reveal 'what works' and therefore inform government policy also providing information to FE colleges looking to develop their provision for young people from care backgrounds. This is especially important given that compulsory education has been extended to age 18 and that FE colleges are one of the main providers for vulnerable groups (Crawford, Meschi, & Vignoles, 2011; Fletcher & Perry, 2008).

EPs have always had a role to play in supporting children and young people from care backgrounds (Osborne, Norgate, & Traill, 2009). With recent legislative changes seeing this role extended to young people up to the age of 25, EPs are likely to find themselves working increasingly within the FE sector (DfE, 2015a). Research is needed to identify the role of EPs in supporting those in FE and those transitioning out of care.

### **1.2 Research aims and questions**

The aim of this research is to identify what the needs of young people from care backgrounds in FE are and how these needs can be met. For the purpose of this

study, the focus will be on FE colleges given the limited time for completion. The following research questions will be answered:

**1. What formal and informal systems are in place to support young people from care backgrounds in the context of an FE college?**

**a, What are the key challenges?**

**b, How are they experienced by young people?**

**2. What are the needs of young people from care backgrounds in the context of FE colleges?**

There is a growing emphasis on multi-professional working when it comes to planning, delivering and reviewing services to meet the needs of all young people from care backgrounds (HM Government, 2013b) and educational psychology services (EPSs) play a key role. A survey of 84 EPSs in England found that 69% were involved in fostering and adoption work, some holding designated posts and others dedicating approximately 67 days per year to work with looked after children (Osborne et al., 2009). This work involved multi-professional consultation on educational needs, intervention planning and providing training to carers and professionals (Osborne et al., 2009). Since the publication of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE, 2015a), EPs have seen their role widen to working with young people between the ages of 18 and 25. FE provision is a relatively unexplored domain when it comes to EP practice. For this reason, the current research also aims to explore what multi-professional working already exists to meet the needs of young people from care backgrounds in FE but also the role EPs may play in this. One final research question will be answered:

**3. How is the role of EPs perceived among young people from care backgrounds and the educational professionals working with them, in relation to meeting their needs?**

## **1.3 Definitions**

### **1.3.1 Young people from care backgrounds**

The term 'young people from care backgrounds' will refer to young people deemed to be 'looked after' as well as those who have left the care system. The term 'looked

after' was introduced by *The Children Act* (1989) to describe a child or young person who is in the legal care of a local authority (LA), requiring accommodation for more than 24 hours, is subject to a care or placement order or is voluntarily in care. Children enter the care system for a number of reasons including; abuse, neglect, parental disability, ill health or death, family dysfunction or where the child has significant needs that cannot be met in the family home (Zayed & Harker, 2015). Due to global displacement in recent years, increasing numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors have entered the care system therefore adopting the 'looked after' status (DfE, 2017a). The number of unaccompanied minors looked after by all LAs totalled 4,456 at the end of March 2017, the highest proportion living in London and the South East (DfE, 2017b). 74% of this group were reported to be aged 16 or older, having significant implications for FE colleges and leaving care services (DfE, 2017b).

*The Children Act* (1989) requires LAs to take reasonable steps to ensure suitable accommodation is provided to those in care such as foster care placements, residential placements or accommodation with relatives. On leaving care, LAs are still responsible for supporting young people with finding suitable accommodation. In 2017, 35% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were living independently, 16% in semi-independent or supported lodgings, 7% remaining with former foster carers and 12% living with family (DfE, 2017b). However, 7% of care leavers were deemed to be in unsuitable accommodation and the destination of 11% was unknown (DfE, 2017b).

For the purpose of this research both young people in care and those having left care will be considered, since the aim is to explore the needs of young people from care backgrounds in FE and this is a time when this group begins making the transition to independence. The *Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000)* outlines several groups of young people that meet the criteria for additional support post 16 including;

- **eligible young people**- those who have been looked after for at least 13 weeks between the ages of 14 and 17 and are still in care,
- **relevant young people**- those who have been looked after for at least 13 weeks between the ages of 14 and 17 and have left care and
- **former relevant young people**- those between 18 and 21 who have left care and those between 21 and 25 who have left care and are in education.

### **1.3.2. FE Pathways through FE**

According to the DfE (2016) 'further education (FE) includes any study after secondary education that's not part of higher education.' Although young people are expected to participate in education until 18, at 16 they can pursue their education in a variety of ways (DfE, 2015b). Options include;

- staying on at school (sixth form),
- attending a sixth form college, general FE or specialist college,
- enrolling on an apprenticeship, traineeship or supported internship and
- work or volunteer while studying.

(Connexions, n.d).

Since 2013, FE courses have been available to young people from the age of 14 who wish to study vocational qualifications alongside the KS4 curriculum (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2017). In 2016 an estimated 20,000 14 and 15 year olds attend FE institutions and there are around four million publically funded students in FE, the vast majority (75%) aged over 19 (Snelson & Deyes, 2016). Approximately 15,000 Ofqual regulated qualifications are available including both vocational and academic courses, usually ranging from entry level (functional skills) to level three (A Level, diploma, NVQ) (Snelson & Deyes, 2016).

### **Origins of FE colleges**

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the introduction of technical colleges, designed to offer vocational training and meet local business demand for a knowledgeable and skilled workforce. Technical colleges continued to offer vocational qualifications throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seeing the development of Higher National Certificates and Diplomas in the 1960s and offering an alternative to academic post school education. From the 1970s, colleges were encouraged to reach out to unemployed and vulnerable groups in order to equip them with skills for the workplace. National Vocational Qualifications were introduced, again offering a work based alternative to academic education for those with few or no qualifications. Modern apprenticeships were introduced in 1995, leading to the development of the National Apprenticeship Service in 2009. Through this scheme, employers offer employment based contracts with students who also study towards qualifications, usually at an FE college. The framework combines

vocational study with functional skills in literacy and maths for those who have not achieved these during compulsory schooling.

### **Current landscape**

In 1993, the Conservative Government took FE colleges out of LA control, making them the publically funded but private corporations that they are today. Currently, all FE colleges are exempt charitable organisations, meaning that they are not regulated by the charity commissioners but initially by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) and now the DfE. FE colleges are governed by a board of governors, including staff, students and external governors, whose role it is to ensure quality of performance and financial planning (DBIS, 2014). Ultimately, the running of colleges is overseen by the Secretary of State who has the power to intervene. Like schools, FE colleges are subject to inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

The *Further and Higher Education Act (1992)* changed the landscape of colleges, allowing them to provide both FE and HE, including undergraduate and post graduate courses. In 2016 there were approximately 178,000 learners studying A-Levels in FE colleges compared with 306,000 learners on apprenticeship courses (Association of Colleges, 2016). Having their origins in work based training, it is unsurprising that FE colleges show a bias towards vocational qualifications and this has implications for the nature of students attending colleges (Crawford et al., 2011; Wallace, 2013). Academic education runs parallel with vocational training but the two have rarely been regarded with the same prestige. Wallace (2013) argues that while academic pathways, involving A Levels and undergraduate study, were held in high regard and attended by high achieving middle and upper class students, vocational routes were seen as less favourable and pursued by those from working class families and those who did not succeed in school. Wallace writes that

*'Further education was often referred to...as the sector of the second chance- the sector that provides learning opportunities for those who didn't succeed in school the first time around. In a system where success was measured in O Levels..., A Levels and university degrees, this attitude was perhaps inevitable.'*

(Wallace, 2013, p18)

There is some evidence to suggest that this pattern continues to exist (Allen, Parameshwaran, & Thomson, 2016; Toth, Sylva, & Sammons, 2015). Statistics show a higher proportion of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds attending FE colleges and a higher proportion of advantaged students attending school sixth forms (Crawford et al., 2011; Fletcher & Perry, 2008). Colleges are also more likely to see a higher proportion of students who have not achieved well at GCSE whereas high achievers are more likely to attend sixth forms where academic subjects are more available (Crawford et al., 2011; Thompson, 2009). Often vocational routes are seen as the preferred option for young people aged 14 and 15 who have disengaged with schooling (Lumby, 2007). Given the diversity of entry level and functional skills based courses available, FE colleges are likely to be more attractive to learners who have experienced barriers to achieving the GCSE grades required for the academic courses offered by sixth forms. In 2015, 17% of learners enrolled in colleges had a learning difficulty or disability (Association of Colleges, 2016). Colleges are also one of the main providers of courses teaching English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), often studied by young people who have arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker.

### **Implications**

The variety of learners and diversity of need presents FE colleges with a unique set of challenges. However, colleges may have some way to go when it comes to developing inclusive practice. For example, some argue that there is a lack of teacher training on the needs of vulnerable students at this level as well as inconsistent opportunities and practice between FE colleges, for those with additional needs (Elson, 2011; Ofsted, 2010). Although there is little research into inclusion in FE, increasing attention has been paid to developing inclusive practice with, for example, the SEND Code of Practice being extended to incorporate the needs of students aged 16- 25 and placing greater emphasis on supporting the transition to adulthood (DfE, 2015a). However, the impact of this legislation on colleges is little researched and not yet reported on by Ofsted.

The 'Post 16 Skills Plan' addresses the need to bring parity of esteem between technical training and academic study, ensuring a level of equality between those who choose vocational routes and those who choose to study A Levels (DBIS, 2016). There are already signs of commitment to this, with topics for discussion at the annual Association of Colleges conference including a review of technical education,

increasing the number of high quality apprenticeships and the introduction of 'T' levels (a new technical qualification) by 2020 (Belgutay, 2017b). The 'Post 16 Skills Plan' also sets out objectives for reform including granting employers greater responsibilities for setting higher qualification standards and making vocational subjects more attractive to young people regardless of their demographic. It recognises the need for study towards English and maths qualifications to be mandatory for 16 to 19 year olds and available freely to adults undertaking vocational training without qualifications in these subjects. However the forced re-sit approach has been criticised for its irrelevant curriculum and for failing students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, who perhaps need a different approach to acquiring functional skills (Belgutay, 2017a). It also acknowledges that those who are not ready for formal qualifications at 16 or older will need tailored and individualised support, matched to their aspirations and prior attainment, referred to as a 'transition year' and deemed particularly relevant to care leavers (DBIS, 2016). However there is currently little guidance as to what this transition year might look like or who it might benefit most. Again, this presents a gap for research to fill.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Literature search**

A review of the literature was carried out between September 2016 and February 2018, using three databases including Psychinfo, ERIC and the British Education Index. Several advanced searches were carried out and involved the following search terms;

- looked after young people and further education
- care leavers and further education
- care leavers
- Looked after children and educational psychology services
- unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and education

Synonyms for each term were also used. The term 'looked after young people' was used in conjunction with 'young people in foster care' and 'young people from care backgrounds.' 'Care leavers' was supplemented with 'young people leaving care' and 'young people aging out of care.' 'Further education' was also supplemented with 'further education colleges,' 'college' and 'post 16 education.' 'Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors' was used in conjunction with 'unaccompanied minors' and 'unaccompanied refugees.'

Websites of relevant government departments, charitable organisations and university based research centers were explored for relevant publications. For example the DfE website was searched for statistics and documents relevant to young people in care and FE. Other websites included; 'Become: the charity for children in care' and 'The Rees Centre, University of Oxford.'

Articles were limited to those derived from the UK post 2006 and those involving participants aged between 5 and 25. This was to ensure that the literature provided an accurate summary of the experiences of young people from care backgrounds in the UK and within ten years of this research beginning, therefore reflecting experiences of recent legislation and initiatives.

It was important to utilise research papers with both small and large sample sizes and this was in part due to the difficulty in obtaining studies with larger samples. Researchers often find it challenging to access looked after children (Heptinstall, 2000; Murray, 2005) so small sample sizes are a pragmatic solution to the difficulties of recruitment. Further still, the philosophical underpinnings of this research hold the view that each individual's reality is unique and therefore makes no attempt to generalise findings (see section 3.2). Keeping with this view, consideration will be given to all research offering a valuable contribution to the literature review, regardless of whether they represent a small or large sample of viewpoints.

## **2.2 Literature review**

An overview of the literature will be provided on the needs and experiences of young people from care backgrounds in relation to their education and transition to independence. The review will begin by looking at some of the factors that contribute to the educational outcomes of young people from care backgrounds. While much of the research is focused on school aged children, an exploration of this will help to set the scene and highlight why young people from care backgrounds tend to perform less well than their peers in education. The literature review will then discuss some of the issues relevant to young people leaving care at the point of transition to FE and what LAs and colleges are doing to support this transition. Consideration will be given to the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors given that this group have followed a different pathway into the UK care system and may present with different needs. Finally, there will be an exploration of the existing research on EPS involvement in work with young people in or leaving care.

### **2.2.1 Factors underpinning educational outcomes**

A complex interaction between a number factors can offer some insight into why young people from care backgrounds tend to experience poorer outcomes than their peers. Many have entered the care system as a result of abuse or neglect but always because they are not receiving appropriate care (Zayed & Harker, 2015). As a result, some may have missed important learning opportunities, putting them developmentally behind their peers. In an extensive analysis of national data, Sebba et al. (2015) identified several factors linked to outcomes in education for looked after children. Those who achieved better in education were more likely to have entered care earlier and have spent longer in care, indicating that the care system itself isn't

responsible for negative outcomes. Young people from care backgrounds are more likely to be identified with SEND again presenting them with further challenges in education (Sebba et al., 2015). In 2017, 56.3% of looked after children were identified with SEND compared to 14.4% of their non-looked after peers (DfE, 2017a).

For some young people in care, frequent placement moves is the norm (Ward, 2009). Statistics show that 68% of looked after children had just one placement in the 12 months preceding April 2015, 21% experiencing two placements and 10% three or more (DfE, 2017b). However, this data represents a single year and longitudinal data is needed to gain a clearer sense of the number of placements throughout the duration of time in care. Young people at the end of their school careers are particularly vulnerable to the effects of placement changes. Driscoll (2011) interviewed seven care leavers and found that, despite having high aspirations for themselves, all were disappointed with what they had achieved in school, attributing this to placement changes at crucial times in their education.

Educational outcomes might also be attributed to the expectations and advocacy of others. The Who Cares Trust (2012) conducted online surveys with 100 young people aged 14 or older and 213 professionals including social workers, personal advisors, teachers and carers. The survey revealed inconsistencies in the aspirations young people perceived others to have of them, many feeling that there was at least one adult who believed in them but at least one who did not. The majority of professionals claimed that, while they themselves had high expectations for what young people from care backgrounds could achieve, their colleagues did not. This finding is however, susceptible to social desirability bias and responses are likely to be biased by the fact that individuals completed them on a voluntary basis and may have been those with a vested interest in the issue of advocacy (The Who Cares? Trust, 2012). McClung & Gayle (2010) interviewed Scottish young people from care backgrounds aged between 16 and 19, 40% of whom claimed that there was no one who showed an interest in their education. The European YIPPEE project (Young People in Public Care: Pathways to Education in Europe) interviewed 170 young people aged between 18 and 24 from the UK, Spain, Hungary, Denmark and Sweden. For many participants, lack of birth family interest in education, coupled with low expectations from social workers and carers presented as barriers to educational achievement (Jackson & Cameron, 2011). In the UK in particular, Jackson & Cameron (2011, p40)

identified that a large proportion of the 32 young people interviewed reported their foster carers as 'uninterested and ill-equipped to offer support.' However, in some of these studies, the young person self-reports are rarely triangulated with the views of carers, social workers or teachers.

Where young people from care backgrounds have an educational advocate, outcomes are better. Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley (2005) interviewed 129 care leavers at university, a large number given the small minority of care leavers attending university. For many participants foster carers acted as educational advocates, providing structure and space to study, promoting school attendance and having high expectations about what the young person could achieve. However, in some cases it was not possible to establish the reasons for coming into care, making it difficult to ascertain whether pre-care experiences had impacted on the decision to go to university (Jackson et al., 2005).

There are further concerns that those working directly with young people from care backgrounds lack the knowledge needed to meet their needs. Banardo's (2006, p7) found that some young people felt stereotyped by their teachers who made assumptions about their care status, labelling them as 'bad' or 'trouble makers.' More recently, Mannay et al. (2017) found that young people felt stigmatised as 'troubled' among professionals and peers. Jackson & McParlin (2006) highlight how schools fail to see the potential of looked after children by neglecting to look beyond their social and emotional difficulties. They argue that 'instead of addressing the underlying causes, however, schools generally resort to exclusion, or demand that the child should be transferred to a special school' (Jackson & McParlin, 2006, p2). According to Berridge (2012) behavioural difficulties have been misunderstood and inappropriately addressed in looked after children, with many being labelled with special educational needs and not receiving the right support. These problems may reflect the lack of knowledge and understanding teachers have of the needs of children and young people from care backgrounds and how best to address these needs. It would certainly explain why we see a disproportionate number of this group being excluded from education (DfE, 2017a). However more evidence is needed to corroborate this.

In summary achievement in education may be underpinned by a number of factors including, SEND, placement moves, expectations and educational advocacy from key adults as well as the understanding these adults have of the needs of young people from care backgrounds. For some young people a lack of qualifications at the school leaving age has led to them selecting less challenging and less desirable courses than initially hoped for (Driscoll, 2011). There are also concerns that this group of young people are being pushed into 'soft' subjects or more vocational routes as a result of underachieving at school (Jackson & Cameron, 2011). We might then expect engagement on these courses to be less than if the young person had pursued a suitably challenging course in an area of their interest. In addition, young people from care backgrounds frequently cite negative school experiences, low self-esteem and confidence as barriers to engagement in FE (Baker, 2017). Clearly, even before beginning college, these young people have already experienced a number of challenges that have presented a barrier to their ability to engage with education.

Nevertheless, for some young people, college offers the opportunity for a second chance at education, an environment in which more independence is granted and there is opportunity to specialise in an area of interest (Evans, Meyer, & Robinson, 2009). However, those from care backgrounds face a range of challenges with regards to emerging adulthood that their peers may not.

### **2.2.2 The transition to independence**

The age at which young people are required to make decisions about FE often coincides with the transition independence. Independent living, management of personal health and finances, education and career choices as well as the development of social and romantic relationships are central to this transition process. Arnett (2000, p469) refers to this transition period as '*emerging adulthood*' and claims that it is a process of developing maturity, taking place from late adolescence, continuing throughout the third decade of life.

For many young people in the UK this 'emerging adulthood' takes place over time, aided both emotionally and financially through parental support and advice. In 2016 approximately 53% of 18 to 25 year olds were living at home with their parents (Office for National Statistics, 2016a). These statistics do not include young people at university living in halls of residence then returning to parents during vacations, making the figure even higher. Young people may choose to return to the parental

home for reasons such as financial difficulties or break down in relationships, the family home offering a base from which to explore, take risks, make mistakes and return if things do not work out.

For young people leaving care, the situation may be very different, especially for those without this level of familial support. Young people from care backgrounds cease to become looked after on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and foster carers are no longer legally obligated to provide support. Their transition to adulthood has often been likened to falling off a 'cliff edge,' whereby young people experience a dramatic reduction in the support services available and are expected to live more independently (HM Government, 2016; The Centre for Social Justice, 2013). Cameron et al. (2018) argue for the reconceptualisation of achieving 'independence' for care leavers given that it is not always realistically achievable. They found that the disadvantages of being in care with regards to achievement in education, employment and mental health, permeate beyond leaving care. Although, the study only examined data for participants up to age 30. Nevertheless, they demonstrate how care leavers often remain interdependent on welfare services in the absence of a supportive family network. As Cameron et al. (2018, p164) suggest perhaps leaving care is 'better conceptualised as a gradual process involving a changing and different relationship to support within the welfare state.'

The government has attempted to put in place laws and initiatives to support care leavers without familial support. The *Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000)* and the *Children and Families Act (2014)*, place greater responsibility on LAs to support 21 to 24 year old care leavers if they remain in education. The Act requires a pathway plan to be in place from the age of 16, which outlines plans for the young person's future education and career, accommodation, financial arrangements, health, social and emotional well-being, identity, family and relationships as well as plans to support the young person develop the skills needed for independent living. A personal advisor is appointed whose responsibility it is to keep in touch with the young person and ensure they access relevant services, including those associated with housing, finance and careers advice.

Despite these welcome changes, The Care Leavers' Association (2014) argues that the government should be doing more to support care leavers, regardless of them being in education aged 18 to 25. LAs are not obliged to provide accommodation for care leavers after the age of 18 or maintain a pathway plan for those over 21 not in education. The impact of the legislation has not been well monitored. Until recently the government has not routinely collected official data on social outcomes, mental health and care leavers views. No data is collected on education and employment for care leavers after 21 years of age and some LAs fail to keep in touch with care leavers (National Audit Office, 2015). Little data is available from Ofsted inspections of children's services departments: inspections only began in 2013. By 2015, only 59 had been inspected. Of these only 34% were judged as good or better (National Audit Office, 2015). Concerns have arisen about inadequate use of pathway plans and personal advisors but as yet the DfE has failed to intervene and support LAs to make improvements (National Audit Office, 2015). There is further evidence from a relatively small scrutiny of 21 case files, that pathway plans are inconsistently implemented. Munro et al. (2011) found that only 13 had comprehensive information on the young person's education and career plans and even fewer (11) had detailed information on accommodation. Around two thirds failed to include adequate detail on support from birth families, foster carers and health and identity needs (Munro et al., 2011). More recently, Baker (2017) highlighted inconsistencies in the pathway planning process with some young people finding it useful to reflect and set targets and others feeling uninvolved in decisions. Nevertheless, in a recent policy paper 'Keep on Caring,' the government has acknowledged inconsistencies in the support provided by personal advisors and have shown commitment to reviewing the role, extending this support to care leavers aged up to 25 and taking steps towards collecting outcomes data in order to better plan support (HM Government, 2016).

LAs provide weekly living allowances to care leavers aged 16 and 17, although there is no law which states how much this should be (*Children (Leaving Care) Act, 2000*). There appears to be large differences between LAs in the amount they spend on supporting care leavers and little data on the quality of this spending (National Audit Office, 2015) meaning that care leavers could be entering into a 'post code lottery,' with some receiving higher or lower quality support depending on where they live. A bursary to support setting up home is available and those aged 18 or older may be entitled to apply for benefits (HM Government, 2017). Young people from care backgrounds may also be entitled to receive a 16 to 19 bursary, worth up to £1200,

should they continue in education (DfE, 2016). However there is little data on the impact of these bursaries.

More recently, the government introduced the 'Staying Put' policy, allowing young people to remain with their foster carers after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, ensuring ongoing stability and support as they transition to adulthood (HM Government, 2013a). However foster carers are not legally obliged to provide continuity of care. 'In effect they (young people) are lodgers, and their former foster carers become their landlord' (Hiles, Moss, Thorne, Wright, & Dallos, 2014, p2). LAs are expected to support this scheme but funding may vary from one LA to the next and it is not available to those living in residential care. This policy has meant that between 2016 and 2017, only 51% of the 3,170 care leavers remained living with their foster carers for a minimum of three months after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (DfE, 2017b). However, the statistics cannot be truly relied upon given that there are inconsistencies in how successful LAs are at staying in touch with care leavers (DfE, 2017b). Nor does it establish the impact that 'staying put' has had for young people.

Further issues with current legislation and initiatives are highlighted by research documenting the challenges that care leavers continue to face even when they have transitioned to semi-independent living, whereby they receive support from a key worker, based at their accommodation, to manage everyday practicalities. The experience of leaving care can be emotionally stressful for the young person who has not acquired the skills for adult living, including those involved with budgeting, managing rental agreements, cooking for one's self, maintaining a clean home and a healthy work- leisure balance (Gill & Daw, 2017). For some, sustaining education, training or employment can be challenging, proving too much to manage alongside the emotional difficulties linked to being in care, and accommodation break-downs, homelessness and disengagement with education is not uncommon (Dixon, 2007; Gill & Daw, 2017). The Children's Society report that care leavers are more likely to experience serious financial problems including spiralling debt (Ayre, Capron, Egan, French, & Gregg, 2016). An estimated 4,000 benefits sanctions were given to care leavers between 2014 and 2016, very few of which were successfully appealed (Ayre et al., 2016).

A recent review of 80 studies documenting the experiences of care leavers with regards to transitioning to independent living found that they looked forward to gaining independence and the freedom to make decisions for themselves but the reality of living independently did not live up to expectations (Baker, 2017). Many reported difficulties with budgeting and low incomes and a lack satisfactory housing options (Baker, 2017). While this study can be commended for an extensive review of the literature containing young people's voices, it fails to adequately quantify the extent to which young people experience particular issues.

In summary, for some young people the transition to FE aged 16 or older can coincide with the transition out of care, the occurrence of which may create risks to engagement with education. The government have taken steps towards supporting this process through pathway plans, personal advisors, bursaries and the staying put policy yet there are a variety of issues with these initiatives including a lack of adequate data on their impact. This literature review will now consider some further issues related to the outcomes of young people transitioning out of care.

### **2.2.3 Interpersonal relationships**

Stein (2008) makes predictions about those most likely to be successful on leaving care. He refers to three groups, the first being those who 'move on' successfully following stable placements, success in education, and a gradual transition to independence (Stein, 2008, p41). 'Survivors' in comparison, are more likely to have left care earlier, experienced unstable foster care relationships and left education with fewer qualifications, sometimes entering low paid or unfulfilling jobs. This group experience a sense of having achieved things on their own. The third group is considered to be 'most disadvantaged' and represents those who have experienced the most challenging life circumstances, emotional problems, frequent placement moves, becoming unemployed, homeless and isolated on leaving care (Stein, 2008, p42). Stein (2008) argues that a strong social support network is critical for transitions out of care to be successful and a central resilience factor in those who 'move on.' This support may come from peers, professionals, biological family members as well as foster families (Munro et al., 2011).

