



# The Clothworkers' Foundation

Care Leavers Evaluation  
Final Report  
December 2022

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# Introduction

## External context

The Covid-19 pandemic created a wealth of unprecedented challenges for the children's social care sector, and the pressures felt by those in and leaving care have been significantly exacerbated. In 2022, we returned to life without pandemic restrictions but were confronted with another monumental challenge: the cost-of-living crisis. There are growing fears that already vulnerable care-experienced young people will be severely affected, tipping many into poverty and hardship, thus setting them up to fail. In response to these concerns, led by Catch22's National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, a network of over 125 local authorities working on the development of quality leaving care services wrote an open letter to the government on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2022. The charities highlighted a number of ways the cost-of-living crisis will impact young care leavers in particular. As can be seen in the excerpt below, the letter focused in on several core issues that need to be better addressed by interventions:

- **Financial independence:** *Care leavers are expected to be financially independent from the age of 18 – whereas young people more generally are now not leaving the family home until the age of 24.<sup>1</sup>*
- **Mental health concerns:** *Nearly half of looked after children meet the criteria for a psychiatric disorder (compared to 1 in 10 children generally).<sup>2</sup> There are concerns that without further assistance, the current cost of living crisis will have a significant impact on care leavers' mental health.*
- **Poorer support networks:** *Care experienced young people generally have a poorer support network, meaning they have few people to turn to when in financial crisis.*
- **Digital poverty:** *Prior to the cost-of-living rises, we have seen examples of care leavers choosing between purchasing food and WiFi. Digital access is vital to engaging with education, employment, health services and to staying connected with family and friends. The current cost of living increases will put more care leavers into digital poverty, impacting their ability to take positive steps around education and work.*
- **Under 25 Universal Credit rates:** *Care experienced young people under 25-year-olds are only eligible for the Under 25 Universal Credit rates, despite having to manage household bills.*

In addition to this, following on from their interim 2021 report, *The Case for Change*, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, led by Josh MacAlister, published their final report in May 2022. The report suggested that without a whole system reset, by 2032 there will be nearly 100,000 children in care (up from 80,000 today) and the evidently flawed system would cost over £15 billion per year (up from the £10 billion it costs now).<sup>3</sup> The report included a number of recommendations to shift these trends in a more positive direction, including a revolution in Family Help; creating a just and decisive child protection system; unlocking the potential of family networks; fixing the broken care market and giving children a voice; producing five 'missions' for care experienced people; realising

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<sup>1</sup> "Young care leavers set for grave financial struggles as cost-of-living soars". Catch22, April 2022. Available at: <https://cdn.catch-22.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Open-Letter-Cost-of-Living-for-Care-Experienced-Young-People.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, *The case for Change*, June 2021. Available at: <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/case-for-change.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, *Final report*, May 2022. Available at: <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>

the potential of the workforce and making a system that is relentlessly focused on children and families. In terms of next steps, the government had committed to responding to the Review by the end of 2022, but later revised this to 'early in the new year'.<sup>4</sup> The Department for Education will lead on the response and implementation of the Review's recommendations.

### The Care Leavers portfolio

The Clothworkers' Foundation's proactive Care Leavers initiative commenced in 2019 and supports four different projects which aim to have a real impact on the lives of young care leavers. Some projects did this through improving the support and opportunities provided to young people who are leaving or have recently left care, whilst others provided earlier intervention for young people still within the care system, with the aim of contributing to better outcomes in the future. Whilst the activities of all four projects set out to have some tangible impacts for young people who use or benefit from the work of these projects in the short term, many also had wider strategic aims: to provide pilot models that would prove the value of new ways of better supporting young people in or leaving care which, it was hoped, would influence policy and practice and, ultimately, bring about systemic change in young people's experience in care or as care leavers.

For the Clothworkers' Foundation, supporting these projects provided an opportunity for their funding to have a significant impact on outcomes for care-experienced young people. By supporting these programmes, the funding had the potential to not only support the young people who will be directly impacted by the work of the four projects but also to play a role in improving the landscape for care leavers in the longer term.

Details of the charities funded in the portfolio can be found in the table below.

Charity	Grant	Original funding period
Bright Light (Catch22/Children's Society)	£400,000 over 2.5 years	Summer 2019 – Spring 2022
Drive Forward Foundation	£151,000 over 3 years	Summer 2019 – Summer 2022
Lighthouse	£96,000 over 3 years	January 2019 – January 2022
Become	£530,000 over 5 years	January 2020 – January 2025

As part of the funding programme, it was agreed that nfpResearch would work alongside the four charities throughout the core period of their grants, to evaluate the progress and impact of the individual projects. In addition, nfpResearch would aim to understand the transformative potential of the Care Leavers grant scheme as a whole through the wider policy impacts and long-term changes which some of these innovative programmes aimed to support. At the end of each year, we have provided a detailed summary of progress and impact achieved so far. This report is our concluding one, and provides a summary of the end of the original funding period for three of the four charities in the portfolio.

### Methodology

As in the previous two years, a number of different research methodologies were employed to explore progress and impact. Our approach throughout this evaluation has been largely qualitative, and most interviews were conducted virtually this year, with the exception of a focus group with young people

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<sup>4</sup> "Care review response delayed until 2023". November 28, 2022. Available at: <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2022/11/28/care-review-response-delayed-until-2023/>

participating in Drive Forward Foundation’s Compass programme, which took place in person. During the interviews we spoke with a range of staff and young people in order to understand the progress of individual projects over their final year, to discuss the impact and achievements of the project over the three years and to ascertain how the projects continued to develop as we emerged from Covid-19 restrictions. As the original funding period was coming to an end for three of the four projects, we also reviewed what this meant for their organisations and the young people involved, as well as exploring the funding’s legacy and any influence on the wider sector. The charities also shared valuable documentation with us that gave us insight into their progress against their objectives; this included monitoring data, internal evaluations and impact reporting. To complement this contextual insight, we also reviewed website material and information provided in any informal meetings with the charities, and this shaped our approach to the qualitative research phase.

Original qualitative research for this report was conducted between July and September 2022. As noted in last year’s report, the exception to this is the project run by Become. This project is slightly different to the other three programmes in terms of the timing of their funding and they have not yet completed their third funded year; therefore, in this report we have included a brief summary update on Become’s recent progress and we will carry out our final phase of research with them in Spring 2023. However, with three of the projects having moved into the final stage of funding this year, we were able to explore the overall impact of the projects and any lasting legacy.

We focused on a range of topics within the interviews, including the following broad themes:

- What has been achieved over Year 3 (or since the last set of interviews) in terms of project delivery, and what have been the challenges?
- Achievements of the project over the three years as it reached the end of funding – looking back over the project as a whole, and also at how the funding specifically supported development of the wider organisation
- Living beyond Covid-19 – we were interested to hear how the projects have continued to develop beyond pandemic restrictions, what were the longer-term impacts on ways of working, and assessing the ongoing ramifications for young people, from mental health to the current cost-of-living crisis
- Where applicable, what the end of funding meant for the project, including how young people will or have been transitioned into other services
- Legacy – what did our interviewees feel is the legacy of the project on their organisation, and has there been any wider influence on policy or the landscape for care leavers

The breakdown of fieldwork carried out for each of the projects can be found in the table below.

Charity	Qualitative research
Bright Light (Catch22 / Children’s Society)	1 group interview with 2 members of delivery staff from The Children’s Society. 1 individual interview with a senior member of staff from Catch22.
Drive Forward Foundation	1 group interview with 4 members of the staff team and a focus group with 4 care-experienced programme participants.
Lighthouse	3 interviews with staff working across different areas: comms, project committee and frontline.
Become	Informal catch up with staff contact in November 2022. Interviews to be carried out in Spring 2023.

