

RESEARCH INTO FOSTER CARERS' VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION 2026

ACCESS AND OUTREACH TEAM, SEPTEMBER 2026

ACHIEVE HE

Cite this report as: Access and Outreach (2026), Research Into Foster Carers' Views and Experiences Of Higher Education, University of York

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Executive Summary

This research explores foster carers' views and experiences of higher education, alongside their perceptions of the educational support available to the young people in their care. It seeks to understand the influence foster carers have on care-experienced young people's educational aspirations and decision-making, as well as how foster carers believe those young people view their own education. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with fewer than five foster carers and analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

A key finding was that foster carers consistently described significant challenges in navigating the foster care system and securing appropriate support from local authorities and schools. Participants highlighted delays, inconsistent provision, excessive bureaucracy, poor communication between agencies, and a lack of trust in local authority processes, all of which they felt negatively affected young people's educational experiences and opportunities.

Financial concerns also emerged as a major barrier to higher education, with participants reporting that the cost of university led many young people to question whether attending was worthwhile.

Finally, the research highlighted the influential role foster carers play in shaping care-experienced young people's attitudes towards higher education. Participants reflected that their own educational experiences, expectations, and perceptions of university often influenced the aspirations and decisions of the young people in their care.

Although this research provides useful exploratory insights into foster carers' attitudes towards education and higher education, several limitations should be considered. The study involved fewer than five participants, meaning the findings cannot be generalised to the wider foster carer population. All participants had previously completed the Foster their Future programme and had an existing relationship with the interviewer, which may have influenced their responses. Self-selection bias may also have meant participants were already more positively disposed towards higher education than foster carers more broadly.

Despite these limitations, the findings reinforce existing evidence that informed and supportive foster carers can play a significant role in encouraging care-experienced young people to consider higher education, while support from schools and local authorities remains inconsistent. The research recommends expanding future studies to include larger samples, pre- and post-programme interviews, and direct interviews with young people to better understand programme impact. It also highlights the need to improve training and resources for professionals and foster carers through greater promotion of existing webinars, the development of an online learning course, stronger collaboration with sector organisations, and enhanced evaluation methods to collect richer data and inform future programme development.

Introduction and Project Overview

At the University of York and across the UK, students who have experienced local authority care are underrepresented in higher education. Recent figures show that approximately 14% of care leavers enter higher education, in comparison to around 47% of their non-care-experienced peers (Young and Lilley, 2023). At the University of York, we have around 230 undergraduate independent students in total. 'Independent students' is a term used by the University of York to refer to students who have care experience and students who are estranged. As of 2026, we have approximately 30 legally defined care leavers, 100 care-experienced students, and 100 estranged students. The total number of undergraduate students at York is approximately 16,000, meaning our independent student population makes up around 1.4% of the student population.

Achieve HE is our Access and Outreach programme that aims to support the Access targets outlined in the [University's Access and Participation Plan 2025 - 2029](#), by offering a tailored package of support to prospective independent students and their supporters. The Foster their Future programme is one element of Achieve HE and the focus of this research project.

Foster their Future is an online programme of webinars for foster carers, set over four weeks, covering an overview of higher education, the benefits of higher education, researching options, specific support for care-experienced students, the application process, and navigating student finance. We have delivered this programme annually since 2023 and have run four cohorts. It aims to learn from the individual experiences of foster carers and allow them to gain peer support and advice from each other, while also equipping foster carers with the skills, knowledge and confidence to have informed conversations with the young people in their care. As a result of taking part, we hope that foster carers experience:

- Increased positive attitudes towards higher education
- Increased knowledge and awareness of higher education
- Increased confidence to talk to young people about future educational decisions
- Feeling empowered to advocate for young people

We also hope that as a result of foster carers taking part in Foster their Future, a larger number of care-experienced students will progress to HE and the University of York, and we will have more contact with foster carers to offer support and build positive, trusting relationships.

Research aims

Our research project is specifically designed to ask a focused group of foster carers who have participated in our Foster their Future programme, about their attitudes and experiences of supporting care-experienced people through education, through semi-structured interviews. We also aimed to explore how higher education and high-tariff institutions are perceived by foster carers.

Research objectives

- Identify and explore perceptions and attitudes of foster carers towards higher education and high tariff institutions
- Explore foster carers' views on education in general, both from their own perspective and those of the young people they foster
- Explore what foster carers think of the expectations of higher education study for young people in care

Research questions

The interviews aimed to understand the following questions:

- How do foster carers feel about higher education?
- How do foster carers perceive that the young people in their care feel about education, higher education, and their futures?
- What perceptions do foster carers have about support and expectations from schools, colleges and local authorities?
- What do foster carers identify as the benefits and challenges of their young people accessing higher education?
- What impact did the Foster their Future programme have on foster carers?
- What can we learn from the views and experiences of foster carers, and how will we use these findings to support the University of York's APP targets*?

*This is detailed in Objective 6 of the [University's Access and Participation Plan 2025 - 2029](#):

"Ensure consistent and effective support for students with care experience and students who are estranged throughout the entire student lifecycle and demonstrate the impact of this support through evaluation of our provision."