Peer friendships serve as a basis for moral development, self-esteem, emotional support and leisure activity (Dixon & Stein, 2005; Erwin, 2013; Hollingworth, 2012) but being from a care background puts some at risk of social exclusion since challenging life circumstances make forming and maintaining relationships difficult (Ridge & Millar, 2000). In Baker's (2017) review, young people frequently highlighted difficulty trusting others due to previous break downs in relationships. Social isolation on leaving care was not uncommon (Baker, 2017). Attachment theory offers a framework with which to understand relationship difficulties in adult life. Inadequate caregiving and disruption to early attachment figures, creates a negative internal representation of relationship aspects such as love, trust and security (Bowlby, 1971). There may also be a lack of opportunities to develop the social skills required to form and maintain a social network. Frequent placement moves that inhibit the ability to maintain long-lasting relationships, as well as feeling different to their peers contributes to difficulty in forming and maintaining supportive peer relationships (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013; Kelly et al., 2016).

Professional relationships are deemed important in order to meet practical needs including; finding accommodation and jobs, support understanding financial entitlements, and in some cases emotional support (McLeod, 2010; Munro et al., 2011). Experiences of the amount and quality of support offered by professionals appears to be inconsistent among young people and the involvement of many professionals can be confusing, especially when advice is conflicting (Hiles et al., 2014; Munro et al., 2011). Baker (2017, p20) found that young people valued professionals who were 'responsive, consistent and reliable...showed a genuine interest and empathy...demonstrated a desire to help them achieve, holding positive but realistic ambitions for them' and 'showed an interest above and beyond their job, going the extra mile.' Nevertheless, due to their previous life experiences, young people also reported finding it difficult to trust professionals and therefore disengaged with LA services because of the link with being in care (Baker, 2017).

While professional relationships might not always be held in high regard by those from care backgrounds, mentoring relationships have often been shown to fill the gap. Described by Hiles et al (2013, p2064) as 'falling somewhere between relationships with professionals and those with friends,' young people have found mentors to provide a higher level of emotional support (Clayden & Stein, 2005). Various forms of

mentoring and befriending services have been piloted in the UK, using volunteers from a variety of backgrounds (e.g. counselling, teaching and policing). What seemed to be most valued includes; trust that that person will be there in times of difficulty, a reciprocal relationship in which the young person could be of help to their mentor, the mentor's ability to listen without judgement, longevity and provision of advice (Clayden & Stein, 2005; Dallos & Comley-Ross, 2005; Hiles et al., 2013). The development of successful mentoring relationships are unlikely to come without obstacles given the difficulties some young people have in trusting others, following previous bad experiences of those trying to help (Hiles et al., 2013). However, research suggests that young people value opportunities to connect with others from care backgrounds, whether that be through formal peer mentoring schemes or informal social events, as shared experiences help build relationships (Dixon & Baker, 2016; The Care Inquiry, 2013)

Social and emotional vulnerability in interpersonal relationships may also pose a risk with regards to romantic relationships. Teenage pregnancy is more common in young people from care backgrounds (Simkiss, 2012). A recent freedom of information request revealed that approximately 22% of female care leavers become teenage mothers, a number almost three times higher than in the general population (The Centre for Social Justice, 2015). Again the reliability of this figure is difficult to determine given the number of care leavers not in contact with LAs. Barn & Mantovani (2007, p238) report that for some young people their emotional vulnerability makes 'distinguishing between a loving relationship and a sexual relationship... difficult.' Young people from care backgrounds report that their decision to have a child was somewhat influenced by feelings of loneliness and rejection (The Centre for Social Justice 2015). Nevertheless, studies show that teenage pregnancy need not be a bad thing, sometimes leading to turning point in young people's lives, providing them with purpose and stability (Knight, Chase, & Aggleton, 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2015).

In conclusion, while break downs in early attachments can lead to future difficulties in forming relationships, where good relationships do exist, they seem to be valued as protective factors. Resilience has often been linked to a sense of belonging and the need to feel related and important to others (Schofield, Larsson, & Ward, 2016). Sadly, many young people from care backgrounds report feeling lonely or isolated and this can impact their emotional well-being (Baker, 2017; Kelly et al., 2016). The

following section will now explore the incidence and impact of mental health difficulties with regards to young people from care backgrounds.

#### **2.2.4 Mental health**

While mental health difficulties appear to have increased nationally among young people, those from care backgrounds often have the added complication of challenging pre-care and in care experiences putting them at greater risk (Collishaw, Maughan, Natarajan, & Pickles, 2010; House of Commons Education Committee, 2016). The government states that almost half of children in care experience a diagnosable mental health condition (DfE, 2015c). While their non-looked after peers have the support of families and friends to see them through emerging adulthood, care leavers may not. Social isolation has been a consistent factor in the emotional well-being of young people from care backgrounds (Gill & Daw, 2017; Kelly et al., 2016). Dixon (2008) interviewed 106 care leavers, about their mental health and well-being, three months after leaving care and again 12 to 15 months later. The data was well triangulated with interviews also conducted with leaving care workers. Standardised measures were used to assess the young people's social and emotional well-being and mental health, allowing for a more reliable comparison between the base line and follow up data. At the initial interview 10% were found to have mental health difficulties (anxiety, depression and eating disorders), 42% emotional problems (aggression, mood swings and relationship difficulties) and 18% were substance misusers. At the follow up interview the number reporting mental health difficulties doubled to 24%, four had attempted suicide and 41% reported worsening of their emotional well-being. The number of substance misusers had risen to 32% (Dixon, 2008). We might assume that the explanation for this rise in mental health difficulties is directly linked to the process of transition from care to independent living. However identifying causality is complex, as Dixon (2008) points out, deterioration in mental health could also be explained by the emotional issues care leavers carry with them from the past.

The transition to adult mental health services between the ages of 16 and 18 has been criticised for leading to a break-down in support for care leavers. Reasons for this include a difference in the level of eligibility criteria for service access, poor communication and differences in the service delivery compared to children's services (Department of Health, 2009; Singh, Paul, Ford, Kramer, & Weaver, 2008). Gill & Daw

(2017) surveyed a large sample of 99 leaving care professionals from a range of 43 LAs. The need for specific mental health services targeted at supporting young people from care backgrounds was consistently highlighted as was the need for services to continue up to the age of 25 (Gill & Daw, 2017).

In summary, it can be seen why the transition to FE comes at a time of multiple life challenges. Not only are young people from care backgrounds less likely to have achieved well at school, they are also at risk of social isolation and mental health problems. This is in addition to the transition out of care and the onset of self-sufficiency in which young people are at the mercy of inconsistent LA services in the absence of a traditional family unit. Leaving school and entering FE adds another dynamic to their lives. Support in relation to FE will now be considered.

### **2.2.5 Transition to college**

Despite needing to consider career and education options at the age of 14, evidence suggests that young people are not consistently accessing effective careers advice meaning they are not aware of the broad range of options and challenging careers available (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2015; Ofsted, 2013). This problem is likely to be created in part due to cuts to the careers advisory schools outreach service, Connexions, in 2011. Young people from care backgrounds are at greater risk of underachieving in education, falling into the NEET bracket and in some cases not being able to pursue their desired pathway of education or training (DfE, 2017a; DfE, 2017b; Driscoll, 2011). Some may be returning to college after time out of education and may not have had recent advice on their career options. Timely and appropriate careers advice is therefore a high priority, particularly with regards to pursuing alternative pathways. However, the Who Cares? Trust (2012) survey of 100 young people from care backgrounds revealed that almost half had not been provided with the level of careers advice they felt they needed to make important decisions about their future. The survey also showed that young people tended to seek this advice from their carers, teachers and social workers. However, these groups were the most likely, when compared to senior managers, to report feeling that they did not have enough information to help young people make decisions (The Who Cares? Trust, 2012). More recently Ofsted (2016) reviewed the ability of FE provision to meet the needs of young people with high needs, some being from care backgrounds. The review highlighted that little has changed over the past six years, finding that careers

advice at the point of transition from school to college was poor in many of the 17 FE providers inspected. Some learners felt they were recommended a particular provider based on proximity and links with their school as opposed to their individual interests and needs (Ofsted, 2016). Nevertheless, there is little research into what happens to young people once they reach the FE sector without having had appropriate careers advice at school. Nor is it clear what colleges are doing to ensure this group of vulnerable young people receive support with regards to careers advice that goes beyond that of the standard package offered to all students.

FE colleges are in a unique position in that they have direct contact with young people as they pursue their education and are therefore arguably in the best position to be supporting them with the transition to independence. A growing evidence base exists for what works for children and young people from care backgrounds in schools, especially in regards to educational interventions (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Liabo, Gray, & Mulcahy, 2013). Perhaps lacking, is research exploring how young people from care backgrounds fare in college and the provision that is available there to support them (PALAC, 2016).

The *Children and Families Act (2014)* makes it a legal responsibility for LAs to appoint a senior officer, a virtual school head (VSH), whose job it is to oversee the education of looked after children and young people. VSHs are responsible for; ensuring head teachers are aware of looked after children and young people on roll, ensuring each student has a personal education plan (PEP), that professionals are trained on the needs of students from care backgrounds and that young people are aware of the 16 to 19 bursary (DfE, 2018b). VSHs are also responsible for working with designated teachers who fulfil a statutory role within schools for championing the education of their students in care up to the age of 18. Guidance suggests that the designated teacher becomes responsible for contributing towards school policy, promoting awareness of need and high expectation among staff, effective induction, planning transition to new schools and implementing PEPs (DfE, 2018c). The work of virtual schools has been highly valued (Berridge, 2012; Jackson, 2015). However there are a number of issues with current legislation that may put young people in FE colleges at a disadvantage. First VSHs and designated teachers only have legal responsibilities for children and young people of school age that are looked after or previously looked after and no legal obligations with regards to relevant or former

relevant young people (Children and Social Work Act, 2017). Second, advice on the role of designated teachers is directed at schools, indicating no statutory requirement for FE colleges to employ a designated teacher (although some may choose to do so), questioning who is acting as champion for young people from care backgrounds and whether they are receiving the right kind of support with regards to induction, transition and their learning needs.

Without someone responsible for the education of young people from care backgrounds, there may be issues with effective information sharing between virtual schools, schools and colleges. Driscoll (2013b) has been one of the few researchers to explore the transition of looked after students to colleges. She found significant barriers to communication between schools and colleges, with designated teachers becoming uninvolved in transition planning, seeing it as the responsibility of LA leaving care teams. In her study, schools were unaware of the support offered by colleges and support from virtual schools seemed to stop at 16. Four of the eight students interviewed who had transitioned to college had dropped out or had been withdrawn midway through the year demonstrating the potential consequences of poor transition and support. Performance was also felt to be hindered by the stresses associated with leaving care at the point of transition to college, VSHs reporting a high number of their students dropping out of college. Designated teachers also expressed concerns about the level of independence required of their students at college, feeling that the continued pastoral support of the school environment would better meet the needs of their looked after students despite grade related entry criteria limiting this opportunity (Driscoll, 2013b). While holding some important and valid implications, this study was a limited exploration of practice in two LAs, interviewing a sample of 20 students, 12 designated teachers and 2 VSHs.

Recent changes to the school leaving age have also seen the virtual school become responsible for young people up to the age of 18. We might therefore expect to see a smoother transition from school to college. However, there has been no current research to document the impact of this. Furthermore, the fact that current policy is directed at schools means that there is little guidance on how virtual schools should manage transitions to college or exclusions within colleges, especially if they cannot liaise with a designated teacher, again creating the concern that young people from care backgrounds are not being supported and potentially disproportionately

withdrawn from college. Unlike in schools, data on exclusions of young people from care backgrounds in colleges is not routinely collected so the true figure remains unknown.

Attempts have been made to highlight the needs of students from care backgrounds in FE colleges. In 2006, the Frank Buttle Trust published advice on supporting this group of young people, issuing the 'The Buttle UK Quality Award' to 114 universities and 85 colleges (Buttle UK, 2016). Sadly the trust concluded the project in 2015 and there is not recent data documenting the impact of this initiative further highlighting the distinct lack of evidence for what is being done to support young people from care backgrounds in FE and the factors that contribute to promoting their resiliency.

### **2.2.6 Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors: A unique set of challenges**

Unaccompanied minors may enter the care system with a unique set of challenges that their UK born peers do not. Their reasons for leaving their home countries and subsequent journey to the UK may be punctuated by traumatic experiences, some leaving due to political instability, conflict, persecution or are victims of trafficking (Thomas, Thomas, Nafees, & Bhugra, 2004). Many may have witnessed violence against family members or experienced it themselves. The journey to the UK may have itself been long and arduous (Crawley, 2010). These experiences have been linked to an elevated incidence of post-traumatic stress difficulties in this population (Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunniff, 2008). It is also important to recognise that unaccompanied minors represent a diverse group of individuals, coming to the UK from a variety of countries, cultures, religious beliefs and educational backgrounds. Starting a new life in an unfamiliar country can be isolating, especially if surrounded by people that do not speak the same language or share their cultural or religious beliefs. FE colleges have the potential to provide a space for meeting the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors with regards to developing English language skills, an understanding of the new culture and helping them to build a social support network through, for example, ESOL courses. However, many colleges have long waiting lists for ESOL courses and there are concerns about FE funding cuts and the subsequent reduction in number of places available for unaccompanied minors to study English (The Times Education Supplement, 2016). In 2016 the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA), released a strategy on ESOL, proposing that courses be given freely to

unaccompanied asylum seeking minors, an updated curriculum and professional development for teachers. While this has had some part in informing the All Party Parliamentary Group's (APPGs) social integration report, there exists no formal government policy on ESOL, raising concern about its quality and availability across the UK (NATECLA, 2017).

There is evidence to suggest that despite the adversity they face, unaccompanied asylum seeking minors show incredible resilience, personal agency and ambition to make the most of educational opportunities (Chase, Knight, & Statham, 2008; Hopkins & Hill, 2010; Kohli, 2006). There is speculation that they fare better than citizen young people from care backgrounds when it comes to ambition to attend university and continue education after leaving care (Brownlees & Finch, 2010; Dixon, Wade, Byford, & Weatherly, 2006; Wade, 2011). For example, Dixon et al. (2006) found unaccompanied minors exhibited less challenging behaviour throughout their time in care, were less likely to offend and more engaged with continuing education after leaving care. However, the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors in this study was small and there is limited recent and robust research that documents differences in the aspiration and achievement between unaccompanied minors and their citizen peers.

Despite ambition and commitment to their studies, unaccompanied minors face a number of challenges when it comes to accessing HE. Immigration status can impact upon whether they are considered to be an international or home based student, effecting tuition fees and access to student finance and an impending threat of removal from the UK could act as a deterrent to apply for university (Refugee Support Network, 2012). It can be difficult to access HE without a certain level of English and for others, frustration may arise over having achieved a level of qualification in their home countries that are not recognised by the UK education system (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Refugee Support Network, 2012). Jackson & Cameron (2014) also found that many of the 12 unaccompanied asylum seekers in their study were lacking appropriate careers guidance from professionals which, in some cases, delayed their progress through the education system.

Pathway planning for this group can be challenging, especially as leave to remain in the UK or refugee status may not be granted. As unaccompanied minors approach their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday there is the concern about having immigration status re-evaluated and the possibility of returning home (Chase et al., 2008; Hodes et al., 2008) Limited English language skills and understanding of how legal systems work within the UK could mean that unaccompanied minors are not aware of their rights or know if their legal representatives are doing an adequate job (Chase et al., 2008).

### **2.2.7 The role of the EP**

EPs have statutory duties with regards to providing advice for Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and are heavily involved in work with children and young people identified with SEND (Children and Families Act, 2014; Department for Education, 2015). They possess expert knowledge on child development, the barriers children and young people experience in education and the interventions necessary to support overcoming these. Working within education providers, they can apply their consultation skills to guide teachers, parents and carers towards planning, implementing and reviewing support (Wagner, 2008). However, Osborne et al. (2009, p21) writes, EPs 'are considered by some to be primarily responsible for SEN rather than possessing a range of skills that could be applied to a number of areas within children's services departments, including fostering and adoption.' Jackson & McParlin (2006) also advocate that EPs 'are well placed to explain to teachers and carers that disturbed behaviour may be a normal reaction to abnormal experiences and suggest the most effective way of dealing with it.' Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research exploring the role of EPs in working with young people from care backgrounds. Only recently have EPs been mentioned in legal frameworks with regards to looked after children. Recent guidance advises VSHs to work in partnership with professionals such as EPs to promote mental health, well-being and academic achievement (DfE, 2018b).

There have been several reports describing the scope of EP involvement in fostering and adoption (Division of Educational and Child Psychology, 2006; Osborne et al., 2009). The problem with these reports is that they lack objective measures, relying on subjective comments from EPs about the success of this work. In response to this, Osborne & Alfano (2011) carried out an evaluation of consultation sessions for foster carers. Feedback was collected from 101 EPs and 78 foster carers following a

consultation sessions. Findings indicated increases in carers' feelings of competence and a reduction in their level of concern. Carers reported finding problem solving useful and appreciated the reassurance and emotional support provided (Osborne & Alfano, 2011). However, an absence of long term follow up measures means it is unclear as to whether the impact of the consultation continued in the months following. Nor can the researchers be certain that the strategies discussed in consultation were put into place and therefore supported the child or young person.

EPs report being less involved in work with looked after children than they would like to (Osborne et al., 2009). EPSs may not be organised in ways that are conducive to work with looked after children, since many offer a traded model, allowing schools and colleges to choose how much involvement they have. In some cases, young people from care backgrounds may not present as a priority for EP work and it is left to individual EPs to negotiate this. Jackson & McParlin (2006) also note that when EPs are attached to particular schools, they may lose track of young people due to placement moves.

EPs have only recently become involved in working with older young people (up to 25) and are therefore in the early stages of establishing working relationships with FE providers. This is likely to be made more difficult by the national shortage of EPs and a demand that outweighs capacity for EPSs to carry out work in FE (National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2016). Nevertheless, Morris & Atkinson (2018) argue that EPs are best placed to support vulnerable young people make the transition to FE. In their systematic review of the current literature on post 16 transition, they found that EPs have the potential to support young people in a number of ways including:

- guiding the development of transition protocols between schools and FE providers,
- facilitating conversations around individual transition plans,
- provision of training to FE professionals on meeting the needs of vulnerable groups,
- provision of therapeutic work and
- use of person centred planning to elicit young people's views.

(Morris & Atkinson, 2018)

While this research focuses on the role of EPs in relation to young people identified with SEND, it also highlights the ways in which EPs may become involved in transition work with young people from care backgrounds. However this continues to remain a relatively unexplored domain.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

This section will review the research questions and consider the philosophical underpinnings of this research. It will discuss the research design and methodology and how each research question will be answered. There will be a description of the participants and procedure for recruitment and attention will be given to ethical considerations. Following this, the study's procedure and method of data analysis will be described. Finally, consideration will be given to validity and quality assurance.

### **3.1 Research questions**

***1. What formal and informal systems are in place to support young people from care backgrounds in the context of an FE College?***

***a, What are the key challenges?***

***b, How are they experienced by young people?***

***2. What are the needs of young people from care backgrounds in the context of FE colleges?***

***3. How is the role of EPs perceived among young people from care backgrounds and the educational professionals working with them, in relation to meeting their needs?***

### **3.2 Preparatory study**

A year before this research was undertaken, I carried out a small scale piece of research in the first year of my Doctorate. This aimed to investigate the experiences of young people from care backgrounds in one FE college by conducting semi-structured interviews with 11 students, five of whom were unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. Findings showed that young people valued having the support of an accessible key worker based in the college as well as an encouraging peer group, exposure to role models and early careers advice. Young people felt that there were gaps in their knowledge with regards to housing and employment and, in the absence of supportive social workers, felt their college could do more to fill this gap. Differences were between young people who were unaccompanied asylum seekers and those who were citizen young people. While both groups tended to have high aspirations,

citizen young people tended to be more pessimistic but more aware of how to achieve their goals. The preparatory study has influenced the research design for the current study which will be discussed throughout this chapter.

### **3.3 Ontology and epistemology**

This research is underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, adopting idealist ontology and social constructivist epistemological assumptions. From a constructivist view point, reality is cognitively constructed within the minds of individuals. This varies from a social constructionist viewpoint which argues that reality is created and recreated through social processes such as language (Burr, 1995). Weber (1947) argues that not one objective reality exists but instead as many realities as there are individuals and their subjective experiences. This research adopts the same view that each participant's experience is unique to them and individuals make sense of their experiences in different ways, meaning multiple realities will be observed from the accounts of participants. In keeping with a social constructivist viewpoint, this research does not aim to generalise its findings to all young people in care and FE colleges. Instead the aim is to observe patterns among respondents' accounts of their experiences as this might highlight things that have worked well for them and areas in which things could be improved.

Sayer (1992, p49) writes that 'although social phenomena cannot exist independently of actors or subjects, they usually do exist independently of the particular individual who is studying them.' Therefore, the construction of knowledge about the social world may be influenced by the researcher's values, beliefs and experiences. As the researcher I brought my own values and beliefs, developed through my life experiences and underpinned by my socialisation, culture, gender and race. My experiences as a white female, growing up in the UK in a close family unit is likely to be different to the experiences of young people from care backgrounds and this had the potential to influence the questions that I asked and the way in which I interpreted their experiences. I have followed an academic pathway through life, having attended a school sixth form and studied to Doctorate level. Therefore, I appreciate that my views and beliefs about education may be one sided and there may be gaps in my understanding about colleges.

Having worked with looked after children as a teacher and trainee EP, I already held some preconceived ideas about what their needs are and what schools and FE colleges are doing to support this group. These experiences prompted my interest in this area and, in beginning this research, both the literature review and preparatory study added to these ideas. For example, I was aware that young people from care backgrounds value authentic relationships developed through regular supportive interactions with a key worker. I needed to be alert to my current ideas influencing the questions that I asked and the answers I looked for, avoiding the research becoming a process of deduction. I needed to get as close to the participant's subjective experience as possible, while putting to one side my preconceptions about what that experience might be. I therefore adopted an element of reflexivity (Appendix E) and considered a research design that would allow for participants to guide discussion to represent the themes salient to them.

### **3.4 Research design and method**

A range of qualitative research designs were considered in terms of their strengths and weaknesses in relation to answering the research questions. Narrative enquiry was felt to focus too heavily on the life stories of a small number of participants and therefore rejected on the grounds that I would lose focus on describing what is currently happening in FE for a range of students. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was rejected on similar grounds since it involves interviewing a small number of participants and relies on them forming a relatively homogenous group and this is not true for young people from care backgrounds (Hare & Bullock, 2006). Grounded theory was also deemed inappropriate given that the current research does not aim to generate theory that can be generalised.

Initially, a multiple case design was considered most appropriate, given its ability to allow for an in-depth description of policies and practices in a number of colleges and the experiences of those working in or attending them (Yin, 2012). Conducting two case studies would allow me to examine college policies, interview members of staff and students and explore how these differed from one college to the next, hopefully highlighting areas of best practice and areas in need of development. However, as data collection began the multiple case design had to be rejected due to difficulties in accessing policies and arranging interviews in one of the participant colleges.

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), in qualitative research the design and sampling process are more likely to evolve over time as a better understanding of the research context emerges through data collection. Since a multiple case design was no longer possible, I decided to expand the range of participants interviewed in order to better triangulate and enrich the data already collected. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2011) write that in a qualitative research design 'researchers do not know in advance what they will see or what they will look for.' In line with this view, after having immersed myself in the context of an FE college, information came to light that warranted further exploration. On the advice of the designated teacher in one college, I decided to expand my range of participants to young people who had stopped attending college part way through their course in order to gain insight into why things hadn't worked for them. I was also invited to meet with a link virtual school resulting in the decision to interview the VSH in order to better understand their role in working with FE colleges.

### **3.5 Data collection: Semi structured interviews**

In line with a social constructivist view point, semi- structured interviews were used as a method of data collection as they allowed for in-depth discussion about individuals' experiences and the meaning they make from them (Robson, 2002). Lincoln & Guba (1985, p193-4) describe the researcher as a 'human instrument' in the research process, the advantage of this being 'her adaptability, responsiveness, knowledge, ability to handle sensitive matters, ability to see the whole picture, ability to clarify and summarise, to explore, to analyse, to examine atypical or idiosyncratic responses.' It was felt that semi-structured interviews would therefore be conducive to getting as close to the participant's world view as possible given that they would allow me to clarify my understanding and check my interpretation of responses to the interview questions. This gives further justification for the richness of qualitative data collection made possible through interviews. Data richness is often a term adopted by narrative and ethnographic researchers, referring to data that provides 'thick descriptions,' drawing attention to complexities through detailed accounts of experiences and events (Marx & Given, 2012).

Semi- structured interviews were used to allow participants to guide discussion towards issues pertinent to them, reducing researcher influence over the points discussed and keeping in line with the interpretivist view of getting as close to the

participant's reality as possible (Cohen et al., 2011). However, an element of researcher influence over the questions asked was needed in order to ensure that the discussion addressed the research questions (Willig, 2001).