# Summary of common themes

In both our Year 1 and Year 2 reporting, we noted the diversity of the four projects that the Clothworkers' Foundation funds under the Care Leavers initiative. However, we also highlighted that despite the differences between the projects, they all had certain elements that tie them together and provide a clear rationale to the funding stream. As such, throughout our evaluation, we have identified numerous common themes which have spanned across all four funded projects with the hope of providing a sense of the overall value of the Clothworkers' Foundation's funding and also to help to facilitate any learning opportunities that can come out of this research. We have seen a continuation of themes identified in our previous reports in our final round of evaluation and therefore, we have used this section to briefly consolidate and summarise these themes. Later, in the concluding section of this report we will reflect further on the wider learnings and legacy of the projects in the Care Leavers portfolio as a whole.

***For a full overview of these common themes please consult our Year 1 and Year 2 evaluation reports.***

## **Ensuring stability in challenging circumstances**

Over the course of this evaluation, our reports have looked in detail at the huge and unanticipated challenges the Covid-19 pandemic posed, both for charities themselves and the young people they were supporting. For many of the projects, Covid-19 has been in the background for most of their existence and staff were constantly aware of the possibility of further disruption and the need for continued flexibility. Particularly throughout 2020 and 2021, the charities were forced to continually reassess; they faced huge challenges with trying to plan ahead and needed to remain flexible in their approach. Many also saw demand for their services increase and changes to the nature of support required. What felt like a never-ending cycle of lockdowns was particularly difficult for young people and this led to periods of more variable engagement in some cases. However, the charities recognised this quickly and worked hard to meet young people's most urgent needs. This often meant focusing on what young people needed in the moment in order to keep them engaged, rather than sticking rigidly to the aims of the programme or to pre-Covid plans.

## **Pivoting timelines and realigning objectives**

We know that the pandemic created a unique set of challenges for the charities funded in the Care Leavers portfolio. For some, Covid-19 meant a delay to project timelines and for others, the increased demand for their existing services meant that funding was rightly redirected to support more urgent needs. Although the external environment has meant not all of the projects have been able to meet the original objectives and timelines put forward in their pre-pandemic funding proposals, it has been clear throughout the research period that the adaptations they have made have only served to emphasise the value and importance of the work they do.

## **Learning and adaptations have strengthened the charities**

Across the portfolio we have seen that whilst changes were originally made to the programmes as a result of necessity, all projects have used learnings from these forced adaptations to actually make their programmes better in the long term. The charities have demonstrated bolstered resilience, as well as the ability to adapt, troubleshoot, innovate and experiment. They have been able to take forward more flexible working styles and discoveries about what works best into the future work of the

project or into their wider organisations. Therefore, rather than being hindered by the pandemic, the charities have strengthened their models and further highlighted their essential elements of value.

### **The importance of dedicated individuals and consistent staff teams**

The significance of key roles and the importance of consistent staff teams is something that we have discussed with all of the charities. Interviewees talked about how having a consistent staff team not only helped to strengthen projects but was also of huge value to the young people as it enabled time for trust and rapport to be built with key staff members – something that was sometimes contrasted with past experiences for care-experienced young people. These findings reiterate the value of the Clothworkers' Foundation's decision to fund roles or entire projects for a three-year or longer period.

### **Shared impacts for young people**

Where we have been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to carry out research directly with young people, key impacts for them across the projects have included:

- *Holistic support:* rapport with staff meant there was an important shared understanding, and young people felt that they were treated as individuals.
- *Choice and autonomy:* young people valued being listened to and the sense of being able to have their say.
- *Confidence building:* young people spoke about their increased confidence throughout their time engaging in the project, e.g., feeling more able to speak out and advocate for themselves, or being more willing to try new activities.
- *An outside source of support:* young people highlighted the value of having someone outside of the care system who could give an external viewpoint, was approachable and easy to ask questions.
- *Addressing the stigma of care:* the value of working with professionals who understand their circumstances completely, or how liberating it is to be part of a group of other young people where being in care isn't a source of shame or something that requires explanation.

### **Highlighting the need for system change and holistic support**

The projects in the Care Leavers portfolio have served to build evidence and draw attention to the issues facing care-experienced young people; namely, the gaps, lack of resources and inadequacies within the wider system. By providing support that was highly personalised and holistic, taking into account young people's needs in the round, these projects acted in opposition to the norm. The charities have gone beyond treating young people as the object of one specific intervention and have looked further at what best practice really looks like. Their achievements, challenges and wider influence are outlined in the proceeding individual sections of this report.

# Bright Light (Children's Society & Catch22)

## Desk Research Summary

Catch22 and the Children's Society worked in partnership to deliver Bright Light, a programme which focused on progressing care leavers into employment opportunities and apprenticeships, as well as understanding the barriers they faced to help develop solutions and influence policy. The grant from the Clothworkers' Foundation funded the programme for two and a half years, during which the aim was to support 40 care leavers to complete an apprenticeship and 40 care leavers into employment, education or training. Bright Light also aimed to positively engage a further 80 care leavers. The final numbers can be seen in the table below.

### Programme data

	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Q2 2021	Q3 2021	Q4 2021	Target	Achieved
Programme starts	36	26	27	29	17	22	16	9	7	160	188
Apprenticeships	1	0	1	2	4	4	2	4	1	40	19
Education & Training	3	3	0	10	2	6	4	5	0	20	33
Employment	3	4	2	3	1	4	14	11	11	20	53
Total outcome starts	7	7	3	15	7	14	20	20	12	80	105

### Programme highlights

- As shown in the above table, Bright Light exceeded all targets across the programme with exception of the apprenticeship target which was majorly affected by the pandemic, the Government's Kickstart scheme and the downturn of apprenticeship availability.
- The achievements of the programme were recognised at the Children and Young People Now Awards, where Bright Light won The Leaving Care Award in November 2021.
- Throughout the programme, Bright Light successfully delivered 7 virtual career events for care leavers, including 5 job fairs and 2 insight/information days.
- Relationship building played a major role in the programme's success – the Bright Light team focused on developing and maintaining strong collaborative relationships with local authorities and employers, as well as being consistent in their approach to delivery and staffing. This ensured the desired relational and holistic approach with young people was achieved.
- Employer engagement was a huge success for Bright Light in terms of securing vacancies and opportunities for young people, as well as supporting and educating employers to be more inclusive towards the needs of care experienced young people.
- Some of Bright Light's key policy and influencing activities over the period included:
  - The Keep Care Leavers Connected campaign
  - The Shared Accommodation Rate exemption brought forward
  - Pan-London care leavers forum
  - Children's Social Care Review
  - Speaking at various policy events such as the Public Policy Exchange conference on children leaving care



## Qualitative Interviews

Bright Light was a partnership project run by Catch22 and the Children's Society, entirely funded by the Clothworkers' Foundation. Intended as a pilot exploring the benefits of relational and holistic support, it aimed to support young care leavers (aged 16-25) into apprenticeships as well as other educational or employment opportunities. There were several innovative aspects which made the project unique from typical employment programmes, and it was particularly exciting in terms of its potential to bring about change for care leavers in the employment support sector. The programme provided a high level of holistic, wrap-around support for young people via dedicated career coaches. At the same time, it aimed to build a network of employers who understood the barriers faced by young care leavers and work with them to broker opportunities. Finally, at a wider level, the project was seen as an opportunity for learning and skill sharing between Catch22 and the Children's Society – as well as the chance to create a best practice model in supporting young care leavers into fulfilling employment opportunities, which in turn had the potential to influence policy.

Delivery of Bright Light wrapped up in early 2022 and we caught up with staff from both partner charities during August and September 2022 to reflect on the project as a whole. It is worth noting that many of the staff who worked on the project have since left their respective organisations. We'd consider that the core of our evaluation for this project took place in Year 2 and can be found in that report. In 2021 (Year 2) we spoke to a range of stakeholders, including staff working across a variety of roles, young people who had taken part in the programme and an employer. In previous reports, we found that the Bright Light team had proved they were highly adaptable and able to excel in both building strong relationships with key stakeholders and guiding young people through an extremely challenging environment. In this section we reiterate these themes further, offering a summary of overall achievements and staff reflections on the legacy of Bright Light.