Researcher positionality

It's important to recognise the potential biases and intersecting positionalities of the researchers involved in the project. Researchers may be positioned as "insiders" where they belong to the group involved in the research, and as "outsiders" where they do not belong to the group involved in the research (Breen, 2007). In identifying as an "insider" or "outsider" in reflexive quantitative research, researchers are encouraged to examine their "own assumption, belief, and judgement systems, and thinking carefully and critically about how these influence the research process" (Jamieson et al., 2023).

This reflexive approach to the research has informed our [research methodology](#), right from determining the research team roles, to conducting independent thematic analyses, and subsequently co-determining the final findings of the research.

Figure 1: Interviewer positionality

Role	Positionality	Note
Interviewer and Evaluator	Outsider	Does not have experience of being a foster carer. 12 years of experience working in the HE Access and Outreach sector. 6 years of experience working with care-experienced people and their supporters. Has met all participants (online/in person) prior to interviews via the Foster their Future programme. Present for all interviews - interviewed 1:1.
Evaluator	Outsider	Does not have experience of being a foster carer. 1 year of experience working in the HE Access and Outreach sector and 2 years as a student worker within the Access and Outreach team. Not present for interviews but took part in the thematic analysis stage.

It was important to our research that the interviewer had extensive knowledge and experience of working with people from a care-experienced background and foster carers, to ensure appropriate language was used and nuance could be picked up on. This positionality of the researcher as an experienced Access and Outreach practitioner is an important factor and conscious choice in the research design, and as such may influence the interpretation of the qualitative data and methodology approach differently than if the researcher had a research background.

Participant Selection and Demographics

In order to recruit participants, we circulated information about the research project to the current cohort of Foster their Future and participants from last year's cohort (2024/25). The research project was optional to take part in and a small number of foster carers signed up to take part. Unfortunately, not all were able to attend their interview, so ultimately there were fewer than five participants

Prior to the interview taking place, we collected additional demographic information from participants via an online form. The interview cohort included foster carers with a care background and those without. The cohort also included interviewees with disabilities, those without, and some who preferred not to say. Finally, there was a range of qualifications held by the participants; some with master's degrees and some with bachelor's degrees (again, some participants did not share their qualifications with the researchers).

All participants described fostering as an intentional life choice. Although they had initially planned to provide short-term care, all had transitioned into long-term fostering, often because of lengthy court processes and a commitment to providing stability for the children in their care. As one participant explained, "Our plan for fostering was to do short-term fostering... we stood up and said yes we'll continue with this because it's just not fair to our boys." Another stated, "I've always wanted to foster. I would have chosen to foster and not have kids, but my husband wanted his own kids, so we had kids." Another participant explained that "my wife

was fostered as a young person, so she knew what fostering was about first-hand...we'd always said that we would foster."

All foster carers were fostering at least one child who was planning to start at university in the next two years.

Research methodology and data analysis

Interviews took place online via Zoom, on a date and time selected by the participants, allowing them to find a time that suited them best. We took a semi-structured approach to the interview format, where participants were asked the same set of questions. Still, the interviewer was able to follow up on participants' responses to elicit further information or clarify understanding.

Participants were advised that interviews would last 30-45 minutes in their Participant Information Sheet. However, each interview ended up lasting between 45 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes (participants gave verbal consent that they were happy to continue with the interviews past 45 minutes). Notes were not taken during the interview by the interviewer in order to prioritise active engagement with the participant and ensure that the process didn't feel distracting or overly clinical.

Following the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and checked by the research team and subsequently shared with the participants. Participants were given the opportunity to review and offer amendments to the transcriptions before the recordings were deleted and the transcripts redacted to remove identifiable information.

Using Braun & Clarke's 6-step reflexive thematic analysis approach, each researcher independently familiarised themselves with the transcripts and generated initial codes and themes. To enhance interpretive depth and engage with the researchers' positionalities, these independent themes were discussed and refined through a collaborative process. This collaborative process consisted of each researcher presenting their reflections on the transcripts and sharing their initial themes. This generated a comprehensive list of overlapping and intersecting themes. Through iterative discussion, the researchers then mapped links and commonalities across these themes, resulting in our finalised thematic framework, and the eight overarching themes that are discussed in the next section.

Identified themes

Analysis of the transcripts generated eight themes in total. It is important to note that these themes have some overlap and should be considered as interconnected rather than isolated concepts.

1. Navigating Systems of Support: experiences of the foster care system and local authorities

This theme explores participants' experiences, attitudes and views of the foster care system and support from local authorities, including social services and Virtual Schools¹.

Findings

Participants consistently described significant challenges in navigating the foster care system and accessing support from local authorities, including social services and Virtual Schools. Across all interviews, foster carers expressed frustration with systemic barriers, describing a lack of timely, consistent and effective support, excessive bureaucracy, poor communication between services, and limited trust in local authority processes. The consistency with which these issues were raised suggests they represent a shared experience across participants.

Participants highlighted the significant emotional, practical, and financial demands of fostering, with many feeling that responsibility for children's needs fell disproportionately on carers. One participant stated, "Everything falls on us, really," while others described the financial pressures of Staying Put² arrangements, noting that "it actually costs us, as foster carers, to have someone 'stay put'." One participant spoke about the fact that even though she'd worked in senior positions, including as a teacher, she was still not treated as a professional in her role as a foster carer. Foster carers reported feeling excluded from decision-making and that their expertise was overlooked, with one stating, "In fostering, we don't have a voice." One foster carer described how they had little autonomy, despite their day-to-day responsibility for the children in their care, describing fostering as like "parenting in a goldfish bowl. Everybody's got an opinion."