Interviews were conducted with young people from care backgrounds attending or having stopped attending college in order to gain their views on what their needs are **(research question (RQ) two)** and descriptions of their experiences in relation to the support available **(RQ one)**. Questions were based on the research questions but also in relation to the key areas identified by the literature review and preparatory study. For example, young people were asked questions related to advocacy and expectations from others, the transition to independent living, their support networks and education and employment options

Key members of staff were interviewed in order to triangulate the data, also gaining their views on what young people from care backgrounds need to be successful in FE **(RQ two)**. The aim was to gain a description of the work educational professionals are doing to support this group with regards to how support is planned, delivered and monitored, how successful they feel this support is and what the key challenges are in delivering support **(RQ one)**.

Each interviewee was also asked about their experience and understanding of EPs and how they felt that EPs can support young people from care backgrounds, and those working with them in colleges **(RQ three)**.

## **3.6 Participants**

### **3.6.1 Sample**

The following participants were interviewed

- nine young people from care backgrounds attending an FE college,
- one young person from a care background who had stopped attending college part way through her course,
- 17 FE professionals with experience working with young people from care backgrounds in the context of a college and
- one local authority VSH working with college one.

### **3.6.2 Access to the sample**

Having links with the Promoting Achievement for Looked after children (PALAC) team at The Institute of Education, I was invited to attend an event titled 'The Education of Young People in Care in Further Education: A Call to Action' in October 2016 (PALAC, 2016). At this event, I was able to present my research aims to professionals from FE colleges within London and greater London. The designated teachers from two colleges expressed an interest in participation and were later emailed with further information about the research. Descriptions of each college can be found in Appendix B.

With both colleges, liaison with the designated teacher allowed me to gain access to young people from care backgrounds and the professionals working with them creating a convenience sample. As Cohen et al. (2011) put it, a convenience sample is one in which 'researchers simply choose the sample from those whom they have easy access.' Ideally, this research would have taken a wider sample of students and staff from a greater number of colleges, expanding beyond London based providers. However this was not possible given the time and scope of the study.

Meetings were set up with the designated teachers of both colleges in April 2017. Interviewing began in college one from May 2017 and college two from September 2017.

In order to access ex-students who had stopped attending college, the designated teacher of college one put me in touch with a link VSH. Not only was I able to interview this VSH but she aimed to put me in touch with ex-students of college one who had stopped attending part way through their course or had been withdrawn. Consequently, one telephone interview was conducted in February 2018.

### **3.6.3 Sample size and parameters**

#### **Young people from care backgrounds attending an FE college**

Cohen et al (2011) suggest that there are no specific rules when it comes to sample size in qualitative research as often the sample is constrained by time and available

resources. In the current study a flexible approach was maintained. Initially, the intention was to interview approximately ten students from each college, giving a total of 20 interviews with young people. This was based on the finding from the preparatory study that ten participants yielded ample data on the experiences of young people within the context of their college, and the need to meet the requirements of a much larger Doctoral level research.

Students currently in care and those who had left care within the past two years were interviewed since it was felt that they would have recent knowledge and experience of the systems in place. For the purpose of this research, a mainstream population of students was sampled, all having a basic level of English language, communication skills and understanding, allowing them to answer interview questions with greater ease. In doing this, I acknowledge that young people who did not meet this criteria would have been excluded from the sample including those with severe and complex needs. It was felt that this sub-group would require specialised interviewing techniques in order to seek their views and would therefore necessitate additional time and resources to develop these techniques. Given the time constraints of the current study this was not possible. While the views of young people from care backgrounds with severe and complex needs are not represented in this study, it presents a gap for further research to fill.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors formed part of this sample given their presence in the care system, particularly within the London colleges where this study was conducted. In addition, the preparatory study highlighted the lack of homogeneity among young people from care backgrounds, making it important to represent the experiences of sub-groups within the population. Again, only students with a basic level of English language were considered for interview given that further resources would be needed to interview student's without the ability to communicate and understand English (e.g, interpreters). Aspects of quota sampling were used. Cohen et al (2011) write that 'a quota sample strives to respect significant characteristics (strata) of the wider population...it sets out to represent these in the proportions in which they can be found in the wider population.' The problem encountered here is that no data exists on the number of young people from care back grounds attending FE colleges, and more specifically the number of unaccompanied minors within the wider population so quota sampling was difficult. Instead the decision was taken to

interview an equal number of unaccompanied minors and citizen young people as this yielded adequate data to allow for comparison in the preparatory study, without the results becoming skewed towards one particular sub group.

Accessing young people from care backgrounds for research purposes has been documented as difficult by previous researchers (Heptinstall, 2000; Murray, 2005). Barn (2010, p838) writes that 'it needs to be recognised that attempting to elicit the views of a vulnerable and highly mobile population can be extremely challenging.' For this reason, the sample of students interviewed proved to be smaller than originally intended.

In college one, nine students were interviewed, four of which were unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and five of which were citizen young people from care backgrounds (see table one for demographic information). In order to access participants, the designated teachers sent emails to young people from care backgrounds that they were aware of. Despite college one having approximately 150 students from care backgrounds on roll, engagement proved difficult and only nine students volunteered their time. This was not without the designated teacher having to pursue young people to respond to the email regarding the research. The sample was therefore a self-selected sample with a small response rate of 6%.

After a promising start to interviewing staff at college two, the designated teacher stopped responding to emails and I was unable to conduct interviews with young people from this college. Despite efforts to negotiate research time, including offering free training to staff, I did not hear back until February 2018 when the designated teacher informed me that she had been extremely busy and would not be returning as an employee to the college.

In liaison with the VSH, only one ex-student was identified and interviewed. Again, this small number reflected the difficulty in identifying students who had left college due to their transient nature and willingness to engage with LA services. In order to increase engagement each student was offered a £10 voucher as a thank you for participation in the research.

## **Educational professionals**

In addition to students, the intention was to interview ten members of staff from each college giving a total of 20 professionals as it was felt that this number was achievable given the resources and time allocated for data collection. Again, a flexible approach was maintained and in line with Glaser & Straus's (1967) view, once data had reached a level of saturation, no further interviews were necessary. This involved me transcribing and analysing data whilst continuing with interviews so that I could be sure when enough interviews had been conducted in order to provide rich descriptions in answer to the research questions.

In college one, 12 members of staff were interviewed from a range of job roles (see table two), allowing for a range of experiences to be documented, from strategic managers to professionals working with young people on a daily basis. Again due to the difficulties experienced with college two interviews were arranged and conducted with just four professionals. However the data was still felt to be very relevant and the transcripts were not disregarded. In order to enhance the richness of the data set, the decision was also taken to interview a link VSH.

Table one: Demographic of young people from care background participants

College	Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Background information	Course
College one	1	17	F	Black British	citizen young person, IC	Level 2 BTEC Diploma, Functional skills (English)
	2	18	M	White/Black British	citizen young person, IC, SEN (dyslexia)	Level 2 BTEC Diploma, Functional skills (English and Maths)
	3	19	M	Black African	unaccompanied asylum seeking minor, SIL, EAL	Level 2 ESOL
	4	18	M	Black African	unaccompanied asylum seeking minor, SIL, EAL	Level 2 ESOL
	5	18	F	White British	citizen young person, IC, SEN (Asperger's Syndrome)	Level 2 BTEC Diploma, Functional skills (English and Maths)
	6	21	F	Unknown British	citizen, SIL	Level 2 BTEC Diploma, Functional skills (Maths)
	7	18	M	Black British	citizen, SIL, SEN (moderate cognition and learning difficulties)	Level 2 BTEC Diploma, Functional skills (English and Maths)
	8	17	F	Black African	unaccompanied asylum seeking minor, IC, EAL	Level 2 ESOL
	9	18	M	Black African	unaccompanied asylum seeking minor, IC	Level 3 BTEC
College two	No interviews					
Ex students	10	17	F	White British	citizen young person, SIL	Level 2 BTEC Diploma, Functional skills (English and Maths)

\*IC- in care    \*SIL-semi-independent living    \* EAL- English as an additional language    \* SEN-special educational needs \*ESOL- English for speakers of other languages \*BTEC- Business and Technology Education Council

Table two: Professional roles

College	Participant	Job title
College One	1	Designated teacher
	2	Pastoral support advisor
	3	ESOL curriculum manager
	4	Student services manager
	5	Pastoral support advisor
	6	Special educational needs coordinator
	7	Dyslexia assessor
	8	Course tutor
	9	Assistant principal
	10	Course tutor
	11	ESOL tutor
	12	Course curriculum manager
	13	Careers advisor
College Two	14	Careers and employability advisor
	15	Welfare and safeguarding officer
	16	Welfare and advocacy officer for LAC
	17	Designated teacher
LA	18	VSH

### 3.7 Procedure

#### Identifying participants

Following meetings with the designated teachers from each college, they approached staff and students that might be interested in taking part in the research. Each designated teacher organised interviews with professionals, taking into consideration their timetables and arranging a space in which confidentiality could be ensured. With regards to college one, students could choose when and where it would be most appropriate for me to meet with them. For most students this was at one of the college campuses but for one it involved meeting in a coffee shop.

The designated teacher in college one gave me the contact details of a VSH with links to the college. Over email, an interview was arranged with her at the Institute of Education University campus. The VSH then liaised with ex-students of college one, who had stopped attending college but maintained contact with the virtual school. One student gave permission for me to receive their contact details and a telephone conversation was carried out.

## **Interview process**

At the start of the interview, I introduced myself and the research aims. Aware of the potential for a perceived power imbalance between myself and students, I made students aware that I was also a student, hoping to make them feel that we shared something in common. I reminded interviewees that they didn't need to answer any questions that they didn't feel comfortable answering and could withdraw at any point. I gave each participant an information sheet and asked them to sign it, again reminding them of issues around confidentiality, safeguarding and gaining permission to record the interviews. I reminded students that the designated teacher or a member of the virtual school team would be available, should they feel the need to speak to someone following the interview.

Interviews were conducted and recorded, each lasting between 25 minutes and one and a half hours. Interviews began with informal questions about what participants were studying (in the case of students) or how their day had been, again in order to build rapport. The interview schedule was used to ask questions relating more specifically to the research. Probing questions were used in order to elicit further information and richer descriptions. For example, 'Can you tell me more?' or 'I wonder how that felt?' In line with a reflexive approach, meaning was regularly checked with participants by asking 'That sounds to me like...Have I understood correctly?'

Following interviews, participants were thanked for their time and asked if they had any questions.

## **3.8 Ethical considerations**

Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2007, p52) write that informed consent involves four components; 'competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension.' Given the age of participants, I was able to seek consent from them personally. However, I took guidance from the designated teacher and my own judgement with regards to ensuring participants, particularly students, had the competence to fully understand the nature of the research and volunteer their time.

Participants gave verbal consent to take part in this research through the designated teacher. When I met with them, I verbally described the research aims, what participation involved and their right to withdraw. I explained how I intended to use the information discussed during the interview as well as the process of anonymising material. In line with the college and LA safeguarding and whistleblowing policies, I reminded participants that if they disclosed anything that concerned me with regards to their own or another's welfare, I would need to report this to the safeguarding team and they would be identifiable. In addition to verbal consent at the interview, I provided an information page containing this information and asked them to read and sign also asking any questions (Appendix D). Students were encouraged to discuss the research with their carers or another adult within college.

Cavan (1977, p810) highlights that ethics is 'a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others,' and 'while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better.' Respecting this, it was important to acknowledge that interviewing young people from care backgrounds and those that work with them can involve difficult and uncomfortable issues. Questions were asked with sensitivity. Young people were asked to tell me about their background as opposed to being asked detailed questions about why they came to be in care. Respect was therefore paid to how much information participants felt comfortable disclosing.

### **3.9 Data analysis**

Initially two thematic analyses were considered, one for professionals and one for students. However, during analysis it became clear that similar themes emerged from both groups so the decision was taken to merge the data sets. A common criticism of thematic analysis is that there are no clear guidelines for how it should be carried out, making it challenging to make judgements about the quality of the analysis (Antaki, Billig, Edwards, & Potter, 2003). A number of qualitative analysis methods also fall under the heading of 'thematic,' questioning what makes this method unique (Madill & Gough, 2008). Nevertheless, the absence of a strict procedure means that thematic analysis presents researchers with a flexible tool for analysing qualitative data. Depending on the approach taken, it fits well with a constructivist paradigm and allows for a rich description of the data through thematic representation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Boyatzis (1998) suggests that themes can either represent 'manifest' content, being semantic and simply describing the observable patterns, or 'latent' content, going beyond the surface to theories about what the patterns mean. Keeping in line with a constructivist perspective, latent themes were formed following the coding process. Themes were formed based on the researcher's interpretation of underlying meaning and contextual influences on participants' accounts. However, given the descriptive nature of some of the research questions, namely what colleges are doing to support young people from care backgrounds, it seemed necessary to move between both semantic and latent coding.

Another reason for use of thematic analysis is the flexibility it allowed with regards to coding data and establishing themes. Braun & Clarke (2006, p12) describe theoretical coding as 'driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytical interest in the area' allowing researcher's to code 'for a quite specific research question.' In having already conducted a review of the literature and established some research questions, an element of theoretical or inductive coding took place since it was important to ensure that the data provided answers to the research questions. However, deductive coding was also used to ensure that themes, not accounted for by the literature but nevertheless salient to the participant's experiences, were not missed.

Braun & Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis have been widely used in research, including successfully as part of the preparatory study, making me familiar with the procedures. They were therefore used again as a framework for thematic analysis of the current data set. Each stage is described below.

### **Familiarisation with data**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself in order to immerse myself in the data. Each transcript was read twice, errors were checked against voice recordings. Notes were made in the margins with regards to interesting or potential codes or themes that linked to research from the literature review. Notes taken during the interview process were read in order to put the data into context and better assist the interpretation of what each interview had said. For example, notes regarding the relationship between the researcher and participant were considered in order to aid the interpretation of what the participant described (Appendix E).

## **Generating codes**

Each transcript was read line by line and codes were created for segments or whole sections of the transcript. In most cases, codes were generated based on latent content going beyond the surface level to interpreting meaning. For example the extract below was coded 'going the extra mile.' At the semantic level the statement conveys the actions of a tutor checking that her students have eaten. At the latent level and within the context of the conversation, I felt the tutor was trying to convey how she goes beyond her teaching job role to ensure the well-being of her students.

*"I regularly check up to see if they have eaten dinner and keep apples and other food in my cupboard to make sure that they are eating properly."*

Where a new code was generated, previously coded transcripts were also searched for this code. Some codes were amalgamated where it was felt that they represented the same content. Care was taken not to overlook disconfirming cases, ensuring that these were also coded therefore enhancing the transparency of the findings. For example, while many professionals seemed to show empathy and understanding towards young people's difficulties, there were several inconsistencies with this, and therefore coded as contradictory cases.

## **Searching for themes**

At this stage, Nvivo was used to categorise codes into overarching themes and sub-themes. Mind maps were used to help draw links between codes. Where codes did not seem to fit themes, they were stored in a 'miscellaneous' folder.

## **Reviewing themes**

The first step involved reading all data extracts for each theme and deciding whether a coherent pattern formed. Where codes were inconsistent with a theme, this required new themes to be considered. For example, one theme that appeared initially problematic was 'characteristics of professionals.' Under this theme were the codes

'advocating' and 'going the extra mile.' On review, it was felt that data extracts from these codes did not describe 'characteristics of professionals' but instead the relationships between students and members of staff. A new overarching theme titled 'student-professional relationships' was therefore formed.

The second step of reviewing themes involved considering whether the thematic map represented the entire data set. This required the data set to be re-read and reflection on whether themes represented what was conveyed by participants. It also allowed for re-coding extracts, providing further data under each theme.

### **Designing and naming themes**

Once the thematic map had been created, the names of themes and sub-themes were refined in order to ensure that they conveyed clear meaning.

## **3.10 Quality assurance**

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985) research underpinned by interpretivist principles requires a different approach to validity and quality assurance compared to post-positivist research. Instead of judging reliability, validity and objectivity, qualitative research underpinned by an interpretivist perspective such as social constructivism, should examine dependability, credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **3.10.1 Dependability**

This research accepts that findings are unlikely to be replicable or generalisable to different contexts given the nature of multiple social realities. Yardley (2003, p238) writes that qualitative researchers 'would not expect their findings to be exactly replicated in any other sample or context, but would hope that the insights they derived from studying one context would prove useful in other contexts that had similarities.' The hope is that the findings will provide some useful insights into the lives of young people from care backgrounds in FE, highlight things that are working for them and encouraging other FE colleges to ask questions about their own provision.

### **3.10.2 Credibility**

Yardley (2003) lists criteria that can be used to judge the credibility of qualitative research, ensuring that there is correspondence between the realities expressed by the research participants and the way in which the researcher interprets their experiences. This criteria includes triangulation of data and seeking participant feedback.

Findings were triangulated by interviewing a range of individuals in the context of FE colleges including young people from care backgrounds who were both successful and unsuccessful on their college courses, unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and a diverse range of professionals. However, in line with the principles of social constructivism, triangulation within this study did not intend to prove or confirm one perspective, as might be the case in post-positivist research, but instead represent a range of perspectives on particular matters. Yardley (2003, p246) argues that 'triangulation is equally valuable from this point of view, but as a method of enriching understanding of a phenomenon by viewing it from different perspectives.'

While the initial intention was to hold focus groups in order to seek participant feedback on themes, this was not possible. Given the difficulty in recruiting the young people in the initial stages of the research, data collection took longer than planned and there was no additional time for focus groups to take place. It was also felt that it would be difficult to re-engage both students and staff in feedback sessions given the time pressures in the sector. However, an element of participant feedback was sought throughout interviews by employing my skills developed through my experience as a trainee EP. For example, when interviewing I tried to check my interpretation with participants by summarising their narrative and asking 'is that what you mean?' In doing this, I was somewhat able to eliminate my own misconceptions and get closer to the participant's representation of reality.

### **3.10.3 Confirmability**

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985, p243), confirmability refers to the extent to which the researcher can confirm that interpretation of the research reflects the experiences of participants as opposed to being 'figments of the (researcher's) imagination.' It assumes that the researcher will influence the process of interpretation, as highlighted

through the reflexivity adopted throughout data collection and analysis (Appendix E). Yardley (2003) acknowledges several ways in which confirmability can be established including; seeking others' perspectives with regards to interpretation of data, disconfirming cases and maintaining a reflexive approach.

This research aimed to triangulate my perspective with others' perspectives on the data and determine whether important themes had been missed. A selection of six transcripts were chosen to be coded by a peer, also studying for a Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology and conducting research in this field. This had the advantage of the second coder, having experience in the area of educational psychology and coding procedures. However, this may also have been problematic in that the second coder came from a similar background to myself potentially being subject to the same biases and assumptions when it came to interpreting the data (see Appendix F for a section of peer coded transcript).

In addition to this, the research data was discussed with my research supervisors, one being an EP and experienced researcher and a second, also from a research background, working within the PALAC team at the Institute of Education. This helped to further refine themes and ensure they represented the data set. Again, while this discussion had its advantages given the experience of my supervisors in relation to research and the research context, there is also the possibility that they may have been subject to the same biases and assumptions as me.

In line with Yardley's (2003) criteria, credibility was also upheld by seeking disconfirming cases throughout the data analysis and interpretation process, referred to throughout the results section.

Finally, transparency was maintained by keeping, what Yardley (2003) refers to as a 'paper trail,' so that the final report can be linked to the raw data. An electronic copy of all transcripts has been kept as well as notes and descriptions of how the codes and subsequent themes were formed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

When examining the results it is important to consider the sample of students in the context of a) all young people of their age and b) care leavers in order to determine the relevance of the findings within the context of which the sample was drawn. Citizen students in this research sample were predominately taking level 2 BTEC courses and most re-taking either English, Maths or both subjects, having not achieved grades A\* to C at GCSE. According to government statistics in 2017, approximately 70% of 16 to 18 year olds in FE were taking level 3 courses including A Levels and level 3 technical qualifications (DfE, 2018d). The sample of citizen students in this study in comparison is representative of national statistics that state that a higher proportion of disadvantaged students (including those who are from a care background) tend to undertake level two vocational qualifications (DfE, 2018d). Equally they are in line with government statistics reporting that young people from care backgrounds tend to perform less well than their peers at key stage four (GCSE/ progress 8) (DfE, 2017a). However, the sample of 19 to 21 year olds may not be reflective of national statistics given that in 2017, 40% of care leavers at this age were found not to be in education, training or employment (DfE, 2017b). This suggests that while the sample may be somewhat reflective of young people from care backgrounds in FE, it is unlikely to be reflective of all young people in or leaving care. Caution should therefore be taken when interpreting the results outlined in this section.

The following section will describe the themes and subthemes derived from the coding process. An overview of themes and sub-themes can be found in table three. Each theme will be described with illustrative quotations. In keeping with a social constructivist view, it was important to remember that each individual's experience is unique therefore each quotation reflects a single participant's reality that might not be true for others. It is important to consider what was said by each participant in relation to their individual context. For example, pastoral professionals work with young people from care backgrounds in a supportive role, therefore they may have developed a different view point to curriculum managers who are responsible for the delivery of curriculum and upholding attendance and achievement targets. In addition, the experience and therefore reality of an unaccompanied asylum seeking minor in semi-independent living may be very different to a citizen young person in care. For this reason, I have tried to be transparent about which participant the quotations have

come from. Where quotations have been derived from a young person's interview transcript, their age, gender and status has been specified. Where quotations have been derived from a professional's transcript, their job role will be specified.

Table three: Themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
1. Life transitions	Becoming self-reliant: expectation vs reality
	Transition to college: expectation vs reality
	Need for support beyond college
2. Identification	Too little too late
	A variety of methods for identifying students
	Developing a system of identification in the absence of formal transition processes
3. Formal college support services	A role for a designated teacher
	Provision of psychosocial support and the need to do more
	Provision of practical support
	Valuing universal student services
4. Formal LA support systems	An evolving role for the virtual school in supporting transition
	Limited involvement from EPs
	Inconsistent social care support
	Steps towards inter-professional working
	Negotiating boundaries between professional responsibilities
	Too many professionals
5. Non-engagement with support	Wanting to be the same as everyone else
	Wanting to be self-reliant
	Ideas on increasing engagement
6. Making mistakes and moving forward	Accepting mistakes, giving second chances
	Zero tolerance
7. Organisational pressures	Gaps in funding and resources
	Pressure to meet statistics
	The 42 day rule
8. Qualities in the young person-professional relationship	Professionals as a source of practical and emotional support
	Going the extra mile
	Blurring of professional boundaries
	Flexible and creative boundaries
	Importance of contact time
	Responsive and consistent professionals

9. Non-professional relationships	Difficulties forming social relationships
	Having things in common to promote a sense of belonging
	Inconsistencies in familial support
10. Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors	Cultural differences in social behaviour, life experience and engagement
	A unique set of challenges

#### 4.1 Theme one: Life transitions

This theme captures the transitions young people from care backgrounds experience as they approach adulthood, including from care to self-reliance and school to college. As will be discussed, the expectation often appeared very different to the reality. The theme also highlights the need for support beyond college as the transition is made to higher education and employment.

##### **Becoming self-reliant: expectation vs reality**

Becoming self-reliance was a dominant feature of the young people's interview transcripts and commented on frequently by professionals. All young people about to leave care (5) spoke positively about the pending transition.

*'I'm looking forward to it'* (18, male, in care).'

*'I'll get more privacy'* (17, female, in care).

*'I'm looking forward to making my own decisions'* (17, female, in care).

Several felt well prepared for this transition thanks to the support of their foster carers.

*'...my foster carers have helped prepare me slowly so I have got more independence'* (17, female, in care).

For some the desire for self-reliance seemed to come from feeling let down by others throughout their lives. One young person commented,

*'Care kids have learned from day one that they can only rely on themselves. They can't rely on their parents...their social workers, their teachers, their friends'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

For others, the desire to become self-reliant appeared to reflect a natural age related desire to be more independent.

*'I'm getting to the age where I am a bit more independent and I want a bit less support'* (18, male, in care).

This desire for self-reliance might be accounted for by typical teenager behaviour as one young person said,

*'...us teenagers like to think that we're independent'* (17, female, in care).

Eight professionals recognised that *'often there is the perception that when you get to 18 that you are an adult'* (pastoral worker) but care leavers are having to contend with adult experiences without the familial support to develop adult skills.

*'They have trouble managing their own finances or cooking for themselves. And they don't just get to come home and mum's cooked them dinner...They are responsible for going out and buying the shopping and coming home and cooking the meal'* (student services manager).

For all young people already in semi-independent living (5), the reality appeared different to the expectation of those about to transition. Three commented on the difficulty living with others.

*'It's always difficult living with lots of people in a house where you share lots of things'* (19, male, semi-independent living).

Five young people found semi-independent living challenging to manage, this impacting of upon college life. Motivating themselves to get to college on time appeared difficult for these young people and reflects the harsh reality of not having a parent making sure they were attending college.

*'I had to manage like when I was going to come in. And it was so easy just to say I'm not going in today or to just stay in bed'* (16, female, semi-independent living).

*'It's hard to motivate myself...Most kids my age rely on their Mums and Dads to wake them up'* (18, female, in care).

One professional spoke of the difficulty in knowing what to do when a young person didn't turn up for college. She commented

*'you are always told to call the parents...but for our kids they don't have a parent'* (course tutor).