### Reflecting on Bright Light's achievements

Our approach to this final round of research was to ask our interviewees to reflect on the achievements and challenges faced over the course of the project's delivery, which had wrapped up six months prior to our conversations. Staff were keen to remember the many successes of Bright Light, albeit with an element of sadness that the project had come to an end without recommissioning.

Staff spoke proudly about what they saw as one of the key pillars of the Bright Light approach: a commitment to a highly relational, personal and specialised service, that recognised each young person was on a unique journey. They told us how in the children's social care sector, this level of attention to individual needs is rather unusual for a programme of this kind. Likewise, to have had a programme like this funded by the Clothworkers' Foundation was an achievement in itself; it can often be difficult to find appropriate funding for a project that aims to tackle complex needs through intensive casework.

The team were also proud to have exceeded the vast majority of the targets that were set at the beginning of the project. Achievements include getting 33 young people into education or training (from a target of 20) and 53 young people into employment (again from a target of 20). As we have touched on throughout this evaluation, the exception has been apprenticeships, where there has been an external challenge with availability due to the Kickstart scheme. Nevertheless, Bright Light still managed to progress 19 young people into apprenticeships (from an original target of 40). These achievements are phenomenal, given the state of many industries during the pandemic and given that this was a pilot programme. Staff felt that the outcomes exceeded their expectations and demonstrate a clear need for the type of support provided by a programme like Bright Light.

Another equally important aspect of the programme from the perspective of staff was the emphasis they had put upon building relationships with key stakeholders to forge a shared understanding of care leavers' experiences. The Bright Light team carefully built their understanding of these unique and challenging circumstances and they were able to translate this into actionable recommendations for employers, making a real difference to the lives of the young people who were given opportunities. The importance of Bright Light's Partnership Development Manager, whose role involved working with employers to make them consider reasonable adjustments and support for functional skills, has been particularly important to the success of the programme. Likewise, the role of careers coaches has been crucial for building an understanding of care leavers' unique circumstances, providing encouragement, and filling the gaps that would ordinarily be provided by the support networks that many young people take for granted.

The team working on the Bright Light programme have demonstrated that they were highly resilient, adaptable, and committed to their work. The team saw themselves as champions and advocates for young people, and as with many of the charities the Clothworkers' Foundation has funded under its proactive grant streams, the programme's success comes directly from the dedicated individuals working on it. Above, and in previous reports, we have mentioned the integral role of the Partnership Development Manager, who has been responsible for building relationships and brokering opportunities with employers, as well as explaining and breaking down barriers and encouraging flexibility. Likewise, careers coaches have not only worked tirelessly with their young people but also to build relationships with local authorities, focusing on providing a voice for care-experienced young people:

*"[Careers coach] had a really good relationship with the local authority. She looked after the Enfield young people and she had established long-term working relationships with Enfield [Council]. She's very determined, is probably the right word, very protective of her clients as well. [...] I think someone needs to be the voice of the young person if the young person can't share their experiences themselves, somebody needs to do it for them. [...] I think the great thing as well is that [careers coach] was attending the monthly meet [and] was in contact with PA's, giving them updates if she couldn't get through to the young person, she'd take the initiative to contact them to say, what's been going on? When was your last contact? We were really able to build a bigger picture but also understand any trauma or any difficulties or barriers the young person had gone through."* Bright Light staff

This advocacy on behalf of young people is a crucial thread that spans across all levels of the Bright Light programme, from high-level employer conversations, to directly supporting the preparation of young people.

The nature of Bright Light as a pilot programme was also a strength in that it offered staff the space to learn and the flexibility and freedom to deploy the experience of the two partner charities. This was a team that was able to recognise when a young person might not be ready for the intensive support Bright Light offered, but still felt they were able to signpost to other services and take a tailored approach without compromising the outcomes of Bright Light. This freedom enabled them to treat young people even more as individuals, rather than just another statistic or person on their books.

## A note on the impact of Covid-19

Like all of the charities funded by the Care Leavers funding stream, the Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on Bright Light's work and the lives of the young people they supported. As one staff member put it, the pandemic "took young people's time away" and in most cases delayed their progression into employment opportunities. This was a tough time for all young people, but the barriers that care-experienced young people faced in their everyday lives seemed to multiply. Tackling digital exclusion was a major focus for the Bright Light team, who, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, found it a constant struggle to keep connected and get young people the right support from their social workers. Uncertainty and the absence of hope impacted young people's self-esteem, creating an ever-challenging environment in which to try to keep them engaged:

*"Because the landscape became suddenly very uncertain and people were living in very difficult conditions, that just made it harder to help people build their confidence and getting into work or apprenticeship. And also, because a lot of a lot of the apprenticeships just vanished and a disproportionate number of young people are in jobs in hospitality and retail [...] It wasn't a very positive environment to work in more generally and I think that created a lot of practical and mental health challenges."* Bright Light staff

But the Bright Light team did manage to keep young people engaged, and through the tough times, there were even some benefits to the ways they had to adjust their style of working. The lack of travelling as a result of providing remote support often meant better attendance rates. It also provided careers coaches with a new lens on young people's lives and meant the team developed a more nuanced understanding of young people's challenges. As we saw in our Year 2 report, in many ways, the pandemic led to careers coaches building more personalised relationships with young people, speaking to them outside of normal working hours and seeing them virtually in their homes.

## Impact on young people

We had the benefit of hearing directly from young people in our Year 2 evaluation about the impact they felt being part of Bright Light had on them. Impacts ranged from the young people's appreciation for the personal connection they were able to build with their careers coaches and the unique nature of the support they received (which was unlike any they had experienced from other agencies); to feeling understood and cared for (personal touches like a birthday card mean a lot) and the guidance their careers coaches provided during a time of isolation and intense uncertainty. It was clear from our conversations that Bright Light was not just about employability support for these young people.

*"I think [the main achievement with] young people was definitely the confidence, the life skills that they've gained. It's so good to see so many of them that have literally come from [not] even having a CV to their name and months later are being supported, getting uniform for an interview, hearing about how they're nervous, to ending up getting the apprenticeship. I think also in terms of staff, how proactive and supportive they have been. It wasn't like, okay a young person now started an education or employment, that's it... they've allowed them to settle into their role, they've supported them with any documentation... Staff are really able to support them with that but also in terms of care leavers, they have so many other barriers in terms of family relationships, mental health as well so we were able to provide them with more support by them accessing this particular service."* Bright Light staff

As illustrated by the staff quote above, softer outcomes were a key focus of the Bright Light programme. In particular, building young people's confidence as well as focusing on wellbeing, personal growth and life skills. Fundamentally, the support provided by Bright Light was about broadening young people's horizons and making them feel good. As one staff member put it, the programme was about recognising individual needs and "giving them the time of day". Ultimately, staff felt that you can't truly measure that and how it impacts young people in the longer term – the drive and confidence it can instil. The case study (right) shows the need for, and success of, Bright Light's brand of personalised support.

## Case study

*"Without the support of the project, I promise you [young person] would have been in prison again. So, with the support of [careers coach], being his advocate and supporting him with his applications, like [colleague] said it's all the paperwork and its overwhelming if you've never had to do that before and you've never had a parent or carer to support you in the first place. For this young person, [careers coach] was able to advocate for him because he wasn't allowed to go to particular parts of London, so it was really difficult for him to actually get to work so they sponsored him to do his driving test and everything like that. He's still there [in the apprenticeship role], he's got a van, he's doing really, really well. He's turned his life around and that wouldn't have happened without this project."*

Bright Light's approach to young people was about building a holistic understanding not only of the young person but of the entirety of their employment journey. From supporting young people to manage their finances, family relationships and mental health, to developing their CV and interview technique. The team of careers coaches also focused on helping young people with access to equipment and any difficult paperwork, as well as all of the small things that a parent might otherwise support them with during their first experiences of a job interview process, such as ensuring they have suitable clothing, clean shoes, printed documents, have set an alarm and planned their route. No stone was left unturned in terms of the thoughtfulness and care provided by Bright Light's careers coaches. Fundamentally, they excelled in understanding the employment landscape and young people's needs.