Support from local authorities was widely viewed as inconsistent, difficult to access, and often delivered too late to be effective. This is also reflected in a report from UCAS, which states, "Access to specific guidance about going to HE as a care-experienced student is inconsistent: 60% stated they received no guidance specific to being care-experienced during their application journey" (UCAS, 2022). Participants in our research reported delays in accessing educational advice, financial support, and leaving care services. One participant described "begging" for educational advice from the local authority, explaining that support arrived too late, after the young person had already submitted their university application.

Participants frequently described communication between agencies as fragmented and confusing. One foster carer commented, "You get little snippets of information from everywhere, and they don't always line up," while another said, "It's hard because you get so much information coming from everywhere all the time." Frequent changes in social workers were also reported as disruptive to continuity of care and support for both foster carers and young people. This is reflective of individual stories we have heard from

¹ Virtual Schools refer to a specific local authority organisation designed to support vulnerable children. These do not exist as physical buildings. Instead, a team of professionals (led by a Virtual School Headteacher) monitors and advocates for the education of children in care and previously in care, ensuring they get the best possible outcomes.

² From the age of 18, young people are no longer legally 'in care' and therefore fostering arrangements and legislation relating to children placed with foster carers no longer apply. In circumstances where a young person remains with their former foster carers after their 18th birthday, the arrangement is called a "Staying Put" arrangement.

care-experienced young people over the years, and also other research which reports that “most respondents described experiencing a high turnover of social workers whilst in care, and reported that the quality of support they received suffered as a result...Having to frequently adapt to working with a new social worker could be destabilising and damage trust in the system” (Ellis and Johnston, 2020).

Views of Virtual Schools were mixed but generally suggested a limited impact. Some participants felt the service had played very little role because their foster children were in stable placements, while others questioned its visibility and effectiveness. One participant remarked, "I've spoken to a lot of other foster carers, because I'm involved in the local fostering group, and nobody knows what Virtual Schools do. They're an absolute waste of space", whereas another acknowledged that they had been supportive but noted that "the actual role that they have played has not been massive," attributing this partly to limited resources and funding. One foster carer described how their only interaction with the young people in their care had been entirely tokenistic.

Participants consistently identified bureaucracy as a major barrier to all aspects of life. Administrative processes were described as overly complex and often hindered rather than supported children and foster carers. One participant argued that "Getting more systems in and more forms and more assessments isn't going to help everyday kids on the ground to succeed," while another described the bureaucracy surrounding benefits and higher education as "utterly mind-blowing." Again, these findings are similar to those from other research, which found that “The care system was felt to be bureaucratic by a large majority of participants and most appreciated that social workers were often constrained by rules and procedures...Some participants felt that their meetings with social workers were devoid of ‘care ’ and served only to demonstrate that statutory obligations had been met. This caused some respondents to lose faith in the system.” (Ellis and Johnston, 2020). Foster carers linked this bureaucracy with limiting young people's access to educational opportunities, for example, tutoring while at secondary school.

Participants expressed a broader distrust and frustration with local authorities, feeling that foster carers were not respected or listened to. One participant stated, "I don't think they [social services] care... all foster carers feel like that". Some foster carers also questioned whether local authorities held sufficiently high aspirations for children in care, with one recalling disagreements with social workers over encouraging young people to attend university.

Overall, participants experienced local authorities as systems in which foster carers feel overburdened, under-recognised and insufficiently supported. The findings suggest a need for more timely and consistent support from local authorities, greater recognition of foster carers as professional partners, improved continuity of services, clearer communication between agencies, and reduced bureaucratic barriers to better support children and young people in care.

2. School Support and Educational Environments

This theme explores participants' experiences, attitudes and views of the support they and the children in their care receive from schools and further education colleges.

Findings

Participants reported mixed experiences of school support, with perceptions varying between individual schools and educational stages. This is indicative of UCAS's 2022 study, which highlights that three in five applicants received no guidance from school that was specific to going to HE with a care background. In this

study, students' responses were "split fairly evenly between those that felt positively supported, those who felt unsupported, and those who felt neutral across all aspects". (UCAS, 2022)

While some of our participants described positive and supportive experiences for the young people in their care, particularly during primary education, most felt that support became less consistent and more challenging at secondary school, and more challenging again at college. Research with Virtual School Heads referred to the particular challenges they had when working with further education colleges. The report stated that "In contrast to both schools and universities, few [further education colleges] were reported to have a good knowledge about the needs of young people in care, very few had well-established support mechanisms including staff with an identified responsibility (e.g. as a corollary of designated teachers in schools or the 'single point of contact' in universities)" (Harrison et al., 2023).

A recurring concern was that schools often lacked an understanding of the needs and potential of children in care, particularly those considering further and higher education. This finding reflects the findings from another research report, which found that "Young people were asked to sum up their overall school experience. Roughly half reported a negative experience, one-third had a positive experience, and the remaining three described their school experience as 'mixed'. Some young people described an absence of targeted support for individual needs." (Harrison et al., 2023)

Several participants in our research believed that schools held low expectations of children in care, resulting in limited opportunities and reduced academic aspirations. One foster carer described how school staff made assumptions about their foster child's ability based on their care status, explaining that "They just put her in all the bottom sets... assuming, foster kid, lack of schooling, she's not going to achieve very much." Participants felt that these assumptions restricted educational progress and reinforced negative stereotypes, which had an impact on the young person's self-belief.