### **Transition to college: expectation vs reality**

Similarly, transition from school to college was characterised by hope and the expectation of a fresh start. As one professional stated,

*'looked after students are in college because they're trying to do something that's trying to get them back on track'* (course tutor).

Three young people commented on the expectation of college being different to school, a place where they could study subjects of choice and be granted independence to make their own decisions.

*'...for me, college was my chance to try again'* (18, female, in care).

*'I was looking forward to college because there were less lessons that you had to do and you had more choice'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

Despite the difficulties young people from care backgrounds tend to face as they enter semi-independent living and college, one professional highlighted how

*'...there's no formalised process from moving from school to college'* (welfare and advocacy officer).

Several of the young people reported getting no support when transitioning from school to college.

*'I didn't really get any careers advice at school. I didn't know what I could do at college'* (18, male, in care).

*'They didn't really tell me what college was going to be like'* (18, male, in care).

A lack of preparation for college was evident in the students' difficulties managing the everyday requirements of college life. For example, eleven professionals commented on issues such as attendance, punctuality and managing the timetabling of assignments.

*'...they never hand in their homework. Timekeeping is an issue'* (curriculum manager)

*'...being expected to hand in an assignment every week, being punctual and attend classes can be a bit of a shock. And I think that's why we lose a lot of students'* (designated teacher).

While young people themselves did not mention difficulties with assignments and the academic work, this fits well with the accounts of the young people with regards to managing their routines once in semi-independent living.

Three professionals also recognised that, for some young people, challenging life experiences have had a detrimental effect on their education. What they expected to study may not be possible due to underachieving at school.

*'what they have gone through has affected their education to such an extent that they tell you, I wanted to do this, but I can't because I don't have a maths GCSE'* (careers advisor).

Therefore there appears to be a need for careers advice, especially at the point of transition, that will help young people from care backgrounds achieve their goals albeit by alternative means.

*'...so it's about letting them know that there's more than just one option and that there are a variety of pathways they can take'* (careers advisor).

### **Need for support beyond college**

Several careers advisors indirectly highlighted a need for support beyond college for students from care backgrounds. While some universities run outreach schemes and support packages, concerns were raised about the lack of awareness among employers of students from care backgrounds.

*'Apprenticeships...there isn't to my knowledge any widening participation scheme with regards to looked-after young people. I wouldn't feel confident to say that if you're having trouble with x then talk to your boss about it because...they might not know the issues affecting care leavers'* (careers advisor).

## 4.2 Theme two: Identification

This theme captures the difficulties participating colleges had in identifying young people from care backgrounds and the impact of late identification. In the absence of a formal transition and information sharing process, one college described how it is developing a protocol agreement with LAs.

### Too little too late

Not identifying students soon enough was commented on by seven professionals.

*'...a lot of the time we don't even know in the first three or four weeks if they are looked after'* (designated teacher)

*'the problem is...some students weren't identifying until halfway through the year'* (assistant principal).

Professionals also highlighted the range of issues associated with late identification, predominately that students were not accessing support early enough therefore facing withdrawal or dropping out.

*'...it's usually that we find out about them being LAC when they're about to be withdrawn'* (assistant principal).

*'...students drop out and we don't ever get to the bottom of why they're not attending'* (designated teacher).

One designated teacher claimed that the uptake of bursaries before she began her role was extremely low because students had not been identified and made aware of the funding.

*'...there were an awful lot of students that should have had access to the bursary but didn't know to apply because we didn't know who they were to tell them'* (designated teacher).

The experience of not receiving the right support soon enough was reflected in the interview conducted with the one student who had been withdrawn from college for non-attendance. She said,

*'I had only really just got on my course before being kicked off. I didn't have access to any services'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

The student was unsure whether the college had been aware that she was a care leaver.

*'I don't think anyone even knew my situation'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

The reality for this student is now disengagement with education and difficulties finding a job without qualifications.

*'I don't really want to go back to college now because I've been kicked out of two; it's a real challenge trying to find a job where you don't need GCSEs'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

### **A variety of methods for identifying students from care backgrounds**

Both colleges asked young people about their care status on application and enrolment forms. Designated teachers at both colleges claimed this process *'unreliable'* because some students *'may not want to be identified'* and

*'...it relies on them knowing what it means to be in care. Many students think this means being in the care of your parents'* (designated teacher).

Students that do not self-identify, are sometimes picked up through discussion with their form tutors but also student services such as the careers service

*'...a lot of young people will come into the service and talk about what they need and we find out later on down the line that they are looked after'* (careers advisor).

One form tutor expressed how she proactively identifies students early on in the year.

*'I know when I first meet a student, I need to enquire about their background so that I can highlight them as looked after'* (course tutor).

However, as one professional pointed out,

*'not all tutors are that hands on, some don't spend the time getting to know a student's personal life'* (assistant principal).

In some cases, young people from care backgrounds were identified through external agencies including the virtual school or social services

*'I might get a PEP request from a social worker'* (designated teacher).

*'...sometimes we might hear from the virtual school or a social worker to see what packages we can offer'* (designated teacher).

*'...leaving care teams might get in touch'* (designated teacher).

However it was clear from all reports that this was only *'sometimes'* or something they *'might do,'* indicating no consistency in the extent to which information is shared between LAs and colleges. Both designated teachers pointed out the difficulty in getting information from schools

*'...we have something like 23 LAs...so makes...dealing with kind of difficult'* (designated teacher).

*'...it's impossible to get into every school and do a proper handover, there are just too many'* (designated teacher).

However, this problem may be distinct to London colleges given the large number of LAs and secondary schools in which their young people come from.

### **Developing a system of identification in the absence of formal transition processes**

Having identified these issues and in the absence of formal information sharing processes at the point of transition, college one had begun creating its own system for identifying students. This came in the form of a protocol agreement between itself and a virtual school, with the view to getting more virtual schools signed up.

*'So it will mean the virtual school share information on students that are about to enrol with us...We can then liaise with a key contact when there are issues. We can then prioritise them for interviews and support for transition and throughout'* (designated teacher).

Although this protocol agreement is in the beginning stages of being used at college one, the VSH was already pleased with the outcome it had had for some students.

*'This year we've been able to get school refusers into college and, using the protocol agreement with X, hold them there when maybe they haven't accessed education in years'* (virtual school head).

Despite no formal protocol agreement on information sharing, the designated teacher of college two also highlighted the importance of liaising with the virtual school in order to identify students.

*'One of the things that we can do is to work with the virtual schools because the virtual schools know all of the looked after students in one borough'* (designated teacher).

### **4.3 Theme three: Formal College support services**

This theme represents descriptive information provided by both professionals and young people with regards to formal college systems in place to support young people from care backgrounds. This included a role for a designated teacher, psychosocial and practical support services. The theme also interprets the views of both students and professionals with regards to these systems of support.

#### **A role for a designated teacher**

In both colleges the role of the designated teacher appeared to be continually evolving through strategic planning in the absence of a formal job description.

*'...they haven't specified what it is that I need to do but have given me the freedom to create my own systems'* (designated teacher).

One designated teacher appeared to take a growing responsibility for monitoring attendance of students from care backgrounds in order to determine when intervention was needed

*'...one of the things that I haven't put in place yet but I intend to is attendance monitoring'* (designated teacher).

*'If I...see that someone's attendance is worryingly low, it will prompt an enquiry'* (designated teacher).

A further responsibility of the designated teacher appeared to involve supporting members of staff to understand the needs of students from care backgrounds.

*'...because my role...has become increasingly prominent, most people in the main departments know who LAC are'* (designated teacher).

*'I delivered training on LAC... I've produced a support and intervention guide'* (designated teacher).

Facilitating PEP meetings was also a dominant feature of the role.

*'...so day to day I facilitate PEP meetings'* (designated teacher).

However, both designated teachers recognised that there were too many students to attend every single meeting (*'but it's just too many to do'*) and therefore had to support tutors to fill this role (*'so the tutors will do the PEPs'*).

Designated teachers from both colleges were very much appreciated by professionals working within the colleges.

*'There is X who is absolutely fantastic but we need more of him'* (student services manager).

*'A major resource is that we have a looked after coordinator. That helps us with multi-agency working'* (assistant principal).

All young people attending college one also commented on how much they valued the presence of the designated teacher indicating that the role is not only strategic but has a part to play in championing for young people from care backgrounds in the absence of a parent and therefore providing an element of both psychosocial and practical support.

*"He helps us plan for the future. He gets us involved in enrichment. If we fail, he reminds us that we can do it"* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

*'He always has time for me;'* *'He has been amazing. He has helped me with my bursary'* (17, female, in care).

*'He helped me with interview practice'* (18, male, in care).

### **Psychosocial support and the need to do more**

Formal psychosocial support in both colleges appeared to operate through generic student services in the form of a pastoral team. The four pastoral professionals interviewed commented on their role in supporting students to manage their emotional well-being through acting as mentors and offering advice.

*'...we will work with students with a range of issues....all kinds of emotional stuff'* (welfare and advocacy officer).

*...'so we adopt a mentoring role;'* *'there is some anxiety and worry and he isn't sleeping very well. So we might...have a chat about sleep techniques'* (pastoral support advisor).

In both colleges there appeared to be a lack of formal mental health services.

*'...we did have counselling but that was dropped'* (welfare and safeguarding officer).

Although, college two had made steps towards reinstating this service. It seemed that the pastoral service was *'filling in'* for a lack of more formal emotional support.

*'Counselling would possibly be helpful...pastoral support fill that role through mentoring;'* *'Their role is more mentoring possibly counselling although they are not trained counsellors'* (welfare and advocacy officer).

In addition to a formal pastoral service, three professionals from college one commented on the availability of extra curricula activities that encourage young people from care backgrounds to forge better peer relationships.

*'X also tries to encourage a lot of our looked after learners into college clubs...just so they can build a college community'* (student services manager).

*'...one thing we did do was a dance workshop specifically for looked after learners'* (pastoral support advisor).

However, the need to do more to help young people from care backgrounds develop support networks was highlighted by two professionals.

*'I think we could also do more to help them forge friendships'* (designated teacher).

Two professionals suggested creating *'more opportunities for buddying up'* (course tutor) and the development of a peer mentoring system *'where the care leavers are mentors for the LAC'* (designated teacher).

## **Provision of practical support**

In addition to psychosocial support, the pastoral service in both colleges seemed to be a source of practical advice with things such as housing and money issues

*'...if it's a housing issue it goes through them...or a financial problem'* (assistant principal).

*'...the pastoral team also run workshops'* (designated teacher).

Young people seemed to value the practical advice available from the pastoral service  
*'...they gave me help with everything including housing and finance'* (18, male, semi-independent living).

*'...they have been really helpful with my bursary'* (designated teacher).

College one also appeared to run themed weeks for all students with a focus on things such as money management and cooking.

*'...we try to have termly themed weeks because most students need to learn the skills for adulthood'* (pastoral advisor).

However they recognised that if workshops were targeted at young people from care backgrounds *'attendance would be poor'* (designated teacher). Reasons behind this non-engagement will be discussed in theme four.

Both colleges also have a formal careers service in which students are invited to make appointments. For one college this service was promoted through the careers advisor attending tutorials and explaining to students how the service could support them.

*'I...ask if they want a one to one tutorial where I can help them write personal statements, CVs, find work experience, find apprenticeships...'* (careers advisor).

College two also mentioned that they ran a drop in service.

*'I would do guidance interviews or I would answer questions during the drop in hours'* (careers and employability advisor).

In both colleges the careers advisors spoke about their role during enrolment with regards to promoting the service and ensuring students received advice that got them on the right courses.

*'...we have a big enrolment events in the summer, we are available to answer questions...we hear from a lot from students who have not done as well as they thought they were going to and are a bit lost in terms of what the next steps are'* (careers and employability advisor advisor).

One designated teacher recognised the need to act more proactively with regards to ensuring young people from care backgrounds received the right careers and education advice.

*'So we would normally expect our students to go and get themselves a careers appointment....but I'm thinking that with our looked after students I need to go to the careers department with the list of names and get them to invite the students to an appointment'* (designated teacher).

### **Valuing universal student services**

In both colleges there were no specific services designed for students from care backgrounds. However for the six students who had used the universal services (those for all students) in college one, all showed a high level of appreciation

*'...student services have been great'* (18, female, in care).

*'...my advisor from the pastoral team....has been a godsend'* (18, male, in care).

*'...they have done everything they can'* (18, male, semi-independent living).

*'I don't really know how to sum it up but the support I have had here has been excellent'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeking minor, in care).

*'The connection that I have with student services here, I could not fault'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

While the majority of young people seemed positive towards universal student services, one young person felt that the pastoral team in particular were not aware of the issues facing care leavers. This is an important point to note given the social constructivist underpinnings of this research and the uniqueness of individual's reality.

*'...they are not as knowledgeable on care leavers'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeking minor, semi-independent living).

This same student made a very interesting observation.

*'I think that a pastoral team for care leavers needs to be available and one especially for unaccompanied minors because their issues are different'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeking minor, semi-independent living).

In contrast, four professionals felt that universal student services were enough to meet the needs of young people from care backgrounds.

*'I always believe that regardless of whether your student is LAC or has another support need, they can access any of the services here'* (assistant principal).

*'I'm not sure if a LAC student would have any specific need that are different to the needs of other vulnerable students'* (curriculum manager).

Only one pastoral professional mentioned the need to offer *'specialised information... as their circumstances are different'* (welfare and safeguarding officer).

This highlights that while young people from care backgrounds value the universal student services available to them, there remains a need for more specialised information to match their circumstances and not all professional may be aware of this.

#### **4.4 Theme four: Formal LA support services**

This theme captures the experiences of professionals and young people in relation to formal systems of support existing within LAs. These include the virtual school, social services and EPSs. The theme highlights systemic issues with regards to negotiating boundaries between professional roles and the steps being taken towards better inter-professional working.

##### **An evolving role for the virtual school in supporting transition**

As discussed, both designated teachers and VSH noted an increasing role for the virtual school with regards to information sharing at the point of transition from school to college. However, further responsibilities of the virtual school appeared less well defined with regards to FE. The VSH described statutory responsibility in terms of ensuring *'statutory school children are in education, there is a personal education plan*

*and that plan is being kept,*' therefore applying to young people up to 18. However, the VSH also reported that the LA in which she worked had extended the age at which support stopped.

*'...we have made the decision that we will support young people up to the age of 25 so long as they are in education'* (virtual school head).

This is interesting given the lack of legislation making this a requirement and the potential for inconsistencies in the age dependent support across LAs.

The VSH reported that her role involved ensuring access to realistic careers advice.

*'...it's part of the transition work that will be done by their individual worker...work with the young person to discuss their options.'*

The virtual school also appeared to have a role in *'mitigating exclusions'* and *'training sessions on building resilience and emotional well-being'* (virtual school head). However, narrative was very much geared towards *'schools'* as opposed to FE colleges.

*'...we're looking to target secondary schools'* (virtual school head).

*'...because schools don't understand the needs of LAC'* (virtual school head).

This could suggest that the presence of this particular virtual school and potentially others is still quite limited in FE colleges despite steps being taken to extend the support offered by this service to 25. While this virtual school had a role to play in mitigating exclusions, the VSH mentioned that,

*'If at the 42 day window they (students) have been taken off roll, we might not find out about it until day 50 and there's nothing we can do to mitigate it'* (virtual school head).

This would indicate issues in the level of communication between FE colleges and the virtual school. One young person also commented on her individual worker from the virtual school saying,

*'...she was good but she didn't help that much. She didn't really know what was going on until it was too late'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

While there is a growing role for the virtual school in the transition process and supporting young people in FE, it is clear that there is still some way to go in terms of fostering better communication between the two systems.

### **Limited involvement of EPs**

Of those interviewed, no students and six professionals had experience working with EPs in FE colleges. For most professionals this experience involved working with an EP to identify student's needs and provision for an EHCP.

*'...we only see educational psychologists when they come to do an assessment for a new EHCP'* (dyslexia assessor).

*'...for one student we are currently applying for an EHCP, and some Boroughs won't accept the application unless you have an educational psychologist report'* (special educational needs coordinator).

The VSH also reported using their own EPs to support with EHCP applications.

*'We have had involvement, an education health and care plan has just gone through for one of my year thirteens'* (virtual school head).

Three professionals commented on the limited involvement of EPs.

*'We don't have any that work within the college'* (special educational needs coordinator).

*'...we don't do much work with educational psychologists'* (course tutor).

Funding was cited twice as a reason for their limited involvement.

*'...you're expensive though'* (safeguarding and welfare officer).

*'...we don't use them anymore. It's funding'* (dyslexia assessor).

Despite this, nine professionals saw a role for EPs with regards to identifying needs and supporting them to put in place useful strategies to help young people from care backgrounds

*'It would certainly be helpful even if it just gave me the opportunity...to know whether what I am doing is helpful'* (pastoral support advisor).

*'...they could help with identifying their learning needs and perhaps their mental health needs'* (special educational needs coordinator).

*'Using them for LAC is a good idea because I think edpsychs are really good at writing reports, giving clear guidance to the ways we need to be working'* (course tutor).

It seems then, that EPs have a statutory role with regards to supporting young people from care backgrounds in FE colleges. Beyond this, their role is limited possibly for

funding reasons, despite professionals identifying a clear need for and value in their support.

### **Inconsistent social care support**

The involvement of social care professionals varied between individuals. Two young people valued the support they received from either their social worker or personal advisor.

*'...she helps me with everything'* (18, female, in care)

*'She's brilliant'* (18, male, semi-independent living).

However five young people reported experiencing difficulties with their social workers and/ or personal advisors

*'Social services give you nothing'* (18, female, in care).

*'My main challenge is social services'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

*'They will only communicate with you when they want something from you but when you need them, they do not respond'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

*'They aren't giving me the information I need'* (18, male, in care).

The experiences of professionals working with social care services mirrored the inconsistent experiences of the young people.

*'...you get some that are absolutely superb and some that are not'* (student services manager).

*'...the majority of social workers that we meet are really great but then some of them really don't know'* (pastoral support advisor).

*'There is a real variety in the extent to which social worker or personal adviser will go to support the young person'* (welfare and advocacy officer).

While some social care professionals appeared to be supporting young people with transitioning from school to college others seemed hard to reach and unable to advise.

*'We have had some amazing social workers that will come in on enrolment day and spend the entire day with the student'* (careers and employability advisor).

*'I don't know whether it's due to workload or time pressures, some don't have time to meet you or respond to your emails'* (course tutor).

### **Steps towards inter-professional working**

Given the difficult experiences described in gaining support from social care services, college professionals frequently reported having to advocate on the student's behalf.

*'...it's my position to advocate for that student...I do a lot of talking to...social workers and personal advisors'* (student services manager).

*'I ask the young person what they want communicated to their social worker because often they feel like the social worker hasn't got time for them'* (ESOL tutor).

*Sometimes our job is just about pushing (social workers) to make sure they do it a bit quicker'* (designated teacher).

College professionals also reported having to liaise with LA services in the absence of parents. One tutor highlighted the need to *'involve keyworkers'* because of the *'day to day contact'* they have with students in semi-independent living (course tutor). A second professional spoke about needing a *'back up plan'* in order to find out why a student wasn't attending college, needing to liaise with a student's key worker because of the need to *'go through them to get to the student'* (student services manager). Another professional spoke of her preference to contact the young person's key worker over the social worker *'as they are the day to day people that see the students'* (course tutor). However, none of the students interviewed mentioned their key workers when asked about the professionals available to support them whilst at college. While key workers may play a role in supporting college professionals to find out what might be going on for their students, the young people may not necessarily see them as offering a supportive role.

This subtheme highlights the steps college professionals are taking towards inter-professional working at the individual level, again in the absence of guidance for how this should be done. It appears that college professionals are recognising a need to chase and advocate for their students in the absence of parental support. Nevertheless, as we have seen from the first two subthemes break-downs in communication between college and LA systems is not uncommon indicating a need

for clearer guidance on inter-professional working.

### **Negotiating boundaries between professional responsibilities**

While steps are being taken to improve inter-professional working, professionals are still working out what their role involves and what the boundaries to this are. Pastoral professionals and tutors frequently mentioned when they felt something wasn't within their role remit. One professional said,

*'it isn't the tutor's responsibility to make sure they are out of bed in the mornings'* (curriculum manager).

Other comments included,

*'There might be stuff going on at home or to do with living arrangements and actually that's a social workers job'* (student services manager).

*'...we would go back to social services because that's their primary responsibility. We don't try to intervene with these things'* (pastoral support advisor).

Despite evidence of advocating for students, college professionals seemed to feel that some of the challenges the young people face were beyond their responsibility and expertise. For many professionals this meant *'referring on'* to more specialised services

*'some of the work we do is referrals so we say I can't help you but I might be able to find someone who can'* (pastoral support advisor).

However one professional highlighted the problem with this,

*'...if we keep saying that's for someone else to sort out then it never gets done. So we have to try and push other professionals to get things done if we don't have the power to do it'* (student services manager).

While much of what is impacting young people from care backgrounds may require support from outside college services, it is clear that college professionals play a key role in advocating for their students to ensure the support they receive from these services is adequate.

### **Too many professionals**

In addition to the issues in negotiating boundaries between professional responsibilities, having a number of professionals involved in supporting young people presents further issues. Two professionals highlighted the fact that,

*'...things get missed, people think someone else must be dealing with it'* (course tutor)

and

*'Because there are so many different people involved, someone could easily fall through the cracks'* (student services manager).

One young person also expressed her frustration at being passed between professionals for answers.

*'I get passed from one person to the next. Oh speak to so and so they should have the answer, speak to your college, speak to your PA...It is very annoying'* (18, female, in care).

The young people interviewed also expressed annoyance over having multiple professionals come and go from their lives and needing to tell their stories over and over again.

*'There are just so many 'professionals' that I have met over the years. God knows. I can't be bothered to talk to them in the end because they will just get changed and I'll have to start again with someone else'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

This experience triangulated well with the experiences of college professionals who also highlighted the frustration young people have in working with *'too many professionals.'* For example two professionals recognised that by becoming involved,

*'...we are just another person on a long list of people who are trying to get to know...their business'* (course tutor)

and

*'...again it's just another person to talk to and share your story with'* (pastoral support advisor).

One professional highlighted how he felt

*'...it would just be easier to have that one person available all of the time'* (assistant principal).

This feeling appeared to be mirrored by one student who also claimed that it would be easier to have,

*'...social workers in colleges so they can help day to day'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

This is an interesting point to reflect on and may draw attention to wider systemic issues in the organisation of UK public services with social care and education operating as two separate systems. To some extent, the virtual school has helped to connect the LA social care system with education but clearly there are still issues with communication.

#### **4.5 Theme five: Non-engagement with support**

This theme captures the pattern of non-engagement with services, highlighting reasons why and discussing ways to increase student engagement. In total, eight professionals commented on the lack of student engagement with support services

*'The main challenges were attendance and getting them to engage'* (designated teacher)

*'There can be a pattern of non-engagement'* (pastoral support advisor)

*'...they don't like to engage with professionals'* (curriculum manager).

#### **Wanting to be the same as everyone else**

Five students spoke of the desire to *'blend in'* with peers and not wanting to feel targeted for support.

*'...we don't like to feel different to anyone else'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

*'It's not about disengaging, sometimes we just want to blend in and we don't like being associated with need extra support'* (18, female, in care).

This finding was well triangulated with the opinions of four college professionals who also stated that,

*'Many of them don't want to stand out as different or be targeted for support'* (course tutor).

and

*'...we are putting them at a disadvantage if they don't access support... but there are some LAC that just don't want to tell people'* (assistant principal).

### **Wanting to be self-reliant**

It also appeared that young people associated the need for 'support' as meaning they were in some way not independent or self-reliant, a state they desired to achieve.

*'Maybe it's just the word support that makes it seem negative. Because when you need support it means you aren't coping'* (18, male, in care).

*'When you have relied on yourself for so long, you don't think you need help'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

Again this finding was evident from several professional transcripts.

*'When they get here, they come with a sense of I'm independent now I don't need support'* (course tutor).

### **Ideas on increasing engagement**

Several ideas emerged from both professionals and the young people with regards to how colleges could increase engagement with services among their students from care backgrounds. Several young people commented on the need for student services to be universal and discreet as opposed to targeted, making them feel singled out.

*'Care students don't want to be different to the others so services should be more about all students'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

*'Information should be for everyone not just us'* (18, female, in care).

This fits well with the findings of theme three which highlighted the value both students and professionals placed on universal student services. The fact that these services were thought of so highly by students using them may be because they did not feel singled out for accessing support from the same services as their peers.

There was mention of offering 'information' rather than 'support' due to the negative connotations that arise from the word 'support' and making students feel that they aren't coping.

*'If it was less about offering help and support. People associate those words with neediness'* (18, female, in care).

*'...so services should be more about all students, telling them that they need information not support'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

*'...they are better off saying...come and get information on leaving care, or semi-independent living'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

College professionals also stated the need to be persistent when it came to '*chasing*' students and ensuring they continued to access support. Pastoral professionals in particular talked about '*hanging outside lessons*,' '*calling them*' and staying '*in touch with...tutors*' in order to keep students engaged and ensure they attended meetings. Several pastoral professionals also reported spending time in spaces such as the '*common room*' and '*lunch hall*,' again to ensure consistent engagement with their students (pastoral support advisor, welfare and advocacy officer).