### Wider impact and the programme's legacy

With this being our concluding set of interviews and an opportunity to look back on the programme as a whole, we felt it was important to ask staff what they had learnt through working in partnership. We also explored what they felt to be the lasting legacy of Bright Light, aside from the fundamental impacts on the young people they supported.

All in all, the programme's achievements show that many positives came from two expert organisations working together on this project; both parties reflected that they were highly driven to ensure the programme was a success and felt acknowledged that the partnership was built on an equal footing. Our interviewees at both charities acknowledged that, as is to be expected, each organisation had its own ways of working. Understandably, it took time to establish roles and responsibilities on the project, but there was a strong commitment to making it work. Likewise, both organisations agreed that there were clear benefits that came from the collaboration in terms of learning from each other as practitioners and deepening their expertise, as one staff member said: "A

*lot comes from projects like this. It's not just about the main outcomes of the projects, it's about the other branches that grow from the tree."*

The project also made them think differently about employer support, and the impact the project has had on the employers it engaged with is seen as an important achievement. By bringing awareness of the barriers faced by care leavers to countless employers (even those with whom Bright Light didn't end up working with formally), it's hoped this will have a lasting impact on those organisations and the opportunities available to care experienced young people throughout the years to come.

Other highlights have included the successful external engagement and influencing activities detailed in the desk research summary in this report, particularly the external recognition gained through the Keep Care Leavers Connected campaign and winning the Leaving Care Award at the Children & Young People Now awards in November 2021.

Staff at both the Children's Society and Catch22 agreed that there is a positive, lasting legacy of Bright Light at their respective organisations. However, they did recognise the difficulties that come with the end of the funding period for such a specialised and intensive piece of work. Try as they might, it's very hard to keep the torch burning, especially with changes to both personnel and organisational priorities. While they were disappointed not to find funding to continue the work straight away, both organisations do still hold hopes for more funding for this type of work. Their commitment to further developing Bright Light can be seen in the commissioning of an external report by research consultancy, Deepr, where the scalability of a programme of Bright Light's kind was explored in-depth. Ultimately, in the evidence we've been presented with during our evaluation, the model has clearly shown its merits, along with the important change it can make to the lives of the young care leavers it engages.

# Drive Forward Foundation: Compass

## Desk Research Summary

Drive Forward Foundation has been supporting care-experienced young people into sustainable employment for close to a decade. The Compass programme represents the charity's earliest intervention with young people in care and was aimed at engaging a cohort of children over a sustained three-year programme between years 9 and 11 of their schooling. The programme aimed to expose care-experienced children to social and educational opportunities, activities and experiences that would help them navigate the world of post-16 education, training or employment options and to plan ahead for the transition towards leaving care.

## Key activities (2021/2022)

- Four additional care-experienced young people were engaged with the Compass programme in 2021/2022, bringing the total number of young people Compass were working with to 26.
- Compass supported young people with their academic endeavours: they launched a series of virtual study socials, led by skilled mentors with expertise in Maths, Science, English, IT and Modern Languages. These sessions explored various learning techniques, ranging from offering revision tips to support and feedback on mock exams.
- Summer of Sport: 45 children from Drive Forward Foundation's Compass and Breakthrough programmes attended a team-building day trip to Brighton ahead of their summer projects together.
- West Ham United Foundation: delivered a 2-day sports leadership course which provided 8 young people with an entry-level qualification in sports coaching and team facilitation.
- Snow Camp (charity): 14 young people took to the slopes at the Snow Centre in Hemel Hempstead and gained a Snow Sports England qualification.
- 3-day residential trip to Kent: this trip focused on instilling self-confidence, fostering teamwork, building stronger relationships, and developing practical skills. The young people joined in with activities such as abseiling, kayaking, low ropes and swimming.
- Half-term projects: these offered young people a break from studying and included...
  - A trip to London's West End to see "&Juliet"
  - A walk over the O2 and an Around the World Buffet
  - Laser quest and paintballing
  - Go-Karting at Oasis Right Track Karting in Wandsworth
  - A trip to see Caryl Churchill's "A Number"
- Navigation days: these were created to equip young people with the basic skills and knowledge that would enable them to more easily manage some of the many challenges ahead of them. This included looking at:
  - Body Positivity and Self Care with The School of Sexual Education and Samaritans
  - Money Management with The Money Charity
  - Emergency First Aid with The Street Doctors
  - Music Production with The Music Klub

## Qualitative Interviews

In the third and final year of the pilot programme, the Compass team at Drive Forward Foundation (DFF) have focused on the 'Development' phase of their 'Motivation / Action / Development' three-year model. For young people in the group, this has meant a stronger focus on their futures as they navigated Year 11 and tackled their GCSEs, with the team helping them develop the skills, experiences and understanding of the next steps needed to reach their chosen pathways. This focus on preparing for the next steps continued to be delivered alongside opportunities to expand the group's horizons more broadly – through opportunities to try new activities, from theatre to skiing – and to spend more time together as a community, which has built strong bonds and support systems over the previous two years. More 1-to-1's with the Project Manager have also been offered to support young people's individual needs and planning, in addition to their well-established group work.

*"The Develop year has been to see the young people recognise what they want to do - so that move from being a teenager into young adulthood, recognising what their next educational path may be, what career choices they might want to make in future - and just offering up opportunities for them to have the whole range on offer, to see what it is they'd like to progress to." DFF staff*

This year we conducted a new group interview with a mix of frontline and delivery staff alongside senior staff at DFF, to understand the achievements and challenges of the year, as well as their overview of the funding period and legacy of the programme. We also carried out an in-person group interview with four young people who have been participating in Compass to further enrich our understanding of the programme's impact over the last three years.

## Key achievements and objectives

Over the final year of the funding period, Compass expanded opportunities to their group of young people in care, through working with their range of partners. Highlights in this programme have included a careers fair, a university taster day and an entrepreneur event, with staff able to facilitate the full range of in-person opportunities, which were often so difficult to access in the early years of the programme due to pandemic restrictions. As in previous years, staff viewed the continued strong engagement of their young people with the programme as one of its key successes and note that many have participated throughout the full three years of the programme since joining in Year 9. For young people in care, whose lives are often heavily disrupted with placement changes and personal upheaval (exacerbated through the challenges of the pandemic), Compass' retention rate has been higher than expected or hoped for. Staff feel that the young people have continued to gain from the project year on year and regardless of how busy this year has proven, as they entered Year 11 and juggled academic, social and pastoral commitments.