Participants also highlighted instances of misinformation and inconsistent advice from schools, particularly in relation to educational opportunities and progression. One foster carer expressed disappointment with the misinformation they received from school about submitting personal statements through UCAS, stating, "School are sort of adamant that you can't... it's one letter and that's it. Which for [town] Grammar School is very disappointing."

A further theme was the lack of personalised support, with one participant stating, "I think it's a one-size-fits-all in the sixth form". Participants felt that schools often adopted a generic approach rather than recognising the individual circumstances and aspirations of children in care. One participant explained how her foster daughter had recently damaged some school property after receiving some difficult news about her birth father, and the school responded with "a knee-jerk 'right, suspend her', which is what they would have done with any other kid. So I don't think they are getting different treatment in terms of looking at background of behaviour." Some also felt that school staff had limited experience of supporting children in care to progress into further and higher education, leading to uncertainty and a lack of informed guidance during key transition points.

Despite these concerns, participants also described examples of positive practice where individual staff members made a meaningful difference. One foster carer spoke positively of a member of school staff, commenting, "He does have a lovely lady at school that does advise him well." This example suggests that supportive relationships with knowledgeable staff can positively influence educational experiences, although participants viewed such support as dependent on individuals rather than being consistently embedded across schools.

Overall, participants' experiences suggest that while individual schools and staff can provide valuable support, there remains inconsistency in schools' understanding of the needs of children in care. Participants identified a need for more individualised support, higher expectations, accurate guidance, and greater expertise in supporting children in care to access further and higher education.

3. The Cost of University

This theme addresses two of our research questions: foster carers' views of higher education (specifically related to finances) and their perceptions of the barriers care-experienced young people face in accessing it. It explores participants' perspectives on the financial costs of higher education, its perceived value, and the resource inequalities affecting care-experienced young people.

Findings

Participants consistently identified financial considerations as a major influence on care-experienced young people's decisions about higher education. Their accounts extended beyond tuition fees to include concerns about value for money, student debt, financial preparedness, and broader inequalities arising from the absence of family support. Financial concerns were therefore viewed as both practical barriers and reflections of wider structural disadvantage.

A key subtheme was cost-benefit evaluations of higher education. Participants described weighing the high financial cost of university against uncertain employment outcomes, with several questioning whether a degree still offers sufficient returns. As one participant reflected, "I don't think the cost of university now necessarily... gives you what I would call that added advantage that it used to in the jobs market."

Participants widely viewed the cost of higher education as prohibitively high, often expressing frustration with tuition fees and the student finance system. Negative media coverage of student loans was also perceived to reinforce concerns, with one participant commenting, "I think with all the drama with the student loans, because it's so expensive, and people are getting so ripped off, you know, with the interest rates". While one foster carer accepted student debt as "a necessary evil" of attending university, this acceptance was often reluctant.

Debt and financial anxiety emerged as a particularly strong barrier. Participants believed that fear of borrowing money discouraged many care-experienced young people from considering university, especially because they lacked the reassurance of a family financial safety net. As one foster carer explained, "They are scared about debt, because... they've not got that support there." Unlike their peers, care-experienced young people were seen as lacking access to financial assistance, advice, and reassurance from parents, increasing both the perceived risks of higher education and anxiety about managing independently. Participants also felt that many young people entered adulthood with limited financial knowledge and preparedness, identifying a need for greater financial education to improve confidence in budgeting and navigating the student finance system.

Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned the specific financial support available to care-experienced students at university, such as bursaries or subsidies, despite this being covered extensively in *Foster their Future*. Consequently, it is difficult to determine whether this additional financial support would alleviate the

anxieties associated with student loans and debt among care-experienced young people and their foster carers.

Finally, participants situated these issues within broader resource inequalities. They perceived local authorities as providing insufficient financial support for higher education and emphasised that disadvantage extended beyond money to include a lack of social capital. As one participant explained, "It's not just financial; it's the connections." Research into the importance of social capital report that:

"The networks of these [low socio-economic status background] students, although often strong and supportive in a myriad of ways, may not contain specifically the knowledge they need in their network about university to make good decisions about where and what to study and their family and peers may not be able to helpfully advise on the best ways to get the most out of their experience (by approaching study a particular way, networking, or seeking help)." (Todman, V, 2018).

Participants in our research felt that limited access to advice, networks, and advocacy further reduced care-experienced young people's opportunities to access higher education. Overall, participants viewed financial barriers as inseparable from wider structural inequalities. High costs, uncertainty about the value of university, debt anxiety, limited financial preparedness, and reduced financial and social support were perceived to combine to make higher education a particularly challenging option for care-experienced young people.

4. The Influence of Foster Carers

This theme explores the influence of foster carers on their young people's decision-making around higher education. The Office for Students (2021) highlights that "research suggests that a foster or adoptive parent with a higher education background increases the likelihood of them [young people in care] going [to university]." This theme discusses whether that is the case and, if so, in what ways.

Findings

Participants consistently described themselves as playing a pivotal role in shaping care-experienced young people's attitudes towards higher education and supporting their educational decision-making. Foster carers saw themselves as providing encouragement, practical guidance, advocacy, and, in some cases, financial support that young people would otherwise be unlikely to receive. Many reflected that their own educational experiences and beliefs about university directly influenced the expectations they held for the young people in their care.

A key subtheme was the influence of foster carers' own experiences of higher education. Of the participants who discussed their personal experiences of attending university, the majority spoke very positively about their time in higher education and a minority questioned whether it had been worth going. Participants who had positive experiences reflected that they felt better equipped to promote higher education as a realistic and worthwhile option as a result. One foster carer described how their young person had already dismissed university, recalling that, "She didn't think university is for her...she actually said in exact words, 'It's not for kids like me. She'd already ruled herself out.'" Reflecting on their own influence, the participant stated, "I think if I'd been another foster carer without having had a positive university experience myself, I don't think she

would have gone [to university]." This illustrates how foster carers' personal educational backgrounds could help reshape young people's perceptions of who university is for. Research from the Office for Students also suggests that a foster or adoptive parent with a higher education background increases the likelihood of the young person in their care going to university (Office for Students, 2021).

Participants also highlighted the considerable amount of practical support and advocacy required to help young people navigate the higher education system. Many described spending significant time researching university options, explaining student finance, completing applications, and helping young people make sense of complex information. One participant commented, "I just don't think young people can really comprehend what lies ahead. It's just so hard; it's such a minefield holding everything in your head for making these decisions." Others described how university application systems could be overwhelming, with one foster carer remarking that "you can see why a young person... [is] just losing the will to live."

Participants emphasised that this support depended heavily on foster carers having the knowledge, confidence, and time to provide it. Some described themselves as educational advocates, actively encouraging aspirations that young people may not have developed independently. One participant reflected, "If they hadn't had the luck to be placed with us, there's no way that the older one would now be doing A-levels." Others viewed higher education as an important opportunity, explaining that university had always been an expectation within their own family growing up and that they sought to provide similar expectations for the young people they cared for. However, participants also recognised that these expectations were becoming more difficult to sustain given increasing concerns about the costs and value of higher education.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that foster carers are often central to care-experienced people's higher education journeys. Through their own educational experiences, advocacy, practical guidance, and emotional support, foster carers help young people navigate complex decisions and challenge beliefs that university is "not for people like me." At the same time, participants recognised that this support is uneven, depending on carers' knowledge, confidence, and capacity, highlighting the significant role foster carers play in reducing educational inequalities for care-experienced young people.

5. Foster carers' perceptions of HE: benefits and concerns

This theme explores foster carers' general perceptions of higher education, focusing on some of their perceived benefits and concerns about their young people going on to higher education.

Findings

Participants generally viewed higher education positively and believed it could offer significant educational, personal, and social benefits for care-experienced young people. However, these positive perceptions were often interlinked with concerns about financial barriers, the accessibility of university, and whether young people would be able to cope with the academic and personal demands of higher education. Foster carers therefore described university as both an important opportunity and a pathway that presents unique challenges for the young people they support.

Foster carers frequently described university as much more than an academic qualification, emphasising its role in promoting independence, confidence, self-esteem, and personal growth. Many viewed university as providing a safe and supported transition into adulthood, allowing young people to develop life skills while continuing to receive structured support. As one participant explained, "I think it's a positive thing, not only

education, but socially and living-wise and making a transition from dependent to independent living." Similarly, another reflected that university would give their young person "that time to just find his feet a bit better" and "allow him a little bit of growing up time." Participants also highlighted the opportunities that higher education provides to build wider social networks and broaden life experiences, with one foster carer describing how "University is such a powerful option for them because it's not just about academia; it's about stretching and moving and looking further."

Alongside these perceived benefits, participants expressed concerns about whether care-experienced young people would be able to cope with university life. One foster carer, who is fostering two neurodiverse young people, described worries about them managing the transition to a new learning environment, adapting to independent living, and maintaining emotional wellbeing without established support networks. They explained that although they had the academic ability to succeed, the key concern was "whether they can cope with the environment and the change again in learning style and the transition."

Participants also highlighted frustrations with aspects of the higher education system that they perceived as creating unnecessary barriers. Some criticised university admissions processes and application requirements, describing them as confusing or inflexible. For example, one foster carer expressed disappointment that their young person (who is also an asylum seeker) was rejected from a university course because their GCSE grades were not considered sufficient, despite their having English as a second language and having only arrived in the UK two years before sitting their GCSEs. The same foster carer described the barriers of having additional documentation requirements and uncertainty during the application process, describing it as "a horrible time" characterised by "so much confusion." This participant also suggested that universities could do more to clearly communicate the support available for care-experienced students, proposing a simple marker in university prospectuses to identify institutions offering high-quality support. This system is already in existence with the [NNECL Quality Mark](#) and it is interesting that this foster carer was not already aware of this, despite it being covered in Foster their Future. It may be that the foster carer did not attend the session that covered it, and they also took part over a year ago. It could also highlight an issue in itself about the difficulty of accessing information and awareness of systems that are in place.

Overall, foster carers viewed higher education as an important opportunity for care-experienced young people, particularly in promoting independence, confidence, and broader life opportunities. However, these positive perceptions were accompanied by concerns about financial pressures, accessibility, and young people's ability to successfully navigate university systems and transitions. Participants saw the benefits of higher education as substantial but believed that these could only be realised when appropriate academic, practical, and emotional support is in place.