#### **4.6 Theme six: Accepting mistakes, giving second chances**

This theme captures the way young people from care backgrounds feel after having '*messed up*' and what's needed to help them get back on track. The need for second chances emerged as a dominant subtheme from both professional and student transcripts. However, there were contradictory cases from two professionals who seemed to express a 'zero tolerance' view. Within this subtheme one young person commented on the impact of this zero tolerance.

##### **Second chances**

From the young people's accounts it seemed apparent that not conforming to college expectations and making wrong decisions was a feature of their lives.

*'...like all care kids, I rebelled, I didn't show up to class, I didn't bother with assignments'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

*'...they (care leavers) still get through life because of their own decisions. Even though sometimes those are the wrong decisions.'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

However, several young people acknowledged that this was because of other things going on in their lives, meaning college was not a priority for them.

*'I haven't attended for six weeks because I've got other stuff going on'* (male, 18, semi-independent living).

*'If we are being out of order, tell us don't yell at us. You don't even know what's going on in my life'* (18, female, in care).

Giving students another chance to do well seemed to be the most common answer for managing their wrong decisions or non-conformity.

*'...people just need....one person who believes in them, gives them second or more chances'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

*'...they just needed a second chance and they would have been fine'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

*'...they kept giving me a second chance, third, fourth even fifth chance. They didn't turn their backs on me'* (18, male, in care).

Six professionals also commented on the need to accept mistakes and provide multiple chances.

*'So they learn that if they make a mistake, then so what, we will put it down to experience'* (course tutor).

*'I also think it's about second third and fourth chances'* (ESOL tutor).

*'I'm always for second chances'* (assistant principal).

One professional stated that,

*'We have got to understand...their life cycles have always been failure so let's give them a chance'* (assistant principal).

This draws attention to the idea that failure is common to the lives of young people from care backgrounds, and the need for 'chances' to break this cycle of failure, giving them the opportunity to succeed.

### **Zero tolerance**

In keeping with a social constructivist perspective, it was important to highlight that there were two professionals whose attitudes did not mirror that of their colleagues. One professional appeared to stereotype young people from care backgrounds.

*'...my experience of looked-after young people is that they just don't have the commitment. They don't turn up on time'* (curriculum manager).

*'I firmly believe if there is no engagement in the first six weeks then we can't take them back'* (curriculum manager).

One professional also stated that,

*'if you're not showing commitment then this isn't good enough. And we are not going to allow you to continue'* (course tutor).

These statements appear to display a zero tolerance attitude, seeing behaviour as representative of the young person's level of commitment as opposed to the difficulties they may be facing outside of college life. However, this difference in view point may be underpinned by contextual factors such as the professional's job role. For example, there may be particular pressure on curriculum managers and course tutors to meet performance related targets and this may in turn influence their decisions to withdraw students who are not engaging with education.

One young person commented on the impact of this zero tolerance attitude after having been withdrawn from two colleges.

*'My attendance was really poor so they had to kick me off the course'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

She highlighted the disadvantage to which young people from care backgrounds are with regards to maintaining their attendance.

*'They can't call your parents...to let them know you aren't there so who is there to help you'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

Instead of receiving support from her college she said that she was put on 'report' which made her feel 'odd.' This hindered her attendance further.

*'I just felt...what's the point anymore and I stopped turning up again'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

What this young person claimed she needed, like four other young people in this study, was 'a chance' and understanding and support from college professionals.

*'...just calling me in the mornings, speaking to me and my social worker...they never really...asked what they could do to help'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

#### **4.7 Theme seven: Organisational pressures**

This theme represents the pressures currently facing FE colleges as well as the organisational expectations placed on students. It describes the gaps in funding and resources that the sector is facing from the perspective of college professionals. It also highlights the pressure on staff and students to meet academic and attendance requirements and the impact that this appears to have on young people from care backgrounds.

##### **Gaps in funding and resources**

Five professionals reported feeling like they did not have adequate knowledge, experience and/ or skills to fully support young people from care backgrounds, also recognising a need for training.

*'...we are happy to support but we need training'* (pastoral support advisor).

*'...having more training and going to more things where you can talk to people like social workers...would be useful'* (student services manager).

Financial pressures appeared to be hindering access to this training.

*'There doesn't seem to be the funding to send us on training'* (welfare and advocacy officer).

Funding also appeared to impact students in other ways. According to one professional,

*'...one of the things that affects them the most is the fact that a lot of looked-after young people have special educational needs and there are significant cuts there'* (special educational needs coordinator).

In one college funding for tutorials had been cut and this might be considered problematic for young people from care backgrounds given their need to develop interpersonal relationships through contact time with members of staff and other students (themes eight and nine).

*'They don't have tutor groups because of the funding cuts; a couple of years ago they stopped specific funding for tutorials'* (welfare and safeguarding officer).

Several professionals also expressed feeling stretched within their role and needing more members of staff to coordinate support for young people from care backgrounds.

*'...sometimes you can't fit them all in'* (pastoral support advisor).

*'There are a lot of students and we are quite a small team...if we could have more advisors that would be great'* (pastoral support advisor).

*'Some teachers, out of 16 learners, will have 11 looked after. All preparation has to be done in their own time and they don't get any additional time for it'* (assistant principal).

The scale of the designated teacher role was also acknowledged.

*'We have an amazing LAC coordinator but it's a very big job and he can't be available for every young person'* (student services manager).

While the role of the designated teacher may have begun in schools, this highlights how colleges may experience the role differently given the larger number of students on roll.

### **Pressure to meet statistics**

Professionals also commented on the pressure to meet statistics in order to prove themselves and maintain their jobs.

*'...if our learners are not succeeding...it affects our data, percentages and our jobs'* (curriculum manager).

*'...obviously we get judged on performance'* (course tutor).

Those in managerial positions highlighted the systemic pressure to meet grades within the FE sector.

*'It's very cold and it's very target driven and that goes for education full stop'* (assistant principal).

*'There is an obsession with attainment and schools are very good at that because that's what you are assessed on with Ofsted....college isn't much different'* (curriculum manager).

Several professionals recognised the issue with unfair inspection criteria given its irrelevance to vulnerable pupils experiencing challenging life circumstances.

*'The unspoken truth is that we are measured on our academic outcomes and not on the day-to-day progress. So a learner could have made progress in that they have been kept safe, they are emotionally more stable, widened their network of friends, but that would go un-recognised if you look at academic outcomes. A learner, due to circumstances out of our control, may not have sat at the English exam and that shows as a fail'* (assistant principal).

Two professionals in managerial positions described how the pressure to meet targets could filter down onto students, young people from care backgrounds being particularly vulnerable given the barriers they face to achieving. For some students this meant being withdrawn from college.

*'We had to make the decision to remove them because obviously we get judged on performance'* (curriculum manager).

*'Curriculum managers who are very mindful of their outcomes can be quite ruthless....There is no obligation to retain students'* (welfare and advocacy officer).

### **The 42 day rule**

It appears that for a lot of colleges, the '42 day rule' holds that if students have not met performance and attendance expectations by their 42<sup>nd</sup> day at college, withdrawal is likely.

*'In terms of government policy, the 42 days, have big implications'* (assistant principal).

This poses a problem for students from care backgrounds whose situation may not be known to professionals, who struggle with the transition to college and find it difficult to engage with support. Three professionals commented on the reality of this group of young people being withdrawn from college within 42 days.

*'There's a very very big risk they will be withdrawn within the first 42 days'* (designated teacher).

*'...quite a lot have been withdrawn for things like attendance'* (course tutor).

*'The majority were unsuccessful and removed within the first 42 days'* (curriculum manager).

This is extremely concerning given the impact withdrawal from college seemed to have for one student (theme six) and potentially many more.

Nevertheless, two professionals from managerial positions, commented on the difficulty keeping students on despite poor attendance because of systemic issues with funding. The 42 day rule appeared to have implications with regards to whether or not colleges continued to receive funding for students.

*'There becomes a point where funding is withdrawn if the student does not attend'* (designated teacher).

*'If they don't reach a certain attendance within those first four weeks funding is likely to be withdrawn'* (assistant principal).

#### **4.8 Theme eight: Qualities in the young person-professional relationship**

This theme explores the relationships between the young people interviewed and the professionals they work with. While both FE colleges and LAs have in place the formal systems of support, the young people appeared to place equal value on the relationships they held with professionals, every young person referring to at least one college professional who had supported them. Five sub-themes emerged, referring to the particular qualities and behaviours of professionals that allowed these supportive student-professional relationships to develop.

### **Professionals as a source of practical and emotional support**

Seven young people commented on how at least one college professional had supported them practically with advice on things such as housing, lawyers and preparing for college or university.

*'She has helped me buy stuff for college, sort out my housing stuff, that sort of thing'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

*'They really took the time to explain things to you'* (18, female, in care).

*'...mostly, I would go to my teacher if I need advice'* (18, male, in care).

*'Sometimes I need help with my visa but my teacher know about lawyers'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

Equally, five young people commented on the emotional support they received through having a strong relationship with at least one college professional who motivated them to achieve and was there to coach them through more challenging aspects of their lives.

*'X could see through my problems and pick out my strengths'* (18, male, in care).

*'I think some people just need someone like X, just one person who believes in them'* (17, female, semi-independent living).

*'He has never stopped pushing me and being positive for me;'* *'If we fail, he reminds us that we can do it and to keep trying'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

### **Going the extra mile**

Young people frequently mentioned professionals who went beyond their job role to support them whether it be through checking on them after college hours or keeping food in the cupboard if they hadn't eaten properly.

*'Even after college we are not on our own, they always check that we've got everything we need'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

*'She keeps food in her cupboard for when we don't eat. She makes sure we learn how to budget. She told me off for buying a new pair of trainers'* (19, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

This was well triangulated with the reports of a number of staff who recognised the need to go the extra mile for students from care backgrounds.

*'...it's about really empathising with the young person's situation and doing all you can to make it better and that might mean beyond what my job role entails'* (course tutor).

*'Sometimes we are there to act as the nagging parent, checking that they've been to the doctor's, asking what the doctor said, making sure they're eating right'* (special educational needs coordinator).

### **Blurring of professional boundaries**

In addition to going the extra mile, several young people referred to their relationship with professionals as being more of a 'friendship' than a professional relationship.

*'She is more like my best friend'* (18, female, in care).

*'X was always respectful to us. She was like a best friend'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

*'X is like a mentor but he is also an authority. When you get to know him, you realise that he is more of a friend'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

The professionals most valued by young people appeared to be those who showed genuine care also relating to them as 'friends.'

*'X is more friendly. She approaches me in a more friendly social way'* (17, female, in care).

This also seemed to communicate the need for love and closeness, often missing from the lives of young people from care backgrounds.

*'She was just so loving. She would always give us big hugs which care kids don't get'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

The VSH also highlighted this need for belonging stating that,

*'...calling on kids and asking them... are you ok?. I missed you today.... taking on that pastoral head of year responsibility, is hugely valued by young people because they feel missed or they feel wanted or they feel included'* (virtual school head).

This subtheme highlights how young people from care backgrounds often need professional boundaries blurred in order to feel that connection with the adults there to support them in the absence of parental figures. Sadly, some professionals did not see it within their role to go the extra mile and provide that deeper level of connection with their students.

*'We are not here to be their friends;'* *'It isn't our job to make sure they're out of bed and get here on time'* (curriculum manager).

### **Flexible and creative boundaries**

A dominant feature of supportive young-person- professional relationships appeared to involve the existence of flexible boundaries in order to maintain positive relationships.

*'...you need to be flexible and open with the boundaries and then when you have the relationship they are easier to implement'* (ESOL course tutor).

*'...remind them that you are there to support... you are happy and open to be flexible and bend the boundaries to some extent'* (course tutor).

Four professionals spoke at length about the need to make young people feel in control of their decisions, again in order to build a better relationship with them.

*'The more you give someone the freedom to choose, the better your relationship with them;'* *'If you try to be authoritative...I am up here and you are down there, I don't think that works'* (course tutor).

*'as soon as you start controlling them, you have lost them'* (pastoral support advisor).

*'...they aren't going to listen when you tell them to do something instead you have to listen to them and help them to think about the options'* (ESOL course tutor).

Two professionals commented on a playful or creative approach to managing more challenging behaviour from some of their students.

*'You have to be creative in the way that you talk to them so they don't feel like you are trying to control them'* (course tutor).

One professional did this through use of humour.

*'When they behave in certain ways towards me, I don't take things too seriously. I make jokes. When they forget their homework, I say don't tell me the dog ate it. So you build up a relationship with them'* (ESOL course tutor).

### **Importance of contact time**

The amount of time spent with students appeared to enhance the relationship. Young people who reported positive relationships with at least one college professional frequently commented on the amount of time they saw this professional.

*'I see her most days and she always asks about how I am getting on'* (18, male, semi-independent living).

*'I see her really frequently, so she has got to know me really well'* (18, female, in care).

*'...just seeing him all the time, we really made a connection'* (17, female, semi-independent living)

Professionals also spoke about the impact of regular contact on their relationships with students.

*'...they see me for two full days a week so you build up a very good relationship'* (course tutor).

For some students contact time with key professionals was limited due to the way in which college courses are designed.

*'...students on vocational courses may see their tutors for two hours a week so you don't get to know them very well'* (curriculum manager).

This appeared less of a problem for unaccompanied asylum seeking minor's on ESOL courses given the extended level of contact with their course tutor.

*'...we get to see our ESOL students on a one to one basis much more frequently so we can check in with them about how things are going. A tutor on a vocational course wouldn't be able to do that'* (ESOL tutor).

This highlights that citizen young people may be at a disadvantaged given the nature of their courses and the infrequent access to pastoral support in the form of regular tutor groups. As the VSH stated,

*'I think that unaccompanied asylum seekers...it's very different...because they're all together, they're all in the same groups. It's very nurturing...it's almost back to the primary school model in terms of, you've got one person to go to, you've got one teacher who can pick up if you're having a bad day or something has upset you whereas...if you're moving between different A-level classes that doesn't always happen. (virtual school head).*

For pastoral advisors there was no obligation for students to meet with them like there would be course tutors. They reported having to be more creative with regards to building in contact time in order to develop relationships with young people. This involved spending time with students in the common room, lunch hall, stopping them in corridors and *'hanging around outside classrooms.'*

*'We base ourselves in the common room because they are seeing our faces as frequently as their tutors so we can develop those informal relationships'* (welfare and advocacy officer).

*'...mostly it's about spending time...away from the classrooms setting, maybe joining them for lunch'* (pastoral support worker).

### **Responsive and consistent professionals**

One final aspect of the supportive young person-professional relationship appeared to be the level of responsiveness and consistency shown by the professional. As outlined in theme four, some young people reported feeling let down by social care professionals for reasons such as poor communication. In contrast to this, young people seemed to really value professionals who were consistently available during their time of need.

*'She is always there for me'* (18, female, in care).

*'She's the type of teacher you can go to at any time'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

One professional also highlighted the need for this availability to be without conditions, particularly if the young person had ignored previous advice.

*'It's about always being there regardless of if things have gone wrong or they have ignored your advice'* (course tutor).

Early response to the needs of young people from care backgrounds was also mentioned by several professionals who noted that,

*'often our looked after learners are approaching crisis so we need to act quickly'* and *'It's about responding straight away not putting things off because then they are forgotten and you have to start chasing people'* (pastoral support advisor).

Relationship breakdown appeared likely where professionals had failed to adequately respond to the needs of a young person. As one young person stated,

*'I didn't bother contacting her after that. If she didn't have time to respond to my question, then I'm not going to answer hers'* (18, female, in care).

#### **4.9 Theme nine: Non-professional relationships**

This theme represents the views of both professionals and students on the non-professional relationships between young people from care backgrounds and people such as their peers, foster carers and family. The theme draws attention to the challenges faced in forming peer relationships but the necessity for a sense of belonging among their peers. It also demonstrates that some young people still have the love and support of their parents and families albeit at a distance, and for others there are inconsistencies in the support of foster carers.

##### **Difficulties forming social relationships**

Four young people spoke about the difficulty forming relationships with their peers and putting their trust in others.

*'I can get annoyed quite quickly and it's difficult for me to make friends so I am at risk of being isolated'* (18, female, in care).

*'...it takes us a long time to trust people'* (17, female, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

Several professionals also mentioned their experience of young people from care backgrounds struggling to develop peer relationships, sometimes due to having moved about.

*'...many of the looked after learner's struggle to make friendships'* (curriculum manager).

*'They may have had to move really far away...so they have lost friendships'* (designated teacher).

However, not all young people reported this difficulty, five of whom described positive relationships with their peers.

*'I have a lot of friends'* (17, female, in care).

*'I have a few good friends that I am close to'* (18, male, in care).

*'They're fun, we go out. Usually just to the cinema and that kind of stuff'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

### **Having things in common to promote a sense of belonging**

Three young people described the importance of having peers who understood their situation or could relate to them through shared experiences.

*'It is important to make friends and talk to people who will understand your situation'* (18, female, semi-independent living).

*'...we just want to meet others on our level so that we don't feel different'* (18, male, semi-independent living).

One young person reported feeling closest to the peers in her hostel given that they had experienced similar upbringings.

Building on this, several young people suggested the introduction of mentors as a way of promoting a sense of belonging in college.

*'...every care kid should have a mentor, someone they can relate to because it can be lonely when all your friends talk about their parents'* (17, female, in care).

The introduction of mentors was also raised by one designated teacher.

*'I think also having a mentoring service would be another step in the right direction;'*  
*'a system where the care leavers could mentor the looked afters'* (designated teacher).

However, not all students felt the benefits of developing friendships with other students from care backgrounds. This is an important point to note as it highlights the uniqueness of individual's reality. For some young people, having a care status in common with a peer seemed to be a positive thing.

*'...she's in care to so she gets me and I can chat to her'* (18, female, in care).

However, for others it can be viewed as problematic. One student suggested that this could have a negative impact on some.

*'...when you live with lots of other people from similar backgrounds to yourself and they don't believe in themselves, they have no ambitions, they get involved in the wrong crowd and some people get dragged into that'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

### **Familial support**

The fact that some young people still had a high level of familial support draws attention to the lack of homogeneity among those from care backgrounds. Several reported having support from their birth parents or other family members with regards to making decisions about their courses and managing their finances.

*'I still speak to her (Mum) all the time. She helps me to decide and just wants the best for me'* (18, female, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

*I still have family in a different country so I'm still quite loved'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

*'My grandma supports me. I get a bursary and she...tells me how to be careful with my money'* (18, male, in care).

For other young people, a high level of familial support from foster carers seemed to support their transition to semi-independent living.

*'They have helped me to prepare'* (17, female, in care).

*'They have been supportive of my education'* (18, female, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

*'My foster carers have been very helpful in teaching me .I can go to them with any questions'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).'

*'They have helped with things like applications'* (18, female, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

Sadly not all young people had familial support from either family members or foster carers.

*'...we don't have parents dishing out money;'* *'I only have social services to run to'* (21, female, semi-independent living).

One young person also found that her relationship with her foster carer had deteriorated as the time to leave care approached. *'I don't even see my carers;'* *'It's not really a relationship to be honest'* (18, female, in care).

#### **4.10 Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors**

This theme further highlights that young people from care backgrounds form a non-homogenous group with different needs and experiences. Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors were one sub group of young people in or leaving care, frequently referred to by professionals for their contrasting social behaviour, life experience and engagement with education in comparison to citizen young people. They also appeared to present with a unique set of challenges arising to a unique set of needs.

#### **Cultural differences in social behaviour, life experience and engagement**

Six professionals drew attention to the difference between the life experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and citizen young people. According to professional reports, unaccompanied minors may have had *'very stable backgrounds and are from loving families'* (assistant principal). This is well triangulated with three unaccompanied minors reporting that their parents continued to support their education from abroad.

Three professionals also acknowledged that some unaccompanied minors had been considered as adults in their home countries which then changed when they arrived in the UK where they are considered minors and then *'at the mercy of the state.'*

*'In their countries they have effectively being considered an adult and they arrived in the UK and they have their autonomy taken away from them'* (assistant principal).

*'They feel very much like they are treated as children yet they are men in their home countries'* (ESOL tutor).

One young person also stated *'I don't think myself looked after...In my country I am an adult'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

While having experienced independence and being an adult in their home countries appeared to encourage a *'good work ethic'* in relation to paid employment, several professionals also found that this impacted their tolerance of authority within college and interfered with their studies.

*'They don't like authority'* (assistant principal)

*'They'd rather be out earning money to support their families back home'* (designated teacher).

However, this was not the case for all unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. Four professionals highlighted individual differences within this sub-group of young people. Professionals tended to perceive students from Africa and the Middle East to display higher levels of engagement than students from Eastern Europe.

*'...so Syrian, Angolian, Somalian, Sudanese are all secure and stable. The boys that struggle the most are Albanian'* (assistant principal).

*'...the ones from Africa and the Middle East are incredible...they have an insatiable appetite for education'* (careers and employability advisor).

*'Kids from Iraq, kids from Syria...kids from East Africa...are really driven'* (ESOL tutor).

This difference may reflect the regard with which education is held in the student's home countries although further evidence would be needed to support this.

Generally speaking, professionals tended to feel that citizen young people from care backgrounds were *'the ones that struggle the most'* (student services manager). Comments included that

*'...behaviour is more of an issue'* (assistant principal).

*'...time keeping is more of an issue'* (ESOL tutor).

*'...UK learners have often missed a lot of education'* (virtual school head).

*'...their ambitions are nowhere near as high'* and they tend to be the ones *'that never do their homework'* (course tutor).

Again, the differences between citizen young people and unaccompanied minors may be reflective of their life experiences as well as cultural expectations although it is not for this piece of research to speculate.

### **A unique set of challenges**

Three unaccompanied asylum seeking minors reported challenges with regards to building social relationships and living with others from different countries.

*'It can be tough living with people that don't speak the same language, communication can be difficulty'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

*'When I came here I knew no-one'* (17, female, unaccompanied asylum seeker, in care).

*'...it was difficult because nobody spoke my language in the house'* (19, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

Professionals also commented on the reality of arriving in a new country with no family or peer support networks.

*'If you are here as an unaccompanied migrant child then you don't have those official networks to support'* (assistant principal).

*'...unaccompanied minors are often completely alone'* (designated teacher).

Two unaccompanied minors found reassurance through charity organised mentors from their home countries.

*'He helped me how to buy things from the shop and helped me with my emotional issues'* (18, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

*'He speak my language so I felt safe and he understood me. He showed me how to get to place, how to buy things. Came to my house. Check I'm okay'* (19, male, unaccompanied asylum seeker, semi-independent living).

According to four professionals, unaccompanied asylum seeking minors also have the added challenge of being,

*'...put into a system that they don't understand'* (careers advisor).

Not only did professionals highlight the need for them to learn cultural expectations including *'British values'* and *'...respecting gender and sexuality rights'* (assistant principal), but also how the UK education system works. This appeared to involve breaking the news to students that their qualifications did not meet requirements for university entrance in the UK and the need to learn English before taking an alternative pathway through the education system.

*'...they say in my country...I was going to do this but now they are here that isn't possible because you need this qualification and that qualification'* (careers advisor).

*'They argue that they were just about to go to university at home. So then we have to look at what is going to get them to their desired outcome and usually that means taking a few steps back'* (careers and employability advisor).

Finally the ongoing threat of asylum status reviews appeared to concern unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. One professional stated that,

*'...if their expectations are that they have to return shortly or they might be retained or deported, then they might also disappear from college'* (assistant principal).

While their asylum status appeared to cause several students concern, these students also felt well supported by their tutor who appeared knowledgeable about court proceedings and suitable lawyers.

*'When students tell me that they are going to court, I tell them to speak to the social workers about getting specific lawyers, ones who I know will do well for them'* (ESOL tutor).

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

The aim of this research was to highlight the needs of young people from care backgrounds in the context of FE colleges, describe what is currently going on to support this group of young people and investigate their experiences of this support. The following section will now discuss the research findings under the headings of each research question, drawing upon previous research findings. It will then explore some of the limitations of this study.

When interpreting and discussing the findings in relation to the research questions, it is important to re-consider the epistemological underpinnings of the research, namely how social constructivist theory has influenced this process. This research holds that each individual's reality is unique to them and constructed based on their experience and the context in which these experiences occur. Through the data collection process, my own experiences, knowledge, values and belief systems are likely to have impacted the latent interpretation of the participant's experiences. However attempts were made to reduce this through, for example, clarifying understanding and interpretation throughout the interviews, maintaining a reflexive journal and using peer coding and supervision to gain further insight into interpretation of the data. In keeping with a social constructivist perspective, the following discussion does not aim to make overall generalisations and claims based on the current findings. Instead, it aims to highlight the views of a range of participants on their current experience of FE and the process of leaving care within the context of their individual college, local authority and life experiences. The hope is that this will then go some way to encouraging other FE colleges to ask questions about their own provision for young people from care backgrounds and the impact this may be having.

### **5.1 What formal and informal systems are in place to support young people from care backgrounds in the context of an FE College?**

#### **a, What are the key challenges?**

#### **b, How are they experienced by young people?**

As yet there are no government guidelines on the needs of young people from care backgrounds in FE colleges and what should be in place to support them. Without clear advice, there is potential for inconsistencies in the understanding and support offered across colleges. The Frank Buttle Trust was one of the first to highlight the challenges young people in and leaving care face in FE, piloting a quality mark for

colleges displaying best practice (Buttle UK, 2011). The current research is one of the few to examine what is currently happening to support young people in or leaving care within the context of two FE colleges from the perspectives of a range of college professionals and young people. The following section will discuss the formal and informal systems of support in place in participant colleges, the challenges in implementing these systems and the experiences of young people in relation to the support offered.