The team at Compass, and within DFF more widely, are very positive about having met their objectives for the programme, both this year and overall, as a pilot exploring the potential of early intervention. The success they have achieved in recruiting and retaining engagement with this cohort feels particularly striking given the pandemic context for the pilot, which created substantial periods of disruption due to school closure and social distancing requirements, and ongoing difficulties during the first two years offering the full range of enrichment and social opportunities they had envisaged. The main missed objective this year has been the provision of full work experience placements, which fell through due to complications on the part of the partners they were working with. This is

disappointing in light of the team's hopes for this pillar of delivery last year. However, in place of this, CV workshops were organised to support other aspects of the group's employment readiness:

*"It feels like we've been able to work with our young people to provide the opportunity for them to complete their CV and draw on their experiences, even though it hasn't been the work experience we'd like to have added to the CV. We've been able to work with them to find other opportunities that they've had, that we can model in a way that makes their CVs stand out." DFF staff*

Reflecting on the need to shift programme objectives over the funding period, staff note that they have often had to work a great deal harder to keep contact with young people who are already quite challenging to engage during periods of social distancing restrictions. As our previous reports have shown, the importance of community building (between both peers and staff) and the facilitation of meaningful social, educational and life skills experiences within the Compass programme, meant that the pandemic caused substantial disruptions to planned provision that were not always straightforward to pivot online (as may have been the case for more sharply defined training or mentoring programmes). There was frequently a strong need for Programme Managers to work agilely throughout lockdowns and changing restrictions in order to offer much-needed ongoing pastoral care and horizon-widening activities, via a variety of platforms and formats. The desire to then 'catch up' on some of the planned activities missed in 2020-21 due to public health restrictions also made for a particularly packed Year 3 schedule, as a number of Year 2 social and learning opportunities were pushed into the last year of the programme. In this respect, Compass has needed to be responsive to change throughout its pilot, and ready to redesign and vary its offer as circumstances required, as new opportunities emerged and as the interests and goals of the young people themselves developed.

### **Unexpected outcomes**

One of the biggest unanticipated outcomes achieved within the programme – and linked to the agility discussed above – has been the creation of a peer support community between the young people, some of whom have now been together for the full three years. While group delivery of social and educational activities and training were always planned elements of provision, a strong ongoing theme across our three years of research has been the fact that Compass has brought together young people in care in a way none of them had experienced before. Connecting with others in a similar situation to themselves, able to share their experiences without being pushed to do so, and in an environment free from stigma has been a new and highly valuable experience for the group. Without explicitly designing for it, Compass has therefore created a peer network of care-experienced young people at a powerful phase of their lives amidst a period of significant additional strain, as other sources of stability in their lives, such as school, were disrupted due to Covid. This has proven to be a significant unintended benefit and widely acknowledged impact of the programme among the staff and young people we have spoken to.

*"What I've heard a lot from the young people is that that've been able to connect with other young people in a similar situation to themselves. A lot of the young people, I guess, thought they were alone out there, and thought that they were the only child in care, but once they'd met others like themselves in similar situations, they've been able to share their experiences and connect in a way I don't think was ever an [intended] outcome. There were outcomes to educate them and let them know about being a care leaver, but never that network of support amongst themselves that they've formed as well. And they see that as really valuable, that*



*they've been able to take away friendships and a community of other young people. And one of the comments has always been, "Can we stretch this wider? Can we reach more people?"*  
DFF staff

A second unanticipated outcome, discussed in previous reports and amplified by staff this year, has been the increased awareness among the Compass group of support available for older aged care leavers. Their exposure to the office at Drive Forward Foundation – and the way the charity has always prioritised other staff members (including senior management) attending project events – means this cohort now feel even more prepared for the future and part of a support network that includes the charity's wider offer for young adults. In past interviews staff have often highlighted their keenness that any young person involved with Compass should be able to stop by the office in future years for support or signposting and see a staff member they know. The young people graduating from the pilot have spent much time planning for their next steps and working on wider independent life skills, but they are also keen to continue engaging with DFF. The team note that, while it wasn't an explicit aim of the programme, it has been a bonus impact that the cohort leaves Compass knowing they have somewhere to turn in future if they hit difficulties.

*"Due to us having some of the events in our office - or they would come and meet [Programme Manager] in our office - they see that we also work with older young people, and they get a bit of an understanding... they get in touch with the fact that you don't stop being in care ever, really. You might be 25 - and you can still benefit or maybe need support. So, in a way, I think it might be a bit of a daunting thing to realise, one day, you turn 18, and there are different expectations of you as a care leaver; but, at the same time, it might be reassuring for them to know that there is continuous support out there for them."* DFF staff

## **Challenges**

The packed schedule of Year 3 of the programme ultimately proved to be challenging as participants entered Year 11 and faced busy exam timetables. While this was not unexpected, the team remained acutely aware of the multiple demands on young people's time. On the one hand there was a wish to catch up on in-person opportunities (both social and educational) that had been missed due to the pandemic. On the other hand, following years of educational disruption and academic catch-up after the pandemic, the team were also aware of the pressure the group were under in their exam year and tried to tread cautiously. Striking the right balance between encouraging young people to attend events that might benefit them, while not detracting from their focus on GCSEs, was therefore important. This meant in some cases attendance of events or workshops was lower than hoped but reflects the tension Compass has faced throughout the programme, as they've sought to add value without creating extra demands in teenage lives that are already full of complex challenges.

*"It just has to be just GCSEs. I think that's one of the main challenges. The age that they are and the situation that they're in and being very cautious of the pressures that they're facing. Because they've got not just events that we can offer to them, but they've also got social workers, virtual schools, pushing them to make sure that they get the results that they need to get them onto the next step, into sixth form or into college. So it was very challenging, around certain times, getting attendance to be what we'd hoped it could be."* DFF staff

Staff noted that the challenges of balancing Compass activities and opportunities with academic demands sometimes led to a further tension between whether to choose the more fun, social activities or the more educationally relevant ones. In our group session, some of the young people we

interviewed discussed feeling a need to prioritise more educational activities. However, they also mentioned how beneficial attending the fun activities had been for helping them manage stress and achieve balance. This amplifies our research finding over the funding period that a substantial dimension of Compass' value and success has arisen from offering a safe and supportive space for young people in care to simply be themselves, develop their interests and enjoy their teenage years, free from stigma or the pressures presented in their personal and academic lives.

*“Usually the only thing you’re thinking about is your next exam or just revision, it’s hard to make that balanced lifestyle. And having Compass organise that for you and tell you to come along, I found really helpful.”* Compass participant

Finally, as found throughout the evaluation period, challenges continued to arise due to the ongoing instability of many young people’s personal circumstances and placements. Staff reiterated the difficulties that inevitably come up for any organisation working with young people in care and note that situations can change rapidly at this point in the children's lives. This could arise as placements change or other living and communication problems come up, or simply as school workloads intensify. A few young people in the group disconnected during Year 3 or took additional time to re-engage, leading to an ongoing process of engagement and relationship-building that many of the funded charities describe experiencing throughout their programmes. While challenging in practice, consistent efforts to engage and retain participation are part and parcel of work with young people facing disadvantage and remain particularly necessary with those in or leaving care.

In terms of the team’s monitoring and evaluation work this year, the feedback from participants confirmed that there had been too much on offer in the third year, with young people finding they needed to prioritise between 2 and 3 activities per month. Collecting feedback itself also required judgement due to participants' workloads and staff reported trying to be selective and light-touch about their monitoring requests to avoid placing too onerous a burden on the group.

### **Improvements for the future**

Considering these challenges around providing ‘too many’ activities during a GCSE year, the Compass team noted that in future they would improve the efficiency of planning to ensure the activity schedule fits with young people’s workloads and that participants don’t feel pressure to take up all opportunities on offer. They felt that a future focus on ‘combination’ activities – incorporating fun and educational provision in one session – would be particularly useful. Such events include a day where they first attended a first aid training session and then went to Go Ape afterwards, balancing practical learning against a day trip. They have typically found that while the ‘sell’ to attend is the fun activity, young people usually engage well with the educational component and view the entire experience positively as a result.