6. The lasting impact of care experience

This theme explores the lasting impact of trauma and spending time in local authority care on educational aspirations and opportunities.

Findings

Participants consistently described the effects of care experience as extending far beyond immediate educational disruption, shaping young people's aspirations, confidence, and perceived access to higher education. They highlighted how trauma, disrupted schooling, low expectations, and the absence of positive role models and social capital combined to create significant barriers to educational progression. Rather than

viewing these challenges as individual deficits, participants framed them as the cumulative consequences of adversity and unequal opportunities. Similarly, Harrison's widely cited 'Moving On Up Report' concluded that "The most common negative experiences during the transition into higher education were poor support from the local authority, difficulties in navigating changes, financial problems, and social/emotional issues." (Harrison, 2017).

A key subtheme concerned the impact of trauma and disrupted education on young people's educational journeys. Participants described how early adversity, placement instability, and interrupted schooling often affected both academic attainment and engagement with education. While many emphasised that the young people they cared for were highly capable, they recognised that traumatic experiences could make educational progress more difficult. As one participant explained, "He is a very bright boy, but I think his personal experiences were quite traumatic." Foster carers therefore viewed lower educational outcomes not as a reflection of ability, but as the result of experiences that had disrupted learning and development. [Become](#) also highlight this in their 'Teachers Who Care' resource pack, highlighting that:

"Many care-experienced young people go through complex trauma because they have experienced multiple adverse events over long periods of time, often involving relationships with family and friends. Research studies have shown that the stress from high levels of chemicals released during these events can cause developmental differences in the brain and affect things like emotional regulation, mental processing and the ability to connect socially (e.g. Shonkoff et al, 2015)" (Become and Five Rivers, 2025)

In addition, recent research conducted by [TASO](#) found that "results suggest that the combined impacts of trauma, disruption and, possibly for some, other difficulties leading to and/or resulting from experience of children's social care, could have an enduring impact on the likelihood of entering higher education by age 22." (Feinstein et al. 2025)

Participants also discussed the profound influence of trauma on self-esteem and identity. Many believed that care-experienced young people struggled to see themselves as belonging in higher education, often internalising feelings of difference or inadequacy. One foster carer described how their young person was extremely bright and capable of going to university, but that she felt the need to change to fit in, explaining that "she tries to change the way she speaks, and she thinks she's got to change who she is... she doesn't feel like she can go [to university] and be her." Others highlighted the lasting effects of low self-esteem, which they linked to difficult family experiences and adverse childhood environments. Despite this, several participants emphasised the resilience of care-experienced young people, with one stating "Foster kids are unbelievably resilient and insightful, and they've got a completely different perspective on life because of how they've been brought up...so I always tell them it's kind of a superpower; it's not a negative."

Another prominent subtheme centred on the absence of positive role models and social capital. Participants believed that many care-experienced young people lacked examples of family members who had progressed into higher education or professional careers, making it more difficult to imagine university as a realistic option. One participant reflected that "they've got no familial role models that they can base their future on". Participants viewed these missing networks as limiting access to advice, encouragement, and opportunities that many of their peers receive through their families.

Overall, participants perceived the barriers faced by care-experienced young people as rooted in cumulative disadvantage rather than individual ability. They emphasised that disrupted education, trauma, low self-esteem, limited role models, reduced social capital, and low societal expectations all influence young people's aspirations and opportunities. At the same time, foster carers recognised the resilience and potential of the young people they supported, suggesting that with appropriate encouragement, positive role models, and sustained support, many of these barriers could be overcome.

7. Aspirations and assumptions

This theme explores beliefs about the capability of young people, aspirations, and expectations - from foster carers, schools, and local authorities.

Findings

Foster carers generally expressed strong confidence in the abilities and potential of the care-experienced young people they supported. Foster carers frequently challenged deficit-based assumptions from professionals, emphasising that adversity did not diminish young people's capacity to succeed in higher education. They perceived that, generally, these positive beliefs were not shared by schools, local authorities, or other professionals. Participants described a tension between the aspirations they held for young people and the lower expectations they believed were embedded within wider systems.

Participants consistently described care-experienced young people as intelligent, capable, and able to overcome difficult circumstances with appropriate support. One foster carer reflected, "You might've had an adverse background, but you can overcome it, and people do," while another explained, "I just want him to aim for the moon, and if he lands among the stars, then great." These accounts illustrate how foster carers have ambitious aspirations, encouraging young people to view higher education as an attainable goal rather than one constrained by their care experience.

Despite these positive beliefs, participants perceived mixed expectations from schools and generally low aspirations from local authorities and other professionals, which could reinforce educational disadvantage. Some felt that teachers recognised young people's potential and provided encouragement, while others believed educational and social care systems often underestimated what care-experienced young people could achieve. As one participant observed, "there are a lot of assumptions and low expectations... the social workers don't expect them to stay on at school." Previous research involving interviews with care-experienced young people found that "there were concerns that those who were advising care-experienced pupils such as social workers and foster parents may either not have adequate knowledge to inform them on the option of university, or may in some cases assume that university is out of their reach, or a risky choice at the expense of housing security, and so not actively encourage them to pursue it." (Bhattacharya and Payne, 2024). Participants in our research suggested that these external expectations could shape young people's own beliefs about what was achievable, further reducing aspirations towards higher education.

Participants also discussed how these external expectations shaped young people's educational identities. Several described young people who struggled to see themselves as belonging in higher education, particularly at highly selective institutions. One foster carer explained that their young person "wouldn't dream of applying to Oxford or Cambridge... because she just thinks no, it's just not possible," despite the foster carer believing she was academically as capable as other applicants. Participants suggested that these perceptions reflected internalised beliefs about who universities, and especially high-tariff institutions, are for, rather than objective differences in academic ability.

Overall, this theme highlights a contrast between foster carers' optimistic beliefs about young people's capabilities and the lower expectations they perceive within wider educational and social care systems. Participants argued that care-experienced young people possess significant potential, but that their aspirations can be constrained by more negative assumptions, limited educational identities, and a lack of contextual understanding of the challenges they have overcome.

8. Resources and outreach programmes

This final theme discusses the value of university outreach programmes in supporting higher education aspirations, particularly the Foster their Future programme.

Findings

Participants consistently viewed outreach initiatives, particularly Foster their Future and university-based outreach programmes, as valuable sources of information, confidence, and practical support. These programmes were seen as helping foster carers navigate an increasingly complex higher education landscape while also encouraging young people to consider a wider range of post-18 options.

All participants explained that engaging with programmes such as Foster their Future increased their understanding of higher education, student finance, and the support available to care-experienced students. One foster carer reflected that Foster their Future "definitely increased my confidence, awareness and ability to support them," while another commented, "every single session, I went, came away and said, 'Well, I didn't know that!'" Participants valued receiving current and accurate information, recognising that higher education policies and systems change over time. As one participant explained, "I think it's so important that you get an up-to-date perspective on where we are."

Participants also praised outreach programmes for their practical and personalised approach. Rather than simply providing information, programmes were described as helping foster carers think critically about the decisions facing their young people and equipping them with the knowledge to ask informed questions. Reflecting on the Foster their Future programme, one foster carer described it as "absolutely fantastic from start to finish," explaining that it was "down-to-earth and practical" and helped them identify useful sources of support, including organisations such as Become (the national charity which supports children and young people in care).

Another important subtheme was the impact of exposure to universities and higher education environments. Participants believed that opportunities to visit campuses, attend open days, and engage directly with university staff helped make higher education feel more accessible and achievable. One foster carer described how attending an open day "really fired [their young person] up," highlighting the importance of tailoring opportunities to individual interests and motivations. These experiences were seen as challenging misconceptions about university and increasing young people's confidence to consider higher education as a realistic option.

Finally, while participants recognised that higher education is not the right pathway for every young person, they also acknowledged the importance of discussing alternative routes such as apprenticeships alongside university. Outreach programmes were valued because they encouraged informed choice rather than promoting a single educational pathway.

Overall, participants viewed Foster their Future as playing an important role in increasing knowledge, confidence, and aspirations. By providing practical guidance, opportunities for university exposure, and access to wider support networks, this programme was perceived to reduce uncertainty and help foster carers better support young people in making informed decisions about their future education.

Discussion

Limitations

Although several key themes emerged from the interviews, this research has a number of important limitations.

Firstly, the small sample size of only fewer than five participants limits the extent to which findings can be generalised to the wider population of foster carers. The study was intended to provide exploratory insights rather than representative conclusions.

Secondly, all participants had previously taken part in the Foster their Future programme and therefore had an existing relationship with the University of York and had already met the interviewer, either online or in person, before the interviews took place. These pre-existing relationships could have influenced participants' responses and their willingness to express critical views. Furthermore, participants' perceptions of higher education, and of the University of York specifically, are likely to have been shaped by their experiences on Foster their Future. A stronger evaluation design would have involved interviewing participants both before and after taking part in the programme to explore changes in knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions over time; however, this was not feasible within the scope of the research project.

In addition, some of the participants completed Foster their Future in 2025, approximately a year before being interviewed. As a result, they found it more difficult to recall specific aspects of the programme or to clearly articulate its impact, introducing the possibility of recall bias.

The participant sample may also have been subject to self-selection bias in two ways. Individuals who chose to participate in Foster their Future were already willing to engage with a higher education institution and may have held more positive attitudes towards higher education than foster carers more generally. Similarly, those who volunteered for the interviews were willing to share their experiences and perspectives, which may not reflect the views of foster carers who chose not to participate. Including foster carers with no previous engagement with higher education providers may have produced very different findings.

Anecdotally, conversations with a substantial number of prospective and current University of York students from care backgrounds suggest a range of experiences. Many have described negative foster care experiences, including foster carers who actively discouraged them from pursuing higher education. Others, however, have spoken very positively about their foster placements and the encouragement and support they received in accessing university. These contrasting accounts highlight that the findings of this research should not be interpreted as representative of the national picture. Rather, they suggest that foster carers can have varied influences on young people's access to higher education, with both supportive and discouraging experiences reported.

Finally, the research was conducted by a team of Access and Outreach practitioners rather than experienced researchers. While the team brought valuable professional expertise and contextual knowledge, they had limited experience with qualitative research. The project was also constrained by limited time and staffing resources, which restricted the scope of data collection and analysis.

Other things of note

While there is a plethora of research exploring care-experienced young people's experiences of school and higher education, there remains very little research exploring foster carers' attitudes and the role they play in

influencing young people's educational aspirations. This is interesting in itself. While it is vital to hear directly from young people about their views and experiences, by failing to ask foster carers directly about their experiences, the sector feeds into the narrative explored by our participants that foster carers don't have a voice. This represents an important area for further investigation, both across the sector and within our own organisation. As part of this, we intend to strengthen our internal evaluation processes. Foster carers currently complete a short evaluation form after participating in the Foster their Future programme; going forward, we will review and expand this questionnaire to collect richer, more meaningful data that will deepen our understanding of their experiences and inform future programme development. It would also be beneficial to conduct interviews directly with young people, especially before and after their foster carer takes part in Foster their Future, to see if they notice an impact on the confidence, attitudes, and knowledge of their foster carers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The interviews provided valuable insights into participants' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of education, both from their personal standpoint and in relation to the young people in their care. Several key themes emerged consistently across interviews, indicating shared experiences and reinforcing existing evidence.

The findings from this research reflect what we have heard anecdotally from care-experienced young people we have supported over the years: that, generally, support from local authorities is inadequate, support from schools is variable, and that having supportive, well-informed foster carers can have a significant positive influence on young people's confidence and decision-making when considering higher education. However, the small sample size limits the extent to which these findings can be generalised, and the perspectives of foster carers may not yet be fully represented. Future research would benefit from interviewing a larger number of foster carers, ideally both before and after they participate in future cohorts of the Foster their Future programme.

The evaluation also identified opportunities to strengthen future data collection. Introducing an interviewer reflection log immediately after each interview would help capture contextual observations, participant hesitancy, and other nuances that may not be evident from interview transcripts alone, providing a richer understanding of participants' experiences.

A key finding was that staff in local authorities and schools often lack the up-to-date knowledge needed to effectively support care-experienced young people through the higher education application process. For the past two years, we have delivered a programme of webinars for professionals working in schools and local authorities; however, attendance has been consistently low. In response to these findings, we will invest additional time and resources in promoting the programme to schools, colleges, virtual schools, social workers, and leaving care teams. We also plan to develop a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) that foster carers and professionals can access at any time, making the information more readily available and accessible. We hope these developments will increase the number of professionals who are then equipped with the knowledge and confidence to support care-experienced young people in accessing higher education. We will also work more closely with Advancing Access, UCAS, Become, and NNECL to encourage them to provide more learning opportunities for professionals and foster carers to access.

The findings in this research also suggest a need for:

- More timely and consistent support from local authorities
- Greater recognition of foster carers as professional partners

- Improved continuity of services and clearer communication between agencies
- Reduced bureaucratic barriers to better support children and young people in care
- More individualised support and higher expectations from schools
- Accurate guidance about higher education from schools
- Greater expertise from school staff in supporting children in care to access further and higher education.

Notices

Ethics approval was received from the University of York's Professional Services Research Ethics Committee (ProSREC) in February 2026. All participants were required to read an information sheet and complete a consent form before participating. It was made clear that participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary and that choosing not to participate would have no impact on any current or future engagement with the University of York, including activities delivered by the Access & Outreach team, for either the foster carers or the young people in their care.

Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at any point, without providing a reason, up until the anonymisation of their interview transcript. At the beginning of each interview, before audio recording commenced, these points were reiterated. Participants were also informed that the interview would be audio recorded and that a transcript would subsequently be shared with them for review, allowing them to provide additional comments or request amendments if they wished.

Where we report on participant data we adhere to HESA rounding and suppression to ensure confidentiality.

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Appendix A

Term	Definition
Legal care leaver	Under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, a care leaver is defined as a young person aged 16 to 25 who was "looked after" by a local authority for at least 13 weeks (or periods amounting to 13 weeks) which began after the age of 14 and included at least one day after their 16th birthday.
Care experienced	Refers to anyone who has spent time in local authority care for any length of time at any age. This includes foster care, kinship care, residential care, those who have been adopted, and those looked after at home under a supervision order.
Estranged student	Students aged 25 or under at the start of their course who are studying without the support and approval of their parents due to a breakdown in their relationship. Students who are estranged have no contact with both of their biological and/or adoptive parents. This term would also include situations where the student's parents are deceased.
Independent student	Independent students is an umbrella term used by the University of York to refer to students who are either legal care leavers, have care experience and students who are estranged. The term was developed as part of a focus group with these students to reflect their self-identification and to foster a sense of belonging.
NNECL	The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) is an award-winning, not for profit education organisation working to transform the educational outcomes of young people with experience of being in care.
NNECL Quality Mark	Launched in 2021, the NNECL Quality Mark is an evidence based and impact driven change management process for universities and colleges to demonstrate their support for the inclusion and success of students with care experience and who are estranged. The University of York was awarded the NNECL Quality Mark in 2022, and this was re-awarded in 2025.
Access and Participation Plan (APP)	Access and participation plans (APPs) set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.
Achieve HE	The name of the pre-entry programme within the Access and Outreach team at the University of York which supports independent students, foster carers and professionals.
Foster their Future	One element of the Achieve HE programme, Foster their Future is a programme of free webinars aimed at supporting foster carers from across the UK.