### **5.1.1 Formal systems**

#### **Identifying students from care backgrounds**

In both colleges there appeared to be a lack of formal transition and information sharing between themselves and feeder schools. In part this seemed due to the unique nature of large London colleges enrolling pupils from a high number of schools across a range of different LAs, a finding also shown by Buttle UK (2011). Instead, colleges used application and enrolment forms and informally identified students through them accessing student services. However these methods were deemed unreliable given students misunderstanding of what it means to be looked after and possible reluctance to disclose this information. This resulted in late identification of students, meaning support was not put in place early enough, some students not receiving access to the 16-19 bursary. It became apparent that withdrawal or dropping out from college was the harsh reality of late identification for some students, highlighting a need for better systems of identification so that early intervention can take place.

Poor communication between school and college staff was also found by Driscoll (2013b). Drop out and withdrawal from college was reported on by both students and VSHs. She recommended that virtual schools take a greater responsibility for information sharing between schools and colleges and a move is made away from doing this through leaving care teams (Driscoll, 2013b) which would make sense given their lack of expertise in education. Recognising a need for better identification systems, college one has developed a protocol agreement with a local virtual school with the view to extending this to all virtual schools involved with students at the college. Although it is too early to assess the impact of this protocol agreement, the hope is that it will improve information sharing, with virtual schools making the college aware of students from care backgrounds about to enrol so that transition and support can be strategically planned. This is one step towards meeting the requirements of recent legislation that states VSHs should make links with FE colleges, supporting

their students to find provision that understand their needs, also making them aware of the 16-19 bursary (DfE, 2018a).

### **The designated teacher**

Members of staff in both colleges identified a need for a designated teacher despite this not being a requirement for FE colleges (DfE, 2018c). This role seemed to fulfil much of the expectations outlined in advice to schools with regards to promoting an awareness of the needs of looked after learners among staff, monitoring attendance and achievement and facilitating PEPs. However, a key challenge appeared to be the large number of young people from care backgrounds on roll and the capacity of one designated teacher to assess needs, monitor and plan support for all. Advice from the DfE (2018b) recognises that in large secondary schools there may be a need to appoint more than one designated teacher to fulfil the requirements of the job. However, the role of designated teachers in colleges appears to be neglected by recent legislation as does the fact that colleges, often being large institutions, may have significantly high numbers of students from care backgrounds.

Nevertheless, the appointment of a designated teacher appeared well received by members of staff, particularly those involved in pastoral support. All young people interviewed had worked with the designated teacher in some capacity and displayed high levels of gratitude for the support offered, demonstrating a positive impact on their lives. The designated teacher appeared to be a source of practical advice but also a champion for the education of looked after students, promoting high expectations and encouraging involvement in college based activities. However, as yet there exists no research on the impact of this role in ensuring the achievement of young people from care backgrounds within FE.

### **Universal student services**

In both colleges, young people from care backgrounds are invited to use universal student support services, no different to any other student. This came in the form of a pastoral team available to advise students on issues such as housing and finance but also provide an element of emotional support through mentoring. It was recognised that despite receiving some training, pastoral support workers were not trained counsellors and mental health provision in particular was not well established in either college. This is concerning given the high level of mental health difficulties found in children and young people from care backgrounds, being shown to worsen as the transition from care begins (DfE, 2015; Dixon, 2008), highlighting a potential gap in

the provision offered in colleges. However, most young people felt that college was already doing enough to meet their emotional needs and several reported receiving support to manage trauma through external mental health services.

Previous research has found unaccompanied asylum seeking minors to express ambivalence towards counselling services, making recommendations for support to be 'woven' into daily interactions with professionals (Wade, Mitchell, & Baylis, 2005, p8). It is possible that an element of emotional support is already being informally 'woven' into day to day work with college professionals for the young people in this study. This informal support will be discussed further in the following subsection. Nevertheless, college professionals may need training to acquire the skills to provide effective mental health support for those who do not reach the threshold for more specialised services. This may indicate a role for EPs (discussed further in section 5.4).

Psychosocial support in college one also appeared to take the form of enrichment activities, those from care backgrounds being encouraged to join clubs and take part in targeted events organised by the designated teacher. Hollingworth (2012) found extra curricula activities to be beneficial with regards to helping care leavers to grow in confidence and encourage participation in education through informal learning experiences highlighting areas of interest. However it was also recognised that leaving care teams were inconsistent in the extent to which they promoted extra curricula opportunities instead it being down to chance whether a young person came across a professional to promote activities to them. FE colleges may therefore need to be more proactive in their approach to getting learners involved in the potential absence of extra curricula activities being promoted elsewhere.

In addition to the pastoral service, both colleges had a careers service but again this service was universal as opposed to targeted to young people from care backgrounds. There seemed to be an expectation for students to make their own careers appointments. College two, did however, acknowledge a need to be more proactive when it came to ensuring all students from care backgrounds receive a meeting with the careers advisory service. This seems especially important given that previous research suggests that this group of young people may have underachieved at school (DfE, 2017; Driscoll, 2011) and may therefore be in need of advice on alternative pathways through education.

The findings also point towards the need for tailored careers advice, explaining the UK education system to unaccompanied minors. Past research shows the difficulties they face in accessing HE due to a lack of English language skills and A-level standard qualifications in addition to poor advice on educational pathways (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2014; Refugee Support Network, 2012). Consistent with this, professionals in the current research reported needing to explain to unaccompanied minors that their qualifications did not transfer to meet UK university entry criteria, again creating the need for advice on alternative pathways.

Government guidance now recognises that young people from care backgrounds require targeted support to raise ambitions and recommends that college careers advisors contact designated teachers in schools in order to find out who is in care, also having input on PEPs (DfE, 2018c). This again seems difficult when we consider the number of feeder schools for London colleges and would perhaps be a need already fulfilled by the college designated teacher.

College one reported supporting young people from care backgrounds to develop skills for adult life, running universal themed weeks on things such as money management and cooking. Professionals felt that in targeting workshops at young people from care backgrounds, attendance and engagement would be poor. Previous research has shown a pattern of non-engagement in support services among young people from care backgrounds (Driscoll, 2013a; The Who Cares? Trust, 2012). The same finding emerged in the current research according to professional reports. Cameron (2007) argued that young people from care backgrounds often show a high degree of personal agency that can come in two forms; feeling confident in one's own abilities to manage or a preference not to ask for help from others. In the current research non-engagement seemed underpinned by students not wanting to be associated with needing support as this compromised the view of themselves as self-reliant. Several students felt that the word 'support' had negative connotations and services would be better if they advertised support as 'information' as this term avoids making them feel unable to cope and needy of support.

Young people who engaged with universal student services showed a high level of appreciation for them with regards to the encouragement provided by professionals and advice on education and careers options. This could be explained by the young people's desire to feel the same as their peers and not targeted or singled out, a common feature of previous research (Driscoll, 2013a; The Who Cares? Trust, 2012).

Universal services, being accessed by all students are therefore discreet, ensuring students from care backgrounds feel no different to their peers. However, in keeping with a social constructivist perspective, it is important to recognise that the reality of accessing student services for one participant was different. This participant felt that student services needed to provide more specialised information to those leaving care. Interestingly, some professionals felt universal services alone could serve the needs of young people from care backgrounds. Nevertheless, the unique challenges these students face suggest a unique set of needs, as indicated by one young person, demonstrating a need for specialised information and individualised support. One young person felt that college could employ a pastoral worker who specialised in supporting care leavers, particularly unaccompanied asylum seeking minors.

### **Inter-professional working**

Inter-professional working appeared to be emerging in its formalities with regards to supporting young people from care backgrounds. College one showed a growing relationship with the virtual school through use of the protocol agreement. This relationship is also likely to have developed on the back of the new education leaving age being 18 and virtual schools having statutory responsibility for young people up to this age, many of whom will have transitioned to college.

Extending the involvement of virtual schools until age 18 was a recommendation of Driscoll (2013a). However, implementation of this support appears somewhat inconsistent from the findings of the current research. While the virtual school appears to have a key role in transition from school to college, especially with regards to providing careers advice and sharing information with their learners' institutions, not all of the young people interviewed knew about the virtual school and how it could help. Furthermore, the virtual school has a key role to play in mitigating school exclusions of looked after children but this research found that students were being withdrawn without the knowledge of the virtual school. It appears that not much has changed since Driscoll's (2013a) study which found similar outcomes. While the protocol agreement is a welcome step towards inter-professional working, there continues to be issues with regards to communication between the LA and colleges.

The virtual school in this study seemed to be proactive in extending their support to young people up to the age of 21 and potentially 25 and beyond if they were still in education. However, legislation does not make this a requirement and some LAs may not have capacity to manage this, potentially putting students at the same college at

a disadvantage. In addition, young people who have left the education system and decided to return may also be unaware of the potential support offered by virtual schools who have decided to extend the age of students that they work with.

Both colleges had formal systems in place to monitor the progress of looked after students in liaison with LA professionals such as social workers. These often involved PEP meetings but rarely did professionals or students mention that pathway plans were regularly reviewed with both college and LA professionals. Interestingly, much of the contact between social workers, personal advisors and key workers appeared to be through informal means which will be discussed under the following sub-heading.

Since improved inter-professional working appears to be in its infancy, this research found a lack of clarity over boundaries between system responsibilities. College professionals frequently mentioned that something wasn't within their job remit or that they were lacking the professional expertise to support a student with things such as housing, needing to refer on to other agencies. However, both young people and college professionals highlighted the problem of having too many professionals involved as this meant having to re-tell difficult life stories to professionals who frequently change. In some cases, it also meant problems with professionals not taking responsibility for supporting the young person, seeing some things as someone else's job. Young people spoke about the frustration of being passed from one professional to the next without receiving the support they needed.

It was mentioned by two interviewees that having just one person to liaise with would make things easier. There was also mention of having social workers based in colleges where day to day contact could be maintained. This is an interesting point to reflect on and may draw attention to wider systemic issues in the organisation of UK public services with social care and education operating as two separate systems. To some extent, the virtual school has helped to connect the LA social care system with education but clearly there are still issues with communication.

### **Organisational issues**

Recent media attention has been paid to funding concerns within the FE sector (Coughlan, 2015; The Guardian, 2015) so not surprisingly it was an issue raised by professionals in the current research. The findings indicated a lack of training for professionals on the needs of their looked after learners, who also felt stretched in

their roles and lacking in expertise and skills to advise on things such as mental health and housing. For one college, important services had been cut including group tutorials which is concerning given the finding that extended contact time with key professionals is important to help young people develop inter-personal relationships.

A further unexpected finding was the 42 day rule appearing to have significant implications on students from care backgrounds. In both colleges all students have their attendance monitored for the first 42 days following enrolment. Should this not reach a certain percentage, students are at risk of being withdrawn from college. A pattern of non-attendance in young people from care backgrounds emerged as a finding of this study, putting them at risk of falling foul of this 42 day rule. Non-attendance seemed underpinned by difficulties managing daily routines without the support of parents and challenging life circumstances making college less of a priority. Theme two also drew attention to the fact that young people from care backgrounds are not always known to the college meaning that they do not receive much needed support. While the government keeps a record of the number of exclusions in looked after children, there is no data on the number of looked after learners and care leavers withdrawn from colleges. There is no legislation that puts pressure on colleges to retain these students and ensure they receive the right support, breaking the cycle of failure.

FE colleges are subject to the same attendance and achievement inspections by Ofsted as schools. This appeared to create pressure on teachers to maintain high standards for their learners but seemed to lead to a zero tolerance attitude among some professionals. The findings drew attention to the fact that some professionals, mindful of their outcomes, were keen to have learners withdrawn from courses if they were not meeting expectations, regardless of their looked after status. Again this points towards a wider systemic issue with the way schools and colleges are inspected. As one professional pointed out, there needs to be greater focus on looking at smaller milestones of progress for looked after learners including social and emotional outcomes. Sadly, the target driven nature of the UK education system has a filter down effect on some of the most vulnerable young people in society.

### **5.1.2 Informal systems**

#### **Student-professional relationships**

In addition to the formal systems of support offered to young people from care backgrounds, the student-professional relationship emerged as a key player in their

well-being and achievement. Previous research has found professionals to be a source of both practical advice and psychosocial support for young people from care backgrounds (McLeod, 2010; Munro et al., 2011). However, young people often report inconsistencies in the quality of relationships they have with professionals (Baker, 2017). In this piece of research, there was a variation in the quality of relationships between young people and LA professionals including social workers and personal advisors. While some students reported good experiences, others reported break downs in communication and inconsistent availability meaning they did not have access to timely and accurate information. Despite key workers having day to day contact with the young people in semi-independent living arrangements, they were rarely mentioned as a source of support. Baker (2017) also found that young people often disengage with LA professionals due to the association with being in care which may offer some explanation for this break-down in communication.

It is possible that FE colleges can facilitate better relationships between young people and college professionals given that they have no previous association with the young person's care status. Indeed, young people in this study all reported having a good relationship with at least one college professional. Previous research has shown that the qualities of supportive student-professional relationship include reliable, empathic professionals who demonstrate genuine concern for the young person's achievement (Baker, 2017). The findings of this study mirror that of previous research. Young people valued professionals who were consistent and responsive to their needs as well as those who appeared to genuinely care about their well-being, enquiring about their daily activities and forming a genuine friendship as opposed to a student-professional relationship. This reference to the blurring of professional boundaries in favour of friendships, may demonstrate an unsurprising need for connectedness to adults given the absence of parental figures and love that some young people from care backgrounds have experienced. Also consistent with Baker's (2017) research, young people valued professionals who went the extra mile, beyond what their job role entailed, again communicating genuine concern for their well-being. Professionals reported checking up on students and acting as a parent would do.

Findings showed that young people from care backgrounds require professionals to be flexible and creative in the way that they implement boundaries in order to maintain positive relationships. Professionals reported needing to take a non-authoritarian stance to behaviour management, providing students with options and freedom to make their own decisions, allowing them to feel in control. This finding triangulates

well with theme six which showed that young people from care backgrounds do not always conform to behavioural expectations and make mistakes because of the challenges they have faced and are currently facing. The theme also demonstrates a need to maintain flexibility in implementing consequences and providing multiple chances for young people to succeed in order to break the cycle of repeated failures. Nevertheless, several professionals seemed to display a zero tolerance attitude towards making mistakes, also stereotyping young people from care backgrounds on their unwillingness to engage as opposed to looking beyond their behaviour. This resonates with what Jackson & McParlin (2006) view to be going on in schools with teachers neglecting to look beyond the behavioural difficulties of looked after children, resulting in disciplinary measures as opposed to addressing the underlying causes. However, as discussed above, these zero tolerance and stereotypical attitudes may be underpinned by systemic pressures for teachers to meet grade related expectations as well as underfunding, meaning staff are not supported to develop the expertise and skills to understand and work with young people from care backgrounds.

The findings also demonstrated the value placed on regular contact time in order to build stronger and more supportive student-professional relationships. While some young people valued seeing their personal tutors several times a week, pastoral workers reported needing to be more proactive in 'chasing' students in order to keep communication and engagement with support going.

Regular contact appeared better facilitated for unaccompanied asylum seeking minors given the way ESOL courses are designed, adopting the primary model of education, with one main tutor also sharing all classes with the same peer group. It has potential to explain the view of professionals that unaccompanied minors struggle less than citizen young people, a pattern also found by previous researchers (Brownlees & Finch, 2010; Wade, 2011). This creates the concern that some citizen young people are at a disadvantage given that the nature of their courses may mean less regular contact with one teacher. One college had even stopped whole group tutorials in order to save money therefore limiting opportunities for young people from care backgrounds to strengthen their relationship with personal tutors.

### **Advocating for students**

In addition to the informal support provided through student-professional relationships, professionals commented on the need to informally advocate for their

students with regards to ensuring their needs were met through services external to the college. This seemed to involve contacting social workers to ask questions on students' behalf or 'pushing' them to make sure things get done. In the absence of parents, professionals also found themselves contacting key workers of those in semi-independent living arrangements in order to find out why a student was absent from college. This further highlights the genuine empathic concern some college professionals demonstrate towards their students as well as a more holistic understanding of their needs in the absence of a stable home life afforded by their other students.

## **5.2 What are the needs of young people from care backgrounds in the context of FE colleges?**

Just by exploring the formal and informal support available in two FE colleges, the challenges that have arisen in delivering this support and how the young people have experienced it, the research has already highlighted a number of needs that some young people from care backgrounds have. These include:

- support at the point of transition from school with early identification of needs,
- targeted careers advice that explores alternative pathways and raises ambition,
- specialised information tailored to the needs of young people in or leaving care,
- discreet services that avoid making the young person feel targeted or unable to cope,
- quality relationships with at least one professional, serving as a source of advice, encouragement and emotional support and characterised by regular contact with a consistent and responsive professional, who goes beyond their job role to support the young person, shows genuine concern for their well-being and is considered as a friend,
- college professionals to advocate for them when difficulties arise with social care services,
- college professionals who are persistent about chasing students to build relationships and ensure engagement including when they do not show up for college,
- flexible and creative boundaries when it comes to implementing consequences and
- multiple chances to succeed after having disengaged or broken rules.

This discussion will now consider some of the other findings that highlight areas of need for young people from care backgrounds.

### **Managing routines**

Theme one further highlights the distinct needs of young people from care backgrounds. As with other research, findings showed that young people can find the transition to independence challenging particularly with regards to managing routines and motivating themselves to get to college in the absence of a parental figure to do this for them (Baker, 2017; Dixon, 2007; Gill & Daw, 2017). While key workers were available for those in semi-independent living, none of the young people reported them to be supportive with regards to encouraging them to get up in the mornings and attend college. This highlights a gap in the provision for young people from care backgrounds and a need for someone to proactively motivate them to meet the demands of their courses. For the one young person who had been withdrawn from two college courses, a simple phone call in the morning was what she felt she needed to encourage her to attend college. Interestingly the DfE have recently trialled an intervention to improve engagement in FE learners through text messaging. Findings revealed that a weekly text message to adult learners on English and maths courses improved attendance by 22% and weekly texts of encouragement to learners aged 16-19 improved attendance by 21% (Hume et al., 2018). Perhaps a similar intervention run by FE colleges may benefit young people from care backgrounds.

### **Developing non-professional relationships**

Theme nine also drew attention to the non-professional relationship needs of young people from care backgrounds. Although most young people in this study reported to be happy within their peer relationships, findings also revealed that some experience difficulty forming friendships sometimes because of trust. Professionals highlighted a need to do more in the way of promoting friendships, possibly through a peer mentoring system. Peer mentoring schemes have shown to encourage valued non-professional relationships, providing both emotional support and educational encouragement (Clayden & Stein, 2005; Hiles et al., 2013). Further still, some young people value the chance to connect with others who have shared their experiences (Dixon & Baker, 2016; The Care Inquiry, 2013). A sense of belonging and feeling important to others has often been linked to resilience in the face of challenging life circumstances (Schofield et al., 2016; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Findings from this study revealed that for some young people from care backgrounds this sense of belonging or relatedness to others could come from forming peer relationships with

those who had experienced similar life events to themselves, such as being in care. As highlighted by professionals, this need might be fulfilled through formal peer mentoring systems whereby care leavers act as mentors for those about to transition out of care, a recommendation made by The APPG for Looked after children and Care Leavers (2012). However, attention should be paid to the ability of care leavers to act as positive role models as one young person pointed out that a peer from a similar background to themselves could in fact have a negative influence. This point is important to note given the social constructivist underpinnings of this research and the value in an individual's own interpretation of their lived experiences. While many may feel having a care status in common can enhance a sense of belonging, others may disagree and experience this negatively.

It is important to acknowledge here that unaccompanied asylum seeking minors may be at a particular disadvantage when it comes to developing social support networks, often arriving in their country of origin knowing no-one. The young people in this study found it difficult being put into housing where no-one spoke their language demonstrating the importance of ESOL courses developing their basic communication skills. For some young people, having a peer mentor from their home country, organised through a charity service appeared to help them learn about their new country and support them emotionally. This highlights the potential that peer mentoring services have to offer in supporting all young people from care backgrounds, particularly those who have arrived in the UK knowing no-one and may be something that colleges consider as part of their own provision, whether that be through using their own students or organising mentors through charitable organisations.

### **The unique needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors**

This discussion has already highlighted needs unique to unaccompanied asylum seeking minors including the need for tailored careers advice and support developing a social network. Previous research has also found unaccompanied asylum seeking minors to experience needs related to their immigration status, especially given language barriers and not understanding the UK legal system could mean that they are unaware of their rights or whether their legal representatives are providing an adequate service (Chase et al., 2008; Hodes et al., 2008). In the current study one professional highlighted how the uncertainty around immigration status could lead to withdrawal from education. However, the ESOL tutor in college one appeared to be proactively meeting the needs of these students by providing information on known

and trusted legal representatives. This highlights the need for colleges to employ ESOL teachers who have experience or are trained to understand the issues related to unaccompanied asylum seeking minors.

### **A non-homogenous group**

The findings of this research again draw attention to the fact that young people from care backgrounds represent a non-homogenous group, all having had unique experiences impacting upon their needs within the context of an FE college. For example, several young people reported still having the support of their birth parents or family members, helping them to make decisions for the future. This was also true for three unaccompanied asylum seekers. In addition, some spoke about the support they had received from foster carers with regards to learning the skills for adult life and motivating them to do well in education. It has potential to explain why these young people may have been doing well on their courses, displaying high motivation to achieve. Indeed, previous research has shown a link between familial support and success with regards to higher education (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005).

Sadly this was not the finding for all students, some having no connection to their birth families, difficult relationships with foster carers or no familial support on having left care. This highlights the need for colleges to explore the experiences of each unique individual and tailor support as necessary. A young person with no familial support, for example, may be in greater need of developing a strong relationship with one key professional who can act as a parental figure, holding high expectations, raising ambitions and motivating them to succeed.

As discussed previously, professionals frequently reported that citizen young people from care backgrounds appear to struggle more than unaccompanied minors, with lower ambitions and a greater frequency of behavioural problems, a finding shown consistently across research (Brownlees & Finch, 2010; Dixon et al., 2006; Wade, 2011). This might be explained by the possibility that unaccompanied asylum seeking minors experience stable home lives until the departure from their home country, though further research is needed to support this speculation. Stevenson & Willott (2007, p671) also attribute this difference based on the finding that the parents of unaccompanied minors have placed greater value on education, seeing it as “a route out of poverty and discrimination.” Nevertheless it again highlights the necessity for needs to be assessed on an individual basis so that support can be tailored to the experiences of each young person.

Findings also indicated that even within the group of unaccompanied minors, differences in social behaviour, commitment to studies and motivation occurred as a result of cultural differences. Students from Africa were considered to show the highest levels of academic commitment by professionals whereas students from Eastern Europe appeared to show a greater motivation to work and earn money. In addition, there appeared to be perceived differences in the acceptance of authority given that some students had been considered adults in their home countries and had had this status taken away from them on entering the UK care system. This highlights the need for professionals to be sensitive to the differences among their students, taking into account their past experiences and tailoring their approach to behaviour management, providing freedom as opposed to control as discussed above (5.2).

In addition to the needs outlined in the initial discussion of this subheading, the findings have highlighted further needs of young people from care backgrounds including the need for;

- a formal system to support management of daily routines including waking up in the morning, attending college and completing assignments,
- development of a peer support network with positive role models who have shared experience of the challenges faced,
- professionals who are aware of the unique needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and are experienced in meeting their needs and
- individualised assessment of need so that tailored support can be planned.

The discussion will now focus on the role of EPs in relation to working with young people from care backgrounds in FE colleges.

### **5.3 How is the role of EPs perceived among young people from care backgrounds and the educational professionals working with them, in relation to meeting their needs?**

The findings in answer to this research question were fairly limited given the lack of experience young people and professionals had in working with EPs. EPs are widely recognised for their work with children and young people identified with SEND and less known for their involvement with looked after children's services (Osborne et al., 2009). Professionals in my study tended to view a role for EPs with regards to statutory work through assessment and provision of advice in EHCPs. Out of 18

professionals, only four saw the value in employing EPs to consult with members of staff in order to identify a student's needs, plan and review the support in place perhaps indicating a lack of awareness among staff on the potential for EP involvement.

New government advice requires VSHs to work in liaison with EPs to promote mental health, well-being and academic achievement of young people from care backgrounds (DfE, 2018b). Indeed, the VSH in this research commented on the partnership between her service and the EPS, highlighting that EPs can become involved in work with students from care backgrounds through the virtual school budget instead of relying on colleges to employ them. Still, this work appeared to be fairly limited to accessing EHCPs, drawing attention to the fact that EPs may not be being utilised to their full potential within the FE sector.

The findings indicate various ways that EPs might be involved in supporting FE colleges to meet the needs of young people from care backgrounds, beyond that of facilitating discussion around needs and provision on a case by case basis. First, there appears to be a gap in the way transition from school to college is managed for young people from care backgrounds, including those who may be returning after a period of time out of education. Morris & Atkinson (2018) demonstrate the role of EPs in filling this gap, particularly with regards to the development of transition protocol agreements between schools and FE providers. While my research describes how this work is already happening in one college, EPs have the potential to facilitate this process by bringing knowledge on the psychological aspects of transition including theory related to developmental psychology, the needs of 16-25 year olds and how evidence based practice can support these needs at the point of transition. Morris & Atkinson (2018) also argue that EPs are best placed to utilise their skills in person centred planning, supporting secondary aged pupils with transition planning, identify their strengths and raising aspirations.

Furthermore, EPs are increasingly working systemically within educational providers and have a role to play with regards to promoting mental health and well-being (DfE, 2017c). EPs are in a position to offer evidence based therapeutic interventions for individuals or groups of students, drawing upon (for example) skills in cognitive behavioural approaches (Squires, 2010). They can also utilise their expertise on risk and resilience factors in vulnerable groups of young people, using this to inform college professionals on ways to promote mental health and well-being (Dent &

Cameron, 2003). Their skills therefore have the potential to fill gaps in the mental health provision as identified by the current findings.

Funding seemed to be the biggest issue in getting EPs into colleges and this is not surprising given the current issues around funding in the sector as a whole. Again, it points to wider systemic issues with traded models of EPS delivery. Since budgets are located with educational providers and not the LA, there is less power for EPs to choose where to allocate their time and resources, instead leaving it to be negotiated with budget holders who may not necessarily see the needs of young people from care backgrounds as a priority. This ethical issue was also raised by Lee & Woods (2017) who highlight a potential need for EPSs to consider retaining some non-traded services for vulnerable children.

Further issues with regards to EP involvement in FE colleges may also be underpinned by the national shortage of EPs (National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2016). An increase in the age of young people that EPs work with corresponds with increased demand for their work, particularly in FE providers where they have statutory responsibilities for EHCPs and a role to play in converting old learning difficulty assessments to EHCPs. However, this has not coincided with an increase in capacity for EPSs to fulfil this work.

Finally, it is important to note the difficulties that might arise from engaging young people from care backgrounds with EP services. As was noted in this study, young people do not always wish to engage with support services and this creates a challenge for EPs. One way EPs could improve engagement could be to increase their presence within FE colleges and develop relationships with key stakeholders such as designated teachers and pastoral support workers. As was highlighted by several young people in this study the word 'support' can make them feel needy or unable to cope. Therefore EPs would need to be careful in how they advertise their services, perhaps advertising their ability to be a source of 'information' on helping students to maximise their achievement in education. Furthermore EPs might benefit from advertising their services to all young people in college, perhaps through tutorials similar to those held by careers advisors. This would avoid making young people from care backgrounds feeling targeted and stigmatised.

## **5.4 Summary**

The findings of this research draw attention to the fact that FE colleges are becoming increasingly aware of the needs of young people from care backgrounds and highlights some of the systems in place to meet these needs. The emergence of formal systems seems to have begun with the introduction of a key professional solely responsible for planning, delivering and monitoring the achievement of young people from care backgrounds. Steps are being taken to increase identification and improve information sharing at the point of transition to ensure the right support is in place for students. Students have access to formal student support services although there appears to be a need to tailor information to the specific challenges faced by care leavers transitioning through education. Informally, students emotional needs appear to be met by contact with key professionals possessing a range of valuable qualities. However, professionals may require support to advance their skills in promoting mental health and well-being in their students from care backgrounds, a need that can potentially be filled by EPs. Nevertheless there are some professionals who appear to be lacking in empathic concern for young people from care backgrounds potentially meaning their needs are going unmet. Just as concerning is the finding that there is little data on the retention of students from care backgrounds, some of whom seem to be being withdrawn or dropping out from college before their needs have been identified and met. Sadly, this may be underpinned by systemic pressures related to funding and seemingly unfair inspection criteria.

Clearly there is considerable scope for further developments in the sector with regards to identifying students, assessing needs and planning holistic interventions to meet these needs. EPs might be best placed to support these further developments, bringing skills and knowledge in relation to identifying needs, person centred planning, psychological aspects of transition and evidence based practice to support vulnerable young people. Nevertheless, this work cannot take place without increasing the number of EPs available to meet the demands of a growing client base, as well as training that allows EPs to better understand the FE sector (Atkinson, Dunsmuir, Lang, & Wright, 2015). Not only do EPSs need to consider forging better links with FE providers but attention should be given to the ethical issues linked to traded services. As Lee & Woods (2017) point out, perhaps core delivery should be reserved for children and young people from care backgrounds in order to ensure some of the most vulnerable learners have equal access to EPSs.

## 5.5 Limitations

This research collected data from just two colleges, and in one only four professionals and no students were interviewed. Therefore the findings collected are unique to the colleges studied and not representative of all young people from care backgrounds in FE colleges. Nevertheless, this study set out to examine participant's individual experiences as interpreted by the researcher so no attempt will be made to generalise from the findings to all FE colleges and all care leavers, given the uniqueness of each individual's cognitive processes and social environment. Instead, we can only observe patterns among respondent's answers and use the findings to encourage other FE providers to ask questions about their own provision for young people leaving care.

A limitation of this research is that the sample of student participants is unlikely to be representative of all young people from care backgrounds. Firstly, the sample excludes young people with severe and complex needs as well as those who do not have a basic level of English communication and therefore cannot be said to be representative of the entire population of young people from care backgrounds, including unaccompanied asylum seeking minors.

Furthermore, the majority of citizen young people were enrolled on level two BTEC Diploma courses and re-taking English, Maths or both through functional skills courses. The BTEC Diploma had either required them to pass four GCSEs (grades A\* to D) or to have taken a level one BTEC Diploma, requiring no passes at GCSE. The sample is therefore reflective of government statistics that state young people from care backgrounds tend to perform less well than their peers at GCSE (DfE, 2017a). Despite appearing to have underachieved at GCSE, the young people interviewed reported that they were doing well on their current courses although this view is subjective and may have been influenced by a possible desire for me to view them in a positive light. They all also seemed to have ambitions with regards to the future and reported positive experiences with regards to college services. Perhaps missing from the data set were the students felt to be struggling, frequently absent from college and not accessing services. This may have provided a very different view on the experiences of young people from care backgrounds within the context of an FE college. Nevertheless, given the difficulties arising from identification, these students may not have been known to the college and therefore a difficult sample to access. In addition, it was only possible to interview one care leaver who had had a

negative experience of college, having stopped attending one college and withdrawn from another. More data would need to be collected in order to observe whether her experiences were similar to others before assumptions are made about ways of intervening to support those at risk of dropping out. Given the sample's lack of representation for all groups of young people from care backgrounds, the results should be considered with extreme caution.

It is also important to acknowledge that the study drew from a self-selected sample of young people. The students had been 'chased' by the designated teacher to follow up emails with regards to participation in the research. The students selected may have been those with a good relationship with the designated teacher and particularly willing to give up their time given their positive experiences. Again, this adds further bias to the sampling process and highlights the need to interpret the results with caution.

A further limitation of this research would be that the interview schedules were not piloted prior to being used. It was initially felt that the preparatory study was enough to gather information that informed the formation of interview questions for the current research. However, in hindsight this did not allow for the current interview questions to be trialled with both young people and professionals. The implication of this was that there was potential for me to ask leading questions or questions that generated insufficient or irrelevant information. This also meant that questions needed to be adapted throughout the interviewing process based on reflections from each interview. For example, the question 'Do you feel the college could do more to support young people from care backgrounds?' tended to elicit 'yes' or 'no' answers. It was therefore amended to 'Where do you feel there are gaps in the provision offered by college to support young people from care backgrounds?' in order to encourage a greater level of reflection and detailed answer.

## **CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **6.1 Implications for policy and practice**

This research has a number of implications for both policy and practice. The fact that some colleges are employing individuals solely responsible for coordinating the education of young people from care backgrounds is promising. However government should consider making this role statutory within the FE sector also publishing guidelines on responsibilities and requirements of the role as it has done for schools. Notice should also be given to the size of FE colleges and the potential for a large number of students from care backgrounds on roll therefore highlighting a need for more than one designated teacher.

FE colleges might also consider developing their own protocol agreements with virtual schools in liaison with EPs, in order to assist identification of students through improved information sharing. Consideration might also be given to improved identification of students who are returning to education, ensuring they are aware of the support offered by their LA.

The research also calls for improved monitoring of the achievement and retention of young people from care backgrounds within FE colleges. Making this statutory, as it is in schools, has the potential to highlight issues with provision and ensure colleges are working hard to ensure the success of their most vulnerable students. National policy might also benefit from considering making young people from care backgrounds exempt from the '42 day rule,' ensuring procedures are in place to detect young people likely to fall foul of this rule. One such procedure could involve an early PEP meeting within the first 28 days of starting college.

The findings highlight the needs of young people from care backgrounds and how college professionals can build supportive relationships that ensure their success in college. For example, training sessions coordinated by a designated teacher, virtual school or even EP could discuss the findings of this research and inform college professionals on best practice when it comes to working with young people from care backgrounds, particularly those living independently without familial support.

Furthermore, the research highlights the unique experiences of a non-homogenous group, recognising that each individual's needs should be assessed on a case by

case basis. In some respects PEPs do this for students up to the age of 18 and pathways plans fill this role beyond 18. Nevertheless, it highlights a need for colleges to ensure that relevant educational professionals are part of these processes and are liaising with LAs whether it be through advocating on behalf of a student or setting up multi-professional meetings in which clear roles and responsibilities are assigned, the young person being present and kept informed. While it might benefit students to have just one professional to liaise with on all matters with regards to their care, health and education this is not possible given the range of different expertise professionals bring. However, colleges need to ensure that there is at least one point of contact for young people from care backgrounds and that this person possess the qualities outlined in theme seven so that a supportive relationship can be maintained. For some students this might be their tutors but for others the designated teacher or pastoral worker.

Finally EPs may have a role to play in facilitating transition from school to college as well as supporting key educational professionals to understand the needs of young people from care backgrounds and ways of promoting their mental health and well-being. This might operate in a supervisory role as has been shown through emotional literacy support programmes in schools (Garwood, 2012). EPs may also be best placed to offer individualised and group based therapeutic work for young people who do not reach the threshold for more specialised services. Nevertheless this is unlikely to happen without funding. Since the government has already recognised the need for EPs to become involved in the lives of young people from care backgrounds (DfE, 2018a), it seems appropriate that protected funding for this should be in place, either making work with young people from care backgrounds a statutory requirement or ensuring EPSs have a protected budget for providing core services to this group.

## **6.2 Conclusion and scope for further research**

It is evident that many of the young people in this study have benefited from the formal and informal systems in place to support them through their college education. Nevertheless it is clear that the sector is currently lacking with regards to statutory guidance on and resources for supporting young people from care backgrounds meaning that many students may have their needs unrecognised and unmet. While this research has interviewed young people who have been predominately successful on their college courses, further research would benefit from interviewing a greater number of students who had been unsuccessful therefore highlighting areas in which

systems need developing. Furthermore, this research has been largely broad and descriptive in nature and further research has the potential to look more specifically at the impact of certain systems such as the impact a designated teacher has on the achievement of young people from care backgrounds in FE colleges. Other systems worthy of research might also include the virtual school protocol agreement, peer mentoring schemes and impact of careers advice on aspirations.

### **6.3 Reflections**

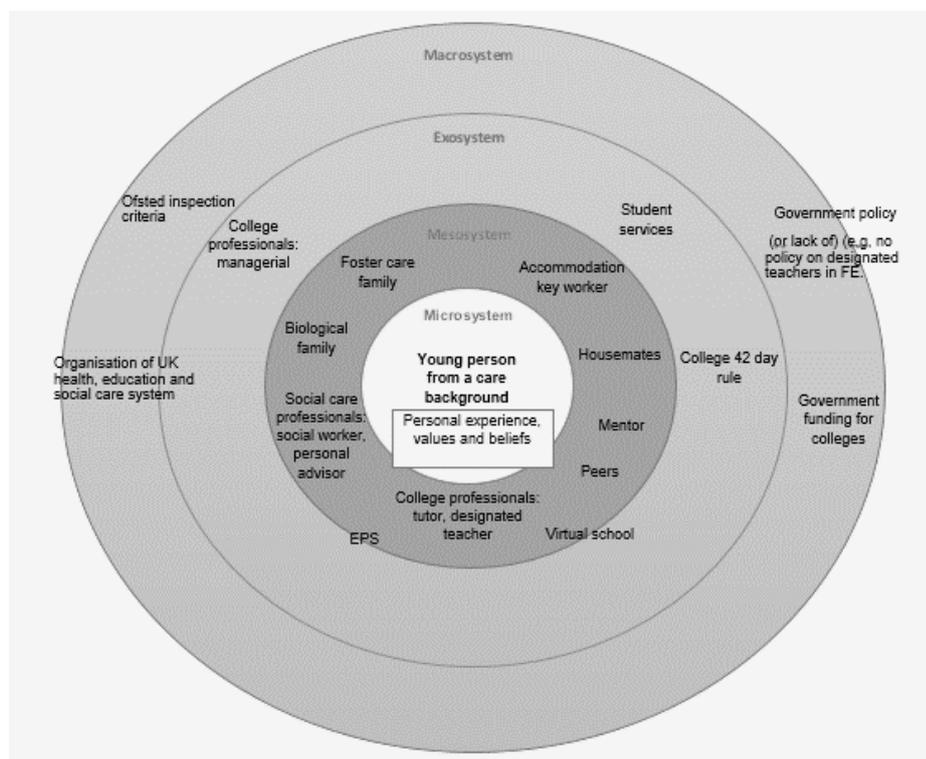
This section will list some final reflections on the research including the decision to combine the data sets, the decision not to use individual case studies as well as how Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory could be applied to the findings.

The decision to combine the professional and student transcripts was taken since similar themes emerged for both groups while conducting the analysis. Combining the data also allowed me to represent the professional voice alongside that of the young persons, allowing comparisons to be made throughout the presentation of the research as opposed to summarising this in a paragraph at the end. Additionally, separating the two thematic analyses would not have been conducive to the word limit of this thesis and data may therefore have gone unrepresented to keep within this limit. For each theme, I tried to ensure that the young persons' comments were evident but I appreciate, that in some cases, the voice of the young person may have been lost given the disproportionate number of professionals interviewed in comparison.

On reflection, individual case studies focussing on the lives of each young person had the potential to enrich the data and provide deeper insight into their experiences in FE. However, in conducting in-depth case studies this may have limited the opportunity to triangulate the data by speaking to professionals within colleges. The decision to conduct interviews, allowed for a wide range of professionals to be interviewed in addition to young people. This allowed for a greater exploration of the college systems in place that were either supporting or acting as barriers to the achievement of young people transitioning out of care. Interviews were therefore more conducive to the research questions.

Reflecting on the key take home message of this research, it is clear that provision for young people from care backgrounds is in the early stages of development. While this might only be true for the colleges in this research, it is evident that new systems of support are being put into place (e.g, the protocol agreement) while older systems are being questioned for their fairness (e.g, the 42 day rule). Our attention is also drawn to organisational pressures that may be having a filter down effect on young people from care backgrounds. For example, Ofsted inspections putting pressure on curriculum managers to reach attendance and achievement targets which may unfairly see young people from care backgrounds withdrawn from colleges for non-attendance and underachievement. On reflection, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) offers a useful framework for us to understand the impact of systems on the young person. According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), child development is best understood by exploring the context that the child lives within on a number of levels. Within each level, different systems operate which interact, some having a direct impact on the child while others operating at a distance but having a 'trickled down' effect. Diagram one provides a visual representation of the application of Bronfenbrenner's model to the findings of the current research.

Diagram one: Systems impacting upon the achievement of young people from care backgrounds:



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## **APPENDIX A: ETHICS FORM**

### **Ethics Application Form: Student Research**

All research activity conducted under the auspices of the Institute by staff, students or visitors, where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants are required to gain ethical approval before starting. *This includes preliminary and pilot studies.* Please answer all relevant questions responses in terms that can be understood by a lay person and note your form may be returned if incomplete.

For further support and guidance please see accompanying guidelines and the Ethics Review Procedures for Student Research <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/studentethics/> or contact your supervisor or [researchethics@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@ioe.ac.uk).

**Before completing this form you will need to discuss your proposal fully with your Supervisor/s.**

**Please attach all supporting documents and letters.**

*For all Psychology students, this form should be completed with reference to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics and Code of Ethics and Conduct.*

Section 1 Project details		
a.	Project title	Supporting looked after young people and care leavers in further education: Building a model of good practice
b.	Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678)	Sacha Grimes GRI13119894
c.	Supervisor/Personal Tutor	Vivian Hill/ Claire Cameron

d.	Department	Psychology and Human Development	
e.	Course category (Tick one)	PhD/MPhil <input type="checkbox"/>	EdD <input type="checkbox"/>
		MRes <input type="checkbox"/>	DEdPsy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
		MTeach <input type="checkbox"/>	MA/MSc <input type="checkbox"/>
		ITE <input type="checkbox"/>	
		Diploma (state which) <input type="checkbox"/>	
		Other (state which) <input type="checkbox"/>	
f.	Course/module title	Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology	
g.	<b>If applicable</b> , state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.	NA	
h.	Intended research start date	March 2017	
i.	Intended research end date	April 2018	
j.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in  <i>If research to be conducted abroad please check <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk">www.fco.gov.uk</a> and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be <b>required</b> before ethical approval can be granted: <a href="http://ioe-net.inst.ioe.ac.uk/about/profservices/international/Pages/default.aspx">http://ioe-net.inst.ioe.ac.uk/about/profservices/international/Pages/default.aspx</a></i>	England	
k.	Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?		

Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	External Committee Name:
No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ⇒ go to Section 2	Date of Approval:

**If yes:**

- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

## Section 2 Project summary

### Research methods (tick all that apply)

Please attach questionnaires, visual methods and schedules for interviews (even in draft form).

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interviews | <input type="checkbox"/> Controlled trial/other intervention study                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focus groups          | <input type="checkbox"/> Use of personal records  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaires        | <input type="checkbox"/> Systematic review ⇒ <b>if only method used go to Section 5.</b>              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Action research       | <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary data analysis ⇒ <b>if secondary analysis used go to Section 6.</b> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Observation           | <input type="checkbox"/> Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Literature review     | <input type="checkbox"/> Other, give details:   |

**Please provide an overview of your research.** This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, your method of data collection (e.g., observations, interviews, questionnaires, etc.) and kind of questions that will be asked, reporting and dissemination (typically 300-500 words).

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the development of policy and practice in relation to the education of young people who were or are in LA care and attending FE colleges. While the education of children in care in schools has

gained considerable attention, what happens to this group in the post-GCSE phase is much less clear. We know from government statistics that approximately 30% of 19 year old care leavers are in education or training and we know from local providers that some further education colleges have many care leavers on roll. Since the introduction of the SEND (2014) legislation EPs now have a role in working with both FE providers and vulnerable young people up to the age of 25. My initial research in this area aimed to explore how this role might develop, and found that looked after young people (LAYP) and care leavers making the transition to adulthood value the relationships they have with their key workers and feel that they need more services to provide them with advice on matters that are specifically related to them, including finance, accommodation and employment.. My aim now is to find out more about the needs of LAYP and care leavers and what services Further Education (FE) colleges can and do provide to meet these needs. My aim is also to explore the role of the EP in the post SEND era in supporting and facilitating this work.

The main research questions are:

- 1. What are the needs of LAYP and care leavers in FE?**
- 2. How are FE colleges meeting the needs of LAYP and care leavers?**
  - A, What support is offered?
  - B, Who are the key professionals involved? What does multi-professional collaboration look like?
  - C, How might EPs support FE colleges to respond to the needs of these young people?
  - D, How is support planned, delivered and reviewed?
- 3. How well do LAYP and care leavers feel their needs are being met in FE?**
  - A, What services have been made use of? How and why?
  - B, What is the young people's experiences of these services?
  - C, What more can be done?

Research design

Data will be collected through case studies of two colleges, one which will have a well-established support system in place for LAYP and care leavers and a second college in the beginning stages of developing this provision. The aim is to compare the needs of the young people, identify gaps in services and look for examples of good practice. It will also consider the role of applied educational psychology in supporting this process, since some virtual schools employ EPs to support the processes of transition. This is a strengths based study in which I view young people as competent in their own lives.

### Participants and Sampling

I will identify two colleges that I feel appropriate for participation based on the stage in which they are at in offering services to meet the needs of LAYP and care leavers. This information will be gained from the contacts I currently hold with colleges including, the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) from the college in which I carried out my research last year and a member of the Virtual School's Further Education team from the LA in which I work. Once two colleges have been identified, I plan to inform a key person (possibly SENCo, head of student services or a designated teacher) about the aims of my research and gain consent for participation via email and a follow up telephone call and or meeting. Following this consent, I will liaise with this key member of staff in order to recruit young people and other key members of staff for interviews.

### Data collection

Each case study will involve interviews with LAYP and care leavers in order to gain a sense of their needs and how well they feel they are being met. I will also be interviewing key members of staff in order to address the question of how services are planned, delivered and reviewed. The number of interviews is likely to vary depending on the number of young people and key members of staff interested in participating in the research. I estimate there to be around five interviews with young people and three to four with key members of staff per college. I will also be examining college policy and finishing with focus groups involving the young people in order to check that my findings appropriately reflect their views.

## Section 3 Participants

Please answer the following questions giving full details where necessary. Text boxes will expand for your responses.

a.	Will your research involve human participants?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/> ⇒ go to <i>Section 4</i>
b.	Who are the participants (i.e. what sorts of people will be involved)? Tick all that apply.		
	Children		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Early years/pre-school <input type="checkbox"/> Ages 5-11 <input type="checkbox"/> Ages 12-16	<input type="checkbox"/> Unknown – specify below <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adults <i>please specify below (adult</i>	

	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Young people aged 17-18	<i>learners, key members of staff including teachers, teaching assistants, key workers and management)</i>  <input type="checkbox"/> Other – specify below
<p><b>NB:</b> Ensure that you check the <b>guidelines</b> (Section 1) carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES).</p>		
c.	<p>If participants are under the responsibility of others (such as parents, teachers or medical staff) how do you intend to obtain permission to approach the participants to take part in the study?</p> <p><b>(Please attach approach letters or details of permission procedures – see Section 9 Attachments.)</b></p> <p>I will ask teachers and tutors who are known to LAYP to request participation on my behalf. I will give teachers information sheets to discuss with potential participants. Once permission is given for me to contact the LAYP, I will review the information sheet and the consent form with each participant. As each will be 16 years of age or older, they may give their own consent to take part.</p>	
d.	<p>How will participants be recruited (identified and approached)?</p> <p>The SENCo at the college, in which I carried out some research last year, will be contacted via email in order to inform her of this research and ask about interest in participation. A second college will be contacted in the same way, on the recommendation of a member of the Virtual Schools FE Team from the LA in which I work. Should either college decide not to participate, I will be pursuing college contacts made at an FE conference at the Institute of Education where I was introduced to lead professionals involved in the provision of education for LAYP and care leavers. In each case I will send out an information sheet about the research also requesting participation. From responses to this request I will ask a key person in each college to identify and approach LAYP and care leavers and ask them about their interest in participating in one to one interviews with myself. I will also ask this key</p>	

	<p>person to approach other members of staff in order to participate in interviews.</p>
<p>e.</p>	<p>Describe the process you will use to inform participants about what you are doing.</p> <p>An initial information sheet will be sent to potential FE colleges to tell them about the research (see attached). I will meet with a lead professional (such as a SENCo, designated teacher or head of student services) and explain the research further. The lead professional will then begin to identify potential candidates for participation, including young people and members of staff and briefly explain the aims of the research. With permission, I will ask the lead professional to forward me their contact details so I can arrange a time to meet with them and explain the research in more detail. Alternatively, I will ask the key member of staff to arrange a time when I can go in and talk to potential participants about the aims of the research.</p>
<p>f.</p>	<p>How will you obtain the consent of participants? Will this be written? How will it be made clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any time?</p> <p><i>See the guidelines for information on opt-in and opt-out procedures. Please note that the method of consent should be appropriate to the research and fully explained.</i></p> <p>It is possible that for consent for the college to act as a case study in this research, a key member of the management team (principle of board of governors) will need to give permission. If this is the case then they will be provided with an information letter to sign and my contact details should they require any further information.</p> <p>At the interview stage, participants will be reminded of the aims of the study and asked to provide written consent. Anonymity and the option to opt out will also be explained before beginning (see attached consent forms).</p>
<p>g.</p>	<p><b>Studies involving questionnaires:</b> Will participants be given the option of omitting questions they do not wish to answer?</p> <p>Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>If <b>NO</b> please explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.</p>

h.	<p><b>Studies involving observation:</b> Confirm whether participants will be asked for their informed consent to be observed.</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>If <b>NO</b> read the guidelines (Ethical Issues section) and explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.</p>
i.	<p>Might participants experience anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment as a result of your study?</p> <p>Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>If <b>yes</b> what steps will you take to explain and minimise this?</p> <p>I will be asking young people to share their experiences of school, college and in some cases their carer experiences. For some this might be an uncomfortable process, especially if their experiences were not good or they had experienced trauma and upheaval. I will remind the young people and adults that they do not have to answer any questions that they feel uncomfortable with and that their answers will be anonymised. Furthermore they will be informed before the interview that they are free to withdraw from the process at any point. I will also need to inform them that if they disclose something that makes me question their safety then it will be my duty to discuss this with my supervisor and report it to the college safeguarding officer if deemed the appropriate course of action. If a participant appears upset but there is no threat to their safety, I will ask if they wish me to share information with a named person with whom the young person is familiar.</p> <p>This will study will aim to elicit information about experiences that have been positive (as well as those that have been more challenging) and therefore aim to minimise any anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment. Furthermore, young people will be regarded as experts (they will be informed of this) and that they will be helping me (the researcher) in understanding more about their experiences in order that young people experiencing transition in the future can be supported more effectively.</p> <p>I will also interview key members of staff (teachers, SENCos, support workers, etc) and again there may be some anxiety around sharing information about their experiences of working with looked after young people and care leavers. Again I will remind them that they do not have to answer any questions that they feel uncomfortable answering, that their answers will be anonymised and that they are able to withdraw at any point in the study. A solution focused, strengths based approach to interviewing will aim to minimise anxiety. Key members of staff will also be reminded that I will need</p>

	<p>to share information that I feel suggests that they or young people/ service users are in danger.</p> <p>Similarly, if anything discovered written or omitted in college policy appears to put staff or service users at risk of child protection or safeguarding concerns then this will need to be reported to the LA in which the college sits.</p> <p>If <b>not</b>, explain how you can be sure that no discomfort or embarrassment will arise?</p>
j.	<p>Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants (deception) in any way?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>If <b>YES</b> please provide further details below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.</p>
k.	<p>Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)?</p> <p>Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>If <b>NO</b> please explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.</p>
l.	<p>Will participants be given information about the findings of your study? (This could be a brief summary of your findings in general; it is not the same as an individual debriefing.)</p> <p>Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>If <b>no</b>, why not?</p> <p>.</p>

#### Section 4 Security-sensitive material

Only complete if applicable

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances;

concerns terrorist or extreme groups.			
a.	Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
b.	Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
c.	Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
* Give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b>			

<b>Section 5 Systematic review of research</b>			
Only complete if applicable			
a.	Will you be collecting any new data from participants?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> *	No <input type="checkbox"/>
b.	Will you be analysing any secondary data?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
* Give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b>			
<i>If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) and if you have answered <b>No</b> to both questions, please go to <b>Section 10 Attachments</b>.</i>			

<b>Section 6 Secondary data analysis Complete for all secondary analysis</b>			
Name of dataset/s			
Owner of dataset/s			
Are the data in the public domain?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
	<i>If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?</i>		
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are the data anonymised?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	

<p><i>Do you plan to anonymise the data?</i>          Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No* <input type="checkbox"/></p>		
<p><i>Do you plan to use individual level data?</i>          Yes* <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>		
<p><i>Will you be linking data to individuals?</i>          Yes* <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>		
Are the data sensitive ( <u>DPA 1998 definition</u> )?	Yes* <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>If no</b> , was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>If no</b> , was data collected prior to ethics approval process?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>
<p><i>* Give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b></i></p> <p><i>If secondary analysis is only method used <b>and</b> no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to <b>Section 9 Attachments</b>.</i></p>		

## Section 7 Data Storage and Security

*Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.*

Confirm that all personal data will be stored and processed in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA 1998). ( <i>See the Guidelines and the Institute's Data Protection &amp; Records Management Policy for more detail.</i> )	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> * No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>* If yes</b>, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with the DPA 1998 and state what these arrangements are below.</p>	
<p>Who will have access to the data and personal information, including advisory/consultation groups and during transcription?</p>	

<p>Myself, Sacha Grimes</p> <p>Report Supervisors, Vivian Hill and Claire Cameron</p>
<p><b>During the research</b></p>
<p>Where will the data be stored?</p> <p>Data will be saved in a password protected file on my laptop. The laptop is only be accessed by myself.</p>
<p>Will mobile devices such as USB storage and laptops be used?</p> <p>Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> * No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p><b>* If yes, state what mobile devices:</b> Personal laptop</p> <p><b>* If yes, will they be encrypted?:</b> Yes</p>
<p><b>After the research</b></p>
<p>Where will the data be stored? The data will continue to be stored on my personal laptop in a password protected file.</p>
<p>How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?</p> <p>The data will be saved only until this study has been written up and graded by my supervisor. It will then be deleted.</p>
<p>Will data be archived for use by other researchers?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> * No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p><b>* If yes, please provide details.</b></p>

## Section 8 Ethical issues

Are there particular features of the proposed work which may raise ethical concerns or add to the complexity of ethical decision making? If so, please outline how you will deal with these.

It is important that you demonstrate your awareness of potential risks or harm that may arise as a result of your research. You should then demonstrate that you have considered ways to minimise the likelihood and impact of each potential harm that you have identified. Please be as specific as possible in describing the ethical issues you will have to address. Please consider / address ALL issues that may apply.

*Ethical concerns may include, but not be limited to, the following areas:*

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics

- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

1. The topic of the research

A named person with whom the young person is familiar will be available to speak to any student who is experiencing anxieties before, during and after the interview completion. This will be arranged through the key member of staff.

2. Safeguarding vulnerable young people

As stated above, information will be shared regarding disclosure and safeguarding with each young person and adult that I interview. The limits to confidentiality will be made known to participants. I will discuss any observations, or disclosures, of practice that threaten the safety of young people with my supervisors and agree a course of action before discussing with relevant authorities.

3. Reporting of the findings

I will end each interview on a positive note by speaking with young people/ adults about something that is going well for them, or about something they are looking forward to doing. Participants will be given a short summary of the research findings if they have made a written or verbal request for them. My email address will be provided on the consent letter and it will be clear that if participants or carers wish to see the results or ask questions then they can contact me via email. Carers and school staff, in particular may be uncomfortable reading the findings, particularly if the findings show them to not be meeting the needs of looked after young people and care leavers. Therefore, careful consideration will be given to how the results are presented.

**Section 9 Further information**

Outline any other information you feel relevant to this submission, using a separate sheet or attachments if necessary.

--

**Section 10 Attachments** Please attach the following items to this form, or explain if not attached

	Information sheets and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research, including approach letters	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	Consent form	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	<i><b>If applicable:</b></i>		
	The proposal for the project	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Full risk assessment	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**Section 11 Declaration**

Yes	No
I have read, understood and will abide by the following set of guidelines.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
BPS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ??	BERA <input type="checkbox"/> BSA <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please state) <input type="checkbox"/>
I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:**

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name	Sacha G Grimes
Date	20-02-2017

## **APPENDIX B: COLLEGE DESCRIPTIONS**

**College one:** College one is a high performing further and higher education college with multiple campuses recruiting learners from London and neighbouring boroughs. There are over 20,000 students on role, approximately 75% of whom are adult learners on part time courses, the majority of fulltime learners on 16-19 study programmes. A recent Ofsted report deemed the college to be good overall. It also stated there to be a significant number of high needs students and students from care backgrounds, achieving well on their courses. According to the designated teacher, the college had over 200 students from care backgrounds on roll in the academic year of 2017/2018, approximately 25% having stopped attending part way through their course or been withdrawn by the end of the year. Approximately three quarters of students are of Black or ethnic minority heritage.

**College two:** College two is a further and higher education college in London with multiple campuses recruiting learners predominately from London but also the surrounding boroughs. The college received a recent short inspection grading it overall as 'Good.' Approximately 30,000 students were enrolled on part time and full time courses in the academic year of 2016/2017. Approximately 53% of students are from Black, Asian or mixed backgrounds and 30% from white backgrounds. 47% of students were aged between 16 and 18 and 53% 19 or older. 7% of students are considered to have a disability. The college does not publish information on the number of learners from care backgrounds and it was not possible to obtain this figure from liaising with the initial designated teacher.

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

### **Student interview schedule:**

Interview question	Influenced by			
	Research questions	Literature review	Preparatory Study	Themes from previous interviews
4. So that I have a better understanding of you can you start by telling me a little about your background and experience of being in care?		X		
5. How do you feel about the label 'looked after?'				X
6. Tell me about your goals and aspirations. Why did you decide to study at college?		X		
7. Tell me about your support network whether that be your peers, family or the professionals involved in your life.	X	X	X	
8. What's going well for you at the moment?			X	
9. What challenges do you face?	X			
10. What excites/ worries you about the future?	X			
11. Tell me about your experience of moving to semi/independent living.		X		
12. Tell me about your experience at college.	X			
13. Tell me about the support you receive at college, if any.	X			
14. Is there anything more that you feel college could do to support you?	X	X		
15. Your college tells me that they have lots of services designed to support young people from care backgrounds but they are finding it difficult to engage students. Do you have any ideas as to why this might be?				X
16. What do you feel an educational psychologist might do to support young people like yourself?	X			

## Staff member interview schedule

Interview question	Influenced by			
	Research questions	Literature review	Preparatory Study	Emerging themes from previous interviews
1. Tell me about what your role involves.				
2. Tell me about your experience working with young people from care backgrounds.	X			
3. Tell me about your experience working with UASM in particular.		X	X	
4. What are the key successes of your work in relation to meeting the needs of young people from care backgrounds?	X			
5. What are the challenges in your work in relation to meeting the needs of young people from care backgrounds?	X			
6. How is your work reviewed? (formally and informally)	X			
7. What do you feel young people from care backgrounds need in order to be successful at college?	X	X		
8. Where do you feel there are gaps in the provision offered by college to support young people from care backgrounds?	X	X		
9. What other professionals do you liaise with in relation to young people from care backgrounds? How have you experienced this multi-professional work?	X	X		
10. What do you feel an educational psychologist might do to support young people from care backgrounds?	X			

## **APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORMS**

### **College information page**

#### **Research into what constitutes effective FE provision for young people in care and care leavers**

I would like to invite your FE college to help investigate the needs of looked after young people and care leavers in FE and how services can be effectively planned, delivered and reviewed to support these needs.

Who am I? My name is Sacha Grimes and I am currently conducting some research as part of my Doctoral studies at the Institute of Education, University College London.

Why am I conducting this research? Currently very little is known about what happens to looked after young people in FE colleges. There is no specific guidance, policy or resources. My initial research found that young people who have been in care value relationships with key workers and would like more services to advise them on matters related to housing, finance and managing employment. I want to extend this work to find out how colleges can more effectively support this group of young people in an era of steep resource reduction.

What will participation involve?

- Appointing a lead coordinator who can help identify relevant young people and staff
- Interviews with approximately five to ten young people and five to ten key members of staff
- Providing me with access to college policies and supporting documentation
- All information gathered will remain anonymous.

What are the advantages of taking part? I will provide participating colleges with new information about the support they provide to looked after young people and care leavers. This will be valuable data for the college improvement plan. The research may also have wider implications in supporting other FE colleges to build effective models of practice and has the potential to inform government policy on the provision needed for this group of young people.

How do I sign up? If you are interested in participating in this research or have any further questions, I can be contacted at [sacha.grimes.14@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:sacha.grimes.14@ucl.ac.uk). I can also be available to meet with you to discuss participation further. Thank you for your time.

## **Staff Member Consent Form**

### **Research into what constitutes effective FE provision for young people in care and care leavers**

This form seeks your consent to participate in an interview regarding the needs of looked after young people and care leavers and the provision available/ needed to meet these needs in further education. Each interview should last no longer than 45 minutes. Please ensure that you have read the information sheet provided and asked any relevant questions prior to completing this form.

- I agree to participate in the above named project. I have seen the information sheet and the project has been explained to me.**
- I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.**
- I understand that if any part of my data is used it will be attributed anonymously and it will not be possible to identify individuals in any publications.**
- I agree to the recording of this interview, that recordings will be stored securely and only used for the purpose of this piece of research.**

Signed

---

Name

---

**Looked After Young People and Care Leavers Research**



Hello. My name is Sacha and I'd like to hear about your experiences of college services and how they can best support you and others from a care background.

**What will I need to do?**



Attend a 30 minute interview with myself.



Answer some questions about your experiences of college services and your course.



Think of some improvements that your college can make to ensure you are better supported to achieve.

You can withdraw at any time during the research and do not have to answer questions you do not want to. Your answers will be anonymised and the information you provide will only be used for the purpose of this research. I can be contacted at [sacha.grimes.14@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:sacha.grimes.14@ucl.ac.uk) should you have any further questions.

**You will receive a £10 voucher for giving your views.**



Place X in the relevant box and sign your name.

**Yes please**

**No thank you**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E: REFLEXIVE NOTES

The following notes have been adapted from my research diary and combined with a section of transcript to put them into context. The notes aimed to help me reflect and challenge my own assumptions, values and beliefs. They also help me to identify where potential patterns/ themes were emerging, consider disconfirming cases and begin to reflect on potential meaning.

Transcript	Reflexive comments/ notes
<p>So that I have a better understanding of you can you start by telling me a little about your background and experience of being in care?</p> <p>So I went into care at the age of 11. <u>I had various foster carers but then I went into a care home which was more stable. It really messed up my education.</u> It's only now that I'm 21. I realise exactly what it is I want to do and how I get there.</p> <p>So what was it about the children's home that made it more stable?</p> <p><u>We had a really good key worker. She was always there for us, she made sure we didn't go without. Should always check that we've got all homework done. She was just so loving. She would always give us big hugs. But you know what she was sacked for that. Apparently she wasn't professional. She was told that she shouldn't be touching us. What kind of idiot says that you shouldn't hug care kids. They've had her no love in their lives and then they're just handed to professionals but you don't get a relationship that way.</u> X was always respectful to us. She wouldn't tell us off whenever we messed up but help us to make better choices. <u>She gave us the freedom to make mistakes but there to help when things went wrong.</u> Always there for us.</p> <p>Wow she sounds inspirational. Am I right in thinking that your key worker was someone who supported you in your education?</p> <p>Yeah she really was...she was.</p>	<p>YP very at ease, confident, appears to want to discuss her experiences</p> <p>Am I assuming that having various carers was a negative experience and due to break downs in relationships based on experience working with LAC? Surprised that a care home would be more stable.</p> <p>Contradicts my previous assumptions about care homes being negative places- based on previous research that care homes experience the most challenging children and YP.</p> <p>Found this statement very powerful. Causing me to reflect on the idea of 'blurring professional boundaries.' When does a professional need to stop being so professional?</p> <p>Confirming previous reports of wanting freedom and needing space to make mistakes. Perhaps referring to unconditional love?</p>

Tell me about your goals and aspirations. Why did you decide to study at college?

I'm studying cabin crew. It's a really interesting course. I've done my English and maths now and I'm about to pass level 3. I'm not sure I want to do cabin crew in the future as I quite like to do health and social care. One day I'd like to have my own care company. What I have seen and experienced is just inspired me to help others in my situation. I've been lucky because I've always been so driven but there are others you should see them they they don't believe in themselves. No one has ever believed in them so why would they believe in themselves. These young people have had such superior experiences compared to people that have grown up with their mums and dads. They've had a real life experience and they should be recognised for that and what that can contribute to society. There are people in my hostel who have just given up. So many of my friends are into drugs so many of my friends are in prison. I've just got back from visiting Scrubs. My friend is in there for 10 years. After years and years of no one believing in you you just become helpless. But for me been ambitious, I've always wanted to believe that there is a way out of the system. For example I've got all my qualifications at college and I also signed up for this volunteer project in South America.

Wow that sounds interesting. What is it that drives you to do so well? I mean...what has been different for you compared to others who don't believe in themselves.

I don't know really. I suppose just having a good group of friends and you know...that one person at college who has always pushed me. I didn't know what I wanted to do at 16, I kept messing up but X kept telling me to keep going and going and now I'm 21, I know what I want in my life.

Similar to other reports of wanting to help others who have shared challenging experiences of the system.

Interesting way of looking at things- caused me to reflect on my stereotype of being in care as problematic. What about post traumatic growth?

Highlighting to me that a population is missing from my research- those who have been unsuccessful in pursuing education- would the support need to be different for these YP in FE?

Similar to previous reports of having a key person who believes in you. Also reflective of code 'being granted second chances.'

This fits with my assumption that LAC take longer to achieve goals but on reflection, isn't this similar for all young people? Does anyone really know what they want to do at 16?

Why am I asking this? Am I just trying to relate through my own experience of travel in this region? Not particularly relevant to this research.

<p><u>Tell me about South America.</u></p> <p>Yeah I just found it on the Internet and applied and got on. And I did some fundraising to get me there. It was an amazing experience but there <u>were still people there that weren't like me.</u> For example we played this game where we all had to stand in a circle and every time someone said something that you could relate to you had to step forward. Well I kept stepping forward and forward but no one else did and <u>when I open my eyes I realise that not everyone has shared my experiences.</u> I think..</p>	<p>Experience of being in care creating the feeling of being different to others?</p>
---	---

## **APPENDIX F: PEER CODED TRANSCRIPT**

Example transcript	Coder one code	Coder two code	Final code
I think the main thing I noticed is their difference in knowledge and awareness. In terms of their situations, obviously those that have been born here and gone through education here, they are used to how the system works.	citizen young people understand the system	UK young people familiar with education systems	citizen young people familiar with systems
Some of them may have come through at a young age and had social work involvement. They might have had a lot of disruption, I think they have a better understanding of how the system works.	citizen young people understand the system	experience leads to familiarity with education systems	citizen young people familiar with systems
Young people coming into the country obviously have their barriers with language and actually understanding how the system works.	EAL as a barrier to understanding systems	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unfamiliar with education systems	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unfamiliar with systems
And I think sometimes, I found that some of their expectations are sometimes unrealistic.	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unrealistic expectations	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unfamiliar with education systems	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unrealistic expectations
They don't understand how the system works.	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors not understanding the system	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unfamiliar with education systems	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unfamiliar with systems
They think they will come over here and get all these things.	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors not understanding the system	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unclear on rights and entitlements	unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unrealistic expectations

## APPENDIX G: THEMATIC MAP

Theme	Subtheme	Example codes
1. Life transitions	Becoming self-reliant: expectation vs reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A desire to be self-reliant</li> <li>- Looking forward to independence</li> <li>- Foster carers preparing young people for independence</li> <li>- Difficulty managing routines without support</li> <li>- Getting on with others</li> <li>- Impact of self-reliance on college education</li> </ul>
	Transition to college: expectation vs reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- College being a second chance</li> <li>- College as being more independent</li> <li>- No formal transition process</li> <li>- Difficulty managing college routines</li> <li>- Not showing up</li> <li>- Impact of having failed at school on engagement</li> <li>- Engagement with 'catch up' English and Maths courses</li> <li>- Being treated as a child</li> <li>- Not being ready for college</li> </ul>
	Need for support beyond college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support transitioning to higher education</li> <li>- Lack of support in employment</li> </ul>
-		
2. Identification	Too little too late	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not identifying students soon enough</li> <li>- Not knowing who LAC students are</li> <li>- Impact of late identification</li> </ul>
	A variety of methods for identifying students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self identifying</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identifying through outside services</li> <li>- Identifying through college services</li> <li>- Sharing information with key members of staff</li> </ul>
	Developing a system of identification in the absence of formal transition processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The protocol agreement</li> <li>- Impact of the protocol agreement</li> <li>- Liaising with the virtual school in order to identify students</li> </ul>
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3. Formal college support services	A role for a designated teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- designated teacher responsibilities- monitoring attendance</li> <li>- designated teacher responsibilities- training staff</li> <li>- designated teacher responsibilities- PEP meetings</li> <li>- designated teacher responsibilities- acting as a champion for the education of LAC</li> <li>- designated teacher responsibilities- multi-professional working</li> <li>- scope for more than one designated teacher</li> <li>- professionals thankful for designated teacher</li> <li>- LAC appreciation for designated teacher</li> </ul>
	Provision of psychosocial support and the need to do more	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pastoral support for social and emotional well-being</li> <li>- Promoting peer relationships</li> <li>- Need to do more to develop peer relationships</li> <li>- Gaps in mental health provision</li> <li>- Pastoral support workers as unqualified mental health professionals</li> <li>- Promoting extra curricula activities</li> <li>- Cuts to tutorials</li> </ul>

	Provision of practical support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pastoral support service as a source of practical advice</li> <li>- Workshops to develop adult skills</li> <li>- Providing careers advice through drop ins and one to one tutorials</li> <li>- Providing targeted careers advice for unaccompanied minors</li> <li>- Need to target careers advice for LAC pursuing alternative pathways</li> <li>- SEND support out of class</li> <li>- Lack of funding for SEND provision</li> </ul>
	Valuing generic student services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No specific services for LAC</li> <li>- Student views of student services</li> <li>- Professional's arguing no need for LAC services</li> <li>- Professionals recognising need for targeted LAC advice</li> <li>- LAC not wanting to be targeted</li> </ul>
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4. Formal LA support systems	An evolving role for the virtual school in supporting transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Virtual school supporting transition process</li> <li>- Virtual school providing careers advice for school leavers</li> <li>- Virtual school sharing information with colleges</li> <li>- Virtual school mitigating school exclusions</li> <li>- Virtual school unaware of students being withdrawn from college</li> <li>- Virtual school potential for extending support up to 25 with capacity</li> </ul>
	Limited involvement from EPs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- EP involvement with EHCPs</li> <li>- Limited or no involvement from EPs</li> <li>- Not knowing what an EP is or does</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Funding as a barrier to employing EPs</li> <li>- Potential for EPs to support college professionals</li> <li>- Virtual school employing own EPs to work with college students</li> </ul>
	Inconsistent social care support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Helpful social care professionals</li> <li>- Unresponsive social care professionals</li> <li>- Some social care professionals are good and others bad</li> <li>- Social workers over-worked</li> </ul>
	Steps towards inter-professional working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- College professionals advocating for students in absence of responsive social care professionals</li> <li>- College professionals contacting key workers to chase students</li> </ul>
	Negotiating boundaries between professional responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Professionals feeling something is beyond their job role</li> <li>- Referring on to other services</li> </ul>
	Too many professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Things get missed when too many professionals are involved</li> <li>- Professionals absolving selves of responsibility, arguing others are better placed to support</li> <li>- Frustration over having to re-tell life story</li> <li>- Better to have just one consistent professional</li> </ul>
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5. Non-engagement with support	Wanting to be the same as everyone else	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not wanting to be treated differently to peers</li> <li>- Not wanting to stand out</li> </ul>
	Wanting to be self-reliant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wanting to be self-reliant</li> <li>- Receiving support seen as not being able to cope</li> </ul>
	Ideas on increasing engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use the term information rather than support</li> <li>- Avoid targeting services</li> <li>- Needing to chase students</li> </ul>

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6. Making mistakes and moving forward	Accepting mistakes, giving second chances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Messing up being a common feature of LAC lives</li> <li>- College not being a priority due to life challenges</li> <li>- Need for multiple chances of success</li> </ul>
	Zero tolerance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stereotyping LAC</li> <li>- Professionals with a zero tolerance attitude</li> </ul>
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7. Organisational pressures	Gaps in funding and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not enough time</li> <li>- Gaps in funding</li> <li>- Gaps in professional expertise</li> <li>- Gaps in resources</li> <li>- Feeling stretched</li> </ul>
	Pressure to meet statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pressure to achieve grades</li> <li>- Pressure to achieve attendance figures</li> </ul>
	The 42 day rule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The 42 day attendance rule</li> <li>- LAC being withdrawn at 42 days</li> </ul>
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8. Qualities in the young person-professional relationship	Professionals as a source of practical and emotional support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Going to key professional for practical advice</li> <li>- Professionals being a source of encouragement</li> <li>- Professionals believing in young people</li> </ul>
	Going the extra mile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Professionals going beyond what their job role entails</li> <li>- Genuine empathic concern for young people's well-being</li> </ul>
	Blurring of professional boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students seeing professionals as friends</li> <li>- Student valuing friendly professionals</li> <li>- Professionals not wanting to be a friend</li> </ul>
	Flexible and creative boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Needing to be flexible with boundaries</li> <li>- Needing to provide choice rather than control</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Using humour as part of behaviour management</li> </ul>
	Importance of contact time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seeing student regularly as a way of improving relationship</li> <li>- Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors have more regular contact with key professionals</li> </ul>
	Responsive and consistent professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students value professionals are provide an immediate response</li> <li>- Students value professionals who are consistently available in their time of need</li> <li>- Being available without conditions</li> </ul>
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9. Non-professional relationships	Difficulties forming social relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulties trusting others</li> <li>- Placement moves leading to break down in relationships</li> </ul>
	Having things in common to promote a sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Those from similar backgrounds being negative role models</li> <li>- Wanting to feel the same as peers</li> <li>- Feeling closest to peers from care backgrounds</li> <li>- A role for a mentor from a similar background</li> </ul>
	Inconsistencies in familial support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not having familial support</li> <li>- Maintaining contact with family</li> <li>- Family being a source of advice and love</li> <li>- Inconsistent foster carer involvement</li> <li>- Only having social services to support</li> <li>- Placement instability</li> </ul>
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10. Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors	Cultural differences in social behaviour, life experience and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Differences in social behaviour among unaccompanied minors</li> <li>- Differences in life experiences among unaccompanied minors</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Differences in educational engagement among unaccompanied minors</li> </ul>
	<p>A unique set of challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- citizen young people familiar with systems</li> <li>- unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unfamiliar with systems</li> <li>- unaccompanied asylum seeking minors unrealistic expectations</li> <li>- diminished social support networks for unaccompanied minors</li> <li>- helping unaccompanied minors to understand the education system</li> <li>- helping unaccompanied minors to understand British culture</li> <li>- Worries about immigration status</li> <li>- Support from ESOL tutor with unique challenges</li> </ul>