

Connect More: How can services, sectors & communities find a shared vision?

National Multiple Disadvantage Summit 2025

The care-leaver gap: What does prevention really mean in complex systems?

Speakers:

- Victoria Odude – Young People’s Benchmarking Forum, Catch22
- Sally Scott – Senior Development Manager, Strategic Partnerships Team, Hertfordshire County Council
- Eva Acs – Programme Director, Fullscope
- Hannah McCowen – National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum Manager, Catch22
- **Chair:** Carl Brown, Systems Practice Manager, MEAM

Aims of the session:

- To explore the systemic drivers that lead care leavers into multiple disadvantage
- To examine the role of identity, trauma, and lived experience in shaping transition pathways
- To spotlight prevention, early intervention, and the power of relationships
- To consider the responsibilities of systems, professionals and communities in enabling safe, equitable transitions from care

Opening reflections

The panel opened with moving personal reflections on what drives their work. From lived experience of the care system to decades of service across housing, social care and the voluntary sector, each speaker articulated the urgency of transforming how we support young people. A common thread was the critical – and often traumatic – nature of the transition out of care, and the need for human, relational responses.

Challenges in transition

Speakers and attendees discussed how young people leaving care often face disrupted support networks, unaddressed trauma, and inflexible services. Support is often offered too early, too short-term, or too clinically, missing the moment when care leavers are actually ready to engage. Systems, the panel argued, need to be responsive, trauma-informed, and offer multiple chances – not rigid pathways that punish non-linear journeys.

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The emotional burden of leaving a structured residential care setting and facing adult life alone was powerfully described. Attendees spoke about how loneliness, shifting identity, and lack of community belonging are frequently overlooked but fundamental barriers.

Equity and intersectionality

A rich discussion focused on the intersectional nature of care experience, including race, gender identity, disability, and migration status. Speakers raised concerns about the Supreme Court's recent ruling and the fear it is creating among trans young people. One in four care leavers are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and the specific risks they face were explored alongside experiences of care-experienced parents and young disabled people. Participants called for services to be more inclusive, flexible and deeply attuned to these intersecting identities.

The power of relationships

Throughout the session, the power of consistent, meaningful relationships came through strongly. Lifelong links with foster carers and social workers were described as transformative. Attendees shared powerful personal stories about professionals who had “seen them” beyond their case file – asking about their life, painting together, going for walks. These moments were highlighted as the true heart of preventative work.

Participants called for more permission, especially within statutory services, to work relationally rather than transactionally – building trust and connection rather than simply delivering services.

Local examples in action

We heard about work underway in Hertfordshire, a MEAM Approach area, where partners are embedding **corporate parenting as a shared responsibility** across the system. Their approach combines relational practice, flexible commissioning, and more responsive services that recognise care leavers not just as service users, but as young people with rights, histories and futures.

This philosophy is being woven into Hertfordshire's broader work on tackling multiple disadvantage and reflects a wider call from session participants: to treat every interaction – however brief – as potentially pivotal. Whether you're in housing, health, policing, or the voluntary sector, the responsibility to support care-experienced young people is collective and lifelong.

To learn more about Hertfordshire's approach – or how MEAM can support your local area – please [get in touch](#).

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Takeaways and provocations

- **Shift the lens** from fixing individuals to fixing systems. Attendees stressed the need to reimagine how public services understand their role in supporting care leavers and multiply disadvantaged people more broadly. *Fullscope's project on mental health support in supported housing offers a concrete example of this approach, moving beyond standard interventions to focus on meaningful, low-barrier relational experiences like cooking together and trips to the seaside.* [Read more here](#)
- **Invest in early and relational prevention.** Effective prevention looks like cooking together, going to the seaside, or making space for connection – not just high-cost, professional interventions.
- **Let young people lead.** Multiple speakers emphasised that care-experienced young people are the experts in their own lives. We must listen to them, centre their voices, and build services around what they say they need. *The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum's 'In Their Own Words' reports – co-produced with over 200 young people – offer vital insights into the realities of life after care and what needs to change locally and nationally.* [Read the reports](#)
- **Recognise our collective role** as corporate parents. One key message was that corporate parenting should not sit solely with children's services – every professional, commissioner and community member has a role to play in creating a culture of belonging and ongoing connection.
- **Stay human.** Whether in the voluntary sector or statutory, attendees called for professionals to show up with authenticity, compassion, and humility – not just professional distance. *Fullscope's CB4Ward project exemplifies this, challenging dominant narratives about what constitutes professional support and making space for solidarity-based, community-rooted approaches.* [Read more here](#)

Final reflection

One panellist movingly referenced the poet Lemn Sissay, who once said, *"The hug I needed, I didn't have."* It was a powerful reminder of the emotional and relational void that many care-experienced young people face — and the urgent challenge of designing systems that can replicate that hug, not as a gesture, but as a principle of support.

As Victoria Odude reflected, effective support must include detailed, tailored plans around the transition from care, grounded in genuine relationships and respect. *"Young people are the experts of their own lives,"* she reminded us. *"Their views and goals should be at the heart of decision making."*