Staff reflected that there were occasions where partners offered activities or experiences that in retrospect they should have declined, in view of an already full schedule. Instead, the desire to ensure the group soaked up as many opportunities as possible before the end of the programme sometimes led to an attempt to cram everything in. In the context of our previous interviews with the team, it seems likely that this may have been partly exacerbated by the restrictions of the pandemic, when the team had to drastically modify planned activities. The urge to make up for lost time may therefore have led to some overscheduling this year. Overall, the team imagine being able to map events out more clearly in future iterations of the programme, building on their experiences, so that young people are better able to take it up a gear in the final year:

*“Sometimes it’s that feeling of, ‘We want our young people to do that’ - and that’s when we have to learn and take a step back and say, “Okay, does it actually fit in our programme? Will the young people have time?” DFF staff*

For young people themselves, many now in their third year, the main suggested improvement to the programme was simply to offer it more widely. This provides a striking endorsement of Compass’ success in reaching and building solid relationships with young people in care at a critical stage of their development. For some participants, it seems obvious that this should be a more universal offer to children in care:

*“I know there’s such a big network of kids in care and knowing that this programme can easily help out or sort them out as well. More than just us - like come on guys, we’ve got this activity, and is anything else being done for these other kids?... I think it should be nationalised a bit more.” Compass participant*

*“I would just say more people. There is enough people in our group, but... I’d say when there’s more people, you get to know more people, talk to more people.” Compass participant*

In addition, some participants suggested that laying out the activities and planning across the three years at the beginning might be beneficial in the future, so that participants understand what to expect from the start. This was expressed as a way to build on the pilot’s accomplishments, rather than as a criticism of their own experience, as the group imagined that future participants would benefit from clear introductions, pictures and testimonies of what Compass has to offer:

*“I feel like for me at first, it was getting to understand the programme and the first year’s activities... I don’t think I necessarily understood how I’m going to be in the same programme for three years - what exactly am I going to be doing for the rest? What I think would have been most helpful is that sort of introduction... Now that pilot activity’s been done, more explicitly naming the activities that you can expect. That would be helpful to someone that doesn’t know what Compass is about.” Compass participant*

*“I feel like now that we’ve gone through the whole programme and had that... I don’t know if portfolio is the right word, just all of these activities. For that next programme, I know if I was starting this I would be so assured seeing pictures of what we’ve done, seeing experiences, our quotes from today. Seeing first-hand to start off with, that would be really helpful.” Compass participant*

At a structural level, the team consider that in future the programme could conceivably run for just two years, rather than three, in order to cover Years 10 and 11. They reflect that this shorter time frame would likely achieve similar outcomes to those achieved over a full three-year cycle; particularly evident since the pandemic meant that this cohort missed much of Year 2 anyway. The experience of this pilot has therefore provided plenty of material for considering the optimal duration of a future Compass programme, its activity scheduling and how it can best support young people through the later years of their secondary schooling.

## **Impact on young people**

In previous reports, we discussed many of the outcomes and emerging impacts described by staff and participants as Years 1 and 2 of the programme progressed. Rather than reiterate all of these in detail, the list below summarises the key themes described across earlier years, before the subsequent sections provide an overview of engagement with Compass followed by the most significant impacts identified by research participants this year.

### **Key outcomes and impacts across Years 1-3**

- Exposure to new experiences and activities, widening horizons and providing essential opportunities for fun and play
- Providing a safe space to just 'be', free from stigma or professionalised intervention
- Creating spaces to exercise choice and the develop autonomy
- Improvements in confidence and communication, within the group and beyond
- Young people feeling trusted and encouraged to push beyond their comfort zone
- Young people feeling supported and seen as individuals
- Provision of trusted adult support outside social work or education, and a wider community of peers which will outlast the programme

### **Engagement**

In interviews, staff emphasised what a rare thing it has been to engage these young people so successfully for three years and they view this as a huge achievement in and of itself. Compass' ability to retain so many of its group has exceeded the team's own expectations for the programme; an accomplishment for any children in this age group but markedly more so in the context of care-experienced young people and over the course of a pandemic. Staff credit the community that has emerged between the young people themselves, as well as the hard work of the two Programme Managers who kept things running with such consistency through a project lead transition and the social and educational disruptions of the last three years. Participants highlighted how much more the programme has offered them in scope and duration than any one-off course might have:

*"[Compass] is something that we've been able to work on for years rather than 'Here's a workshop, you can just do this'. This is your support system that you can actively talk back and forth with, and have that trust built over three years at the same time."* Compass participant

Retention overall has been stronger than expected. While there have inevitably been dropouts along the way, these have been much lower than anticipated given the client group, where the transitory and unpredictable lives of young people in the care system often makes a long-term commitment harder to sustain. They have also found retention within specific events to be stronger than expected once young people are 'through the door', which suggests an endorsement of the activities on offer. For example, the 2-day skiing course offered in an earlier year of the programme presented a very unfamiliar environment and experience but one that even participants who were initially apprehensive gained much from.

New referrals have continued to fill spaces within the group, although staff caveat this observation with the recognition that the programme may not be quite so transformative for those joining in Year 3. They have nonetheless continued to take referrals into the final year while noting that newer recruits may not have had time to develop the same strength of bonds: rituals such as the Compass graduation, for example, may have been less relevant. Despite this, the team feel that even Year 3

participants have gained from the programme and as noted in previous years, the strength of the community has meant that newcomers are often able to feel comfortable quickly.

### **Significant changes**

This section highlights some of the key perceptible shifts in Year 3 of the programme, reflected upon by staff and participants alike.

#### *Prepared for the future*

Staff reflect that one of the main developments is that young people now have more fully developed ideas about their future careers. In addition to this, they see a different level of confidence and sociability emerging, with participants much more able to engage with others and be open-minded about new people and new experiences. They remark that young people also appear much better prepared in Year 3 to manage their difficult upcoming transitions and to take their future seriously. The overall feeling from the team is that participants have been able to take their learning up a gear in this final year, deepening the early impacts seen over the course of their three years in Compass. They give the example of individuals voluntarily choosing to attend the CV writing session over the trip to the London Eye when choices were necessary, showing the maturity of their decision-making.

*“I think it’s really made them think about what they do want to do after sixth form [or] college... Instead of it being very, like, “Oh, I enjoy dance,” it’s now become, “I want to go into physiotherapy” and all that... because they’ve really thought, “What’s my passion?”, and then, “How can I make this into a career?”, or “How can I progress this?” So, it’s been seeing that change of them taking their future seriously.” DFF staff*

*“What we know from our work with young care-experienced people is that, in the years between, I don’t know, 17, 18, 19, there is something in that transition that gets lost. These are, for a lot of care-experienced young people, difficult years, because, suddenly, they are adults. There are different expectations, there is a different level of support they get, and I do think the Compass cohort has been prepared very well to manage that transition.” DFF staff*

*“So, for a lot of them, their mindset is that they’re proactive, and they want to go out there and find something. They don’t want to just settle for being set up on Universal Credit. That’s not what they want.” DFF staff*

Young people also continued to highlight the way that Compass has been able to tailor provision to their own needs and curiosity, supporting them to take their interests and their future paths seriously. This reinforces earlier feedback on the way the team have been able to source additional tutoring where needed, contact professionals who could informally advise on specific career paths, or even design new sessions in response to group demand. Young people in turn have noticed and appreciated the way that staff have balanced responding to their own interests while creating a programme that works for the whole group:

*“They’d gauge our personal sense of our pathways to the future. So, I think at one point I was interested in first aid at St Johns. And this year we also got to do a first aid workshop that we got to experience ourselves. I think throughout the whole of Compass, we’ve each had something that we’ve felt is related to us personally but also helps everyone else at the same time.” Compass participant*

### *Widened horizons and new interests, beyond education and employability*

As found in previous years' research, Compass has impacted its young people by constantly seeking to expand their horizons, exposing them to activities and life opportunities that wouldn't otherwise have been available to them. Young people themselves validated these staff observations on the value of playful or challenging new experiences by talking about how many of these activities can be expensive – or noting that they wouldn't have thought about trying them before. For some, these experiences have awakened new interests that have been culturally enriching and may lead to new interests, goals or life directions. For example, one young person we spoke to talked about how going to the theatre had opened his eyes to something he found he really enjoyed.

*“I'd never really been to the theatre before, it was only from that trip I realised that it was something I actually find interesting and has actively made me want to look for more theatre and arts performances... It's something that you sort of dismiss to begin with until they're like 'Hey come along, why don't you try this out?' Until you do realise it's something you might be interested in.”* Compass participant

*“There were some opportunities that were provided which most of them aren't open to people generally. For example, ice skating - not everyone has the money to do that.”* Compass participant

*“It's by doing these sorts of activities I feel like I can seek them out myself and carry on doing them as well. And that's been really helpful just in my own self-development.”* Compass participant

With many activities, whether consciously educative sessions or those offering fun social events or experiences, participants have developed specific new skill sets, grown a new sense of independence and worked on their broader life skills. The residential trip is mentioned as a standout experience, while chances to swim, cook together, ice skate, learn bike maintenance and generally share time with one another have expanded young people's knowledge bases, practical capabilities and social horizons. While these activities may not all prove central to participants' future career paths, they have offered invaluable access to new worlds and character-building opportunities at a formative age.

### *Developing practical skills for education and work*

In this important academic year, activities focused on education and employability skills were seen by some young people as a real highlight and helped to generate increasing confidence for their future. Events which supported their study skills, plans for further education or career-related skillsets (such as CV writing) were often prioritised when choosing what to attend, showing an increasing seriousness in participants' planning. Staff supported the group to move from vague ideas to a clearer understanding of the different paths available to them and how they might move forward towards their goals. Participants in our group interview noted how relevant these practical support sessions had felt this year and how much more optimistic they felt about their next steps as a result:

*“Having that skill – CV writing has – definitely made us more confident in just applying and hope that we get something.”* Compass participant

*“I didn't have a chance to go to all of the other ones, but I made time for the university taster day and the CV writing. And I feel like the CV writing was so beneficial because now I'm able to apply for jobs and even get interviews for jobs, because Compass laid the foundation for*

*me to do that. And I also think that the university taster thing was really insightful because it gave me coverage of what uni would actually be like.”* Compass participant

### *Consolidating community and continuing to break down stigma*

The critical importance of breaking down the stigma of care experience cannot be overestimated when it comes to the impact of the Compass community. Sharing the experiences of the last three years with other young people, who know the challenges each other face has remained key to the impact of the programme on those who have taken part. Bonding among the group over these years – and creating stable connections with staff and peers – has therefore been a vital precondition to allowing other impacts to develop, in a context of mutual trust and belonging:

*“I feel like the first part of it, everyone was getting to know each other, bonding with each other, because it would be kind of awkward if we didn’t get to know each other. And then later down the line, we got to build bonds, friendships, and then we got to do solo activities, like ice-skating, bowling, all of that. And then further down, we got to do the residential, which made us closer.”* Compass participant

*“I’d never really met such a group of looked-after children until I joined Compass. So, I think that first year is really useful - being in that environment where you can just share stories of our time in care, and it being normal, other than something you just keep to yourself.”*  
Compass participant

*“I definitely built that confidence in starting interactions with others. I know, because being in care was something that I’d kept to myself - and [it] was sort of sensitive, in its own way. So, knowing everyone has their own experience, I wouldn’t mind starting a conversation about, like, ‘Tell me where you’re at?’ kind of thing.”* Compass participant

*“I feel like I’m an open person already, but since I came to Compass, I could relate with more people. Because [before] I didn’t really tell people where I’m from, ‘I’m in care,’ stuff like that. When I’m here I can be open with people - talk to people.”* Compass participant

*“Because [with other people it] felt like ‘Oh my gosh, you’re in care’ - I don’t need the sympathy. But while I’m here, everyone can relate, we can just say our stories and what’s going on.”* Compass participant

Linked to this, young people talked about feeling better able to relate to others and to offer help within the group. Having this safe space and community in which to be themselves has therefore enabled a growing confidence in their social interactions with others and given them a place in which they can open up about difficult experiences and offer support to one another.

### *Resilience, asking for help and optimism for the future*

The desire to help young people build resilience has been widely expressed within the programmes in these funding streams, made all the more acute due to the challenges of the pandemic and its ongoing impacts on the economy and the job market. Compass is no exception and Programme Managers have continued to emphasise their commitment to supporting the development of independent living skills, the ability to advocate for yourself and to be able to seek help when challenges arise. This year, participants in the group interview also discussed developing their

resilience over the last few years and shared that they now feel a greater ability not to give up when they are feeling discouraged or facing difficulties.

This is an encouraging endorsement of staff discussions over the last three years around nurturing increased autonomy and self-confidence within the group, in order to better prepare them for the tough transition out of care, in which so many care-experienced young people come adrift through no fault of their own. Compass participants shared that as part of this resilience, they have got better at asking for help and support when they need it; something programme leaders have been keen to embed both in the present and for the years ahead as the project ends. They have sought to educate the group on their rights within the care system and empower them to advocate for themselves, as well as to seek guidance when they need it.

*“I think just being able to ask for help and knowing that. Because I feel like all of us have gone through some sort of obstacles, whether educationally or personally.”* Compass participant

On a practical level, young people feel that they are already using skills they have gained at Compass. They have also been actively seeking out programmes/opportunities elsewhere since entering the programme – for example registering interest in their local youth parliament or joining Scouts. As noted above, this widening of their horizons, together with the increased self-confidence and soft skills that have come from being part of a long-term community, have already made a big difference in their lives. The group discussed feeling a sense of optimism for the future through having this forum – outside of school or social workers – to talk through their ideas and goals. In this way, they have been able to gradually piece together a sense of their interests and plans in order to imagine a trajectory beyond school:

*“I think a sense of optimism for the future. I think at first, it’s a bit daunting thinking about, ‘Once I leave school, I’m sort of out there in the real world.’ But then, being able... Even if you have a rough idea, still being able to talk through it with another person, just so it secures that idea that you’ve got a pathway, a trajectory to go on... rather than just once school’s over, that’s it.”* Compass participant

### **Catalysts for change**

When it comes to understanding the key elements that have helped bring about the changes discussed above, the core theme of being in a trusted community, free from stigma, over a long time period has been consistently highlighted in interviews throughout the funding period. This stable support environment, where participants can opt in or out from event to event, and without having to hide their background, has offered a backdrop for learning and leisure opportunities that many participants would never otherwise have accessed. It has also created a sense of acceptance and belonging that may often be absent elsewhere. In particular, the group activity framework has helped to create an open, communal environment and brought the participants together in a unique way. They note that this dynamic has been a big part of the difference Compass has made for them:

*“I can’t really imagine any other sort of network that would bring us [together] the same way that Compass did.”* Compass participant

*“I guess it’s like an openness kind of thing... I could be wrong, but [activities] in a circle like this, where... it’s very easy to say something and just share your ideas with one another,*



*rather than activities which are self-centred. Which might have its own benefits but [our] group activities are definitely something that made a big difference.” Compass participant*

The duration of the programme has also been pivotal in giving the group a long period together to build up experiences, learning and trust over several crucial years of their teens. It is not a one-off intervention but a chance to build cumulative impacts via opportunities, relationship-building and support ahead of a huge life transition. This is a longitudinal catalyst for which there are no shortcuts and young people noted the importance of growing their confidence and trust over time.

*“I feel like with each and every activity, we were just more ready to take on. Whereas when we started, to begin with there’s more of, like a hesitancy, with this activity [and] this other group of people that we don’t know.” Compass participant*

Linked to these foundations, it has been evident in our research since Year 1 that the two individual Programme Managers - and their tireless commitment to securing opportunities, creating social events and simply listening and advocating for the group has been a central asset in delivering impact. This achievement is all the more noteworthy due to the change in Manager midway through the programme. Despite this personnel shift, both individuals who held the role during the funding cycle were widely endorsed by staff and young people alike, and the transition appears to have been managed smoothly, without disruption or loss of trust within the group.

*“[second Programme Manager] really had a big job, to take over that, because [first Programme Manager] had done a great job with the young people, and they really bought into her. And I think it’s interesting for me [to think] about having the right person in the right job, and [how] we recruit the right people into the right job. Because what [second Programme Manager] has] done with the young people - to continue that journey and keep them engaged - is quite impressive” DFF staff*

## **Project legacy**

Drive Forward Foundation are not currently re-running Compass but make it clear that this decision is a funding issue and that they would be eager to run it again in future. The team’s plan is to take forward the best of their two pilots for younger age groups, Compass and Breakthrough, and combine them in a single programme. For the current year, they have started running a new project (Aspire) from September 2022, lasting for six months and which they subsequently hope to run on a 6-monthly or annual basis. This programme will primarily target 16 and 17-year old’s, with scope to include younger or older participants, and is geared towards helping them remain in education, training and employment. They remain keen to take forward the evident benefits of the group dynamic, as discovered in their Compass and Breakthrough groups, and provide social events and activities to bring participants together. The current outlook for Compass’ legacy is therefore going forward with this 6-month programme, which will deploy some of its most useful tools and insights, before reviewing the offer for younger groups in the longer term to consider duration, core activities and other delivery considerations, set against the funding outlook.

In terms of legacy for the graduating Compass cohort themselves, the team have focused on transition and sign-posting services to support the group as they take their next steps. Some young people were poised to join the 6-month programme, whilst others may join DFF’s programme focused specifically on employment and education for care-experienced young people once they turn 16. The latter services enable them to access support from employment specialists up until age 26. It has

been a strong staff priority, articulated from the outset of the programme, to impress upon its participants that Compass sits within DFF's wider offer – and that the charity remains accessible to them long-term, whenever they may need support. In this sense, they do not view the relationships formed within the group as coming to an end but adapting as the cohort navigates the next few years.

### **Influencing the landscape for care leavers**

Overall, DFF report that Local Authorities (LA) have responded well to the programme and many have remained keen to refer young people. However, as Programme Managers have noted since Year 1, communication, engagement and relationships vary from LA to LA. While some are proactive and refer often, others are incommunicative, tend to keep things in-house and don't refer directly; in these cases some young people have been referred to Compass by friends instead. Referral practices and the extent to which LAs engage meaningfully with the programme reflect how different LAs 'do business'; a postcode lottery which has been acknowledged across funded programmes. Staff reflect that while some do the statutory minimum and are unlikely to be receptive to more, others go above and beyond to secure additional enrichment and support services for their young people in care. In this sense, Compass, as for other programmes interacting with LAs in order to influence the care system, have had to work hard throughout the funding period in order to seek and retain buy-in across the boroughs they work with.

At a broad level, DFF would like their work to highlight the importance of this transition point to leaving care and share its importance more widely. They view this as significant not just for the young people they work with, but more widely to mitigate the financial burden on both LAs and the economy as whole. The charity highlights the huge public cost of both residential and foster care and the undeniably poor outcomes that result. With young people going through so many different contact points and a high turnover of staff responsible for the care sector in LAs, they emphasise the difference this kind of programme can provide in offering consistent support and community networks during a key time, that will ultimately increase the chance of more stable independent living and improved prospects once they have left care.

*"The young person has to go through so many different... 'corporate parents'. They've got so many different contacts with different people. What programmes like this allow, is for them to have one person that takes them on a journey, that supports them and will hold their hand... not forever, because we want them to be resilient and be independent. But that alone - and that contact with other young people - makes a difference to their wellbeing."* DFF staff

### **Legacy and learnings for the organisation**

The core learnings and insight DFF have gained from the Compass pilot primarily relate to their growing understanding of what is possible for young people in and leaving care, when you work with them from a younger age. It has given them first-hand experience of a belief garnered from their work with young adults: that there is a key transition point between care and leaving care which has the potential to dramatically influence life prospects. Throughout our research interviews with staff over the last three years, the significance of this transition – and the dramatic impact it can have in terms of care leaver's longitudinal prospects across finance, housing, employment and mental health, among many other outcomes – has been a regular theme. From DFF's experience working with young people at that transition point and beyond, they had a conviction that to better prepare young people to navigate that tough terrain, the groundwork needs to start early. Their experience working with the Compass cohort from age 13+ has helped the organisation evidence this case for early intervention, while providing direct impact and support for its first participants.

*“We’ve always believed that the key transition point was between care and leaving care, but now we have got first-hand experience of what that looks like. And I think, as an organisation, we’re far better placed to put things in place, in future programmes, to be able to lessen a lot of the detriment which is caused through that process.”* DFF staff

A second key impact for the wider organisation is the feeling that they have been able to build more substantive relationships with new and existing partners over this longer time period. They have found, for example, partners who have been particularly keen to support work with younger groups or to provide wider-ranging events, workshops or activities, rather than supplying one or two employment consultants (as may be the case with older age groups). It has also been noteworthy through past interviews with the team that the greater flexibility and accessibility provided by digital delivery has in some cases opened up new avenues for partners to offer insight sessions, Q&As and other content. While in-person encounters have usually been the ideal, the ability to combine different modes of delivery has been very beneficial for broadening partnership collaboration and scheduling opportunities that might not otherwise have been practical.

Internally at DFF the perception of Compass has been, and remains, very positive. Staff interviews across the funding period have included senior leadership roles (including the CEO) and project staff from other DFF programmes, as well as the two Compass Programme Managers themselves. We have therefore had the opportunity to hear different perspectives of the programme across levels of seniority and areas of work, evidencing a strong organisational investment in this programme across the wider staff team. DFF also note the strong interest in Compass they have received from trustees, as a new project generating substantial learning and experience for future directions. Staff from across the organisation have attended events and supported different trips and workshops. The team share that initially it was considered quite a separate programme from the core business of employment consultants for older care leavers, but that over the years it has become more integrated: with staff getting more involved in the early intervention side and young people from Compass beginning to attend other DFF events, as well as absorbing information around support services they might access in the future. Developing a portfolio of work with younger age groups has therefore influenced the way the organisation understands its work as a whole, regardless of how it may structure its early intervention work in future.

The experience of Compass has also impacted on the way DFF approaches experimentation and innovation, with the team feeling more able to try new things and take risks within their programmes. The experience of needing to pivot and adapt during the pandemic was one aspect of this; however, the nature of developing this community of younger people also gave Programme Managers a level of flexibility which had not been as integral to DFF’s later employment support provision. In seeking to build and retain engagement from young people across a variety of social and educational opportunities, the team felt they could be more flexible in terms of the activities they were seeking out and the way the programme developed. Offering activities which were primarily for fun and discovery and which gave the group valuable time to enjoy themselves were important throughout the programme. However, many of these experiences also offered something truly aspirational by exposing the group to worlds they had not been part of.

*“It’s the aspirational things which make the biggest difference. Because it’s easy for us to take people to events that they would naturally go to in the course of their lives, but that’s not really*

*what we're about. It's much more about opening up people's experiences so that they can see what the possibilities are."* DFF staff

Overall, DFF hope that their experience with Compass has built a platform which they will be able to develop further in the future. While the specifics of structure and funding remain in question for the time being, there has been strong and clear learning for the organisation as a whole and a strengthened conviction to early intervention work as an important pillar of their work.

*"I personally hope that it provides a platform which we can build on for the future. We never went into it with the plan of doing something, trying it, and then stepping out again. And although we knew of this key transition point, working with the young people and hearing their experiences, it's reinforced our belief that this is the really important thing to do, and we need to continue."* DFF staff

### **Final note on working with The Clothworkers' Foundation**

Across the three years of funding, the DFF team have viewed the Care Leavers initiative to be much more flexible than other funders, with oversight that is engaged but not too 'scripted'. The funding provided to run this pilot has allowed for innovation and creativity which is seen as essential when working with young people in care, while enabling the organisation to try new approaches and adapