

Developing a Universal Definition of 'Care Experience' - consultation - January 2025

Inspiring Scotland's response

Submitted: January 2025

The term 'care experience' has meaning for many people and it can be helpful as an understanding of personal identity and in understanding shared experiences.

As well as providing a sense of identity, there are existing supports and entitlements available to people with care experience, particularly young people with care experience. However, there is not currently one cross-sector definition which is commonly understood and used in practice; or that acknowledges the individual experience of care that different people can have.

This means that eligibility for existing supports is not currently connected by a universal definition, it is often linked to legal provisions and means people with experience of care may currently be missing out.

About *intandem* and our response

Managed by Inspiring Scotland, *intandem* is Scotland's mentoring programme for young people in, or at risk of experiencing the 'care system'. Most young people supported are living in kinship care or are in the 'care system' living at home with their parents. Mentoring starts between the ages of 7 and 15 years meeting once a week in the community for as long as needed.

Established in 2016, *intandem* is delivered by 12 partner charities across 20 local authorities. Partner charities and mentors often build trusted relationships with the family, and it allows families to benefit from support.

intandem submitted the following response to the consultation after seeking the opinions of these groups:

- young people mentored by *intandem* and in the 'care system',
- care experienced adults and have previously been mentored by *intandem*,
- staff of *intandem* partner organisations who work directly with young people in, or at risk of experiencing, the 'care system' and their families.

Q1. Do you agree or disagree that there is a need for a universal definition to describe 'care experience'?

- Agree strongly

Q2. What are your views on the potential advantages of developing a universal definition of 'care experience'?

Everyone consulted—young people, young adults, and *intandem* staff working directly with young people and families—agreed on the need for a universal definition of 'care experience.' It was felt that it would help young people access services and entitlements, and ensure services offer what is available consistently.

One potential advantage discussed was that such a definition could reduce the number of times a young person has to share their personal story when accessing support and services. This experience can be retraumatizing and make individuals feel as though they must constantly justify their experiences and need for support.

Many suggested that this universal definition should be accompanied by a document or card that could be presented, eliminating the need for further explanation. This approach would simplify the process for both the staff working with individuals who have care experience and the young people themselves.

A young adult shared, "A specific document showing my history in care would be helpful, something like a Young Scot card. If I have access to the care experience bursary, I should have access to all entitlements, but it's confusing." Another young adult noted, "It's annoying to go through everything in your past every time."

Introducing a universal definition of 'care experience' could make it easier to access support and entitlements, creating greater equity for those with care experience.

Q3. What are your views on the potential disadvantages of developing a universal definition of 'care experience'?

The young adults consulted expressed strong support for the need for a universal definition of 'care experience'. However, they cautioned that such a definition could inadvertently oversimplify a complex and deeply personal issue. They emphasised that every individual with care experience has a unique journey, and it is crucial for this diversity to be acknowledged within any universal definition. One suggestion was to incorporate subsets or additional classifications to better capture the range of experiences.

As one young adult remarked, “How can someone staying at home be the same as someone stripped away from their family, like I was?”. This statement underscores the reality that each person’s experience of care is distinct, reinforcing the importance of creating a universal definition that respects and reflects this individuality, without minimising or oversimplifying any one person's experience.

Q4. Do you have views on the definition of ‘Care Leaver’ as set out?

Everyone consulted—young people, young adults, and *intandem* staff working directly with young people and families—did not express strong opinions on the definition of ‘Care Leaver.’ Instead, the discussion focused on the practical implications of the definition, particularly regarding support and entitlements.

intandem staff highlighted two main concerns about the current reality:

1. **Reluctance to Engage with Social Work:** At 16, many young people with care experience are resistant to social work involvement. Often, there is no trust or established relationship, and these young people may actively avoid social work services as soon as they have the chance. Unfortunately, these are often the very individuals who need help the most, but their disengagement with services means they miss out on the support they could access at key transition points.
2. **Insufficient and Ineffective Support:** *intandem* staff noted there is currently not enough support for care leavers, and what exists is often inadequate or misaligned with young people’s needs. They commented that support is patchy and not able to fulfil its intended purpose. As a result, *intandem* coordinators frequently step in to act as family support workers, effectively filling gaps in the system. They stressed the need for a more consistent and tailored approach—sometimes requiring a more hands-on, ‘parenting-like’ role to help young people cope and thrive during transitions.

Additionally, there is a gap in support for young people who experience care at some point in their lives but are not formally recognised as ‘care leavers.’ A significant number of young people who aren’t in care on their 16th birthday fall through the cracks of available support, just when they need it most. *intandem* staff pointed out that young people in informal kinship care are especially vulnerable to this lack of support.

One young adult shared their personal experience: after being ‘looked after’ at home and in foster care during their childhood, they were no longer considered ‘looked after’ when they turned 16 and thus lost access to vital support. This resulted in

homelessness as support at this crucial transition point was unavailable, highlighting a clear gap in the system.

These insights underscore the urgent need for more comprehensive, accessible, and continuous support for care leavers, particularly during key transition periods.

Q5. Do you have any views on the statutory definition of 'Looked After' as set out above?

Everyone consulted—young people, young adults, and *intandem* staff working directly with young people and families—felt that the definition of 'Looked After' was overly legalistic, filled with jargon, and lacked clarity.

One staff member remarked, "This is confusing!" while a young person said, "It isn't easy to understand." Another staff member noted, "It feels frightening, like I'm in trouble. You'd want to shy away from anything to do with this definition."

Across the board, everyone agreed that a child-friendly version of the definition would be extremely helpful. Suggestions included creating a video, narrated by young people, to better explain 'care experience' and 'looked after' in an accessible way.

Q6. What experiences of care would you expect to be covered by any definition of 'care experience'?

- Looked After at Home
- Kinship Care (looked after children who have been placed with kinship carers by the local authority)
- Kinship Care (non-looked after children who live with a kinship carer)
- Foster Care
- Residential Care
- Residential Special School
- Supported Accommodation
- Secure Care
- Adoption

Please explain your answer below

intandem staff working directly with young people and families strongly advocated for the inclusion of young people living in kinship care (non-looked after children) in any definition of 'care experience'. They emphasised the importance of acknowledging these young people.

One staff member expressed, "These young people are the hidden looked after children. As a system, we're not recognizing them, but they are a significant part of what we do as a charity because some need significant support."

Q7. Do you have any other comments about the proposed universal definition of 'care experience'?

A universal definition of 'care experience' could lay the foundation for a much-needed clear pathway of support. It could outline the available resources and support for those with experience of care and provide guidance on where to access additional help. Adopting a proactive approach to offering support would be a significant step forward, benefiting young people, families, and professionals alike. This approach could go some way to preventing young people ending up in difficult situations such as homelessness.

Q8. Do you have any comments on the existing language of care?

Everyone consulted—young people, young adults, and *intandem* staff working directly with young people and families—felt that the existing language of care was often stigmatising and outdated. All felt it should take a child and young person centred approach, with one person commenting "it needs to be less scary".

Q9. Do you have any suggestions on potential ways to change and improve the language of care?

Everyone consulted—young people, young adults, and *intandem* staff working directly with young people and families—agreed that a positive shift in language is necessary. Reframing the support available to young people with care experience as a positive resource, along with increased transparency, would represent a significant step forward. As one participant remarked, "We should be able to tell a young person, 'If you have care experience, here are all the things you can access—this is a good

thing.” This approach could help empower young people and create a more supportive, optimistic narrative around the resources available to them.

Are you aware of good practice to change and improve the language of care?

A member of *intandem* staff working directly with young people and families suggested the following organisation in Northern Ireland as an example of good practice:

VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care)

<https://www.voypic.org/>

Resource developed by young people on the language of care- [Language of Care - VOYPIC](#)

At *intandem* we often refer to the work of **Each and Every Child**.

<https://eachandeverychild.co.uk/>

Thank you

Inspiring Scotland would like to thank everyone who contributed to this response including young people mentored by *intandem*, young adults who have previous experience of *intandem* mentoring and staff of *intandem* partner organisations who work directly with young people and families. Our partner organisations are Aberlour, Barnardo's, Move On, YMCA Edinburgh, Right There, Y Sort It, Kirkcaldy YMCA, Befriend a Child, Quarriers, Action for Children, COVEY, and TCA.

For more information, please contact Christine Roxburgh, *intandem*'s Policy and Participation Lead on christine@inspiringscotland.org.uk.

Follow us:

Website: www.intandem.scot

X: [intandemScot](#)

Facebook: [intandemScot](#)

LinkedIn: [intandem Scot](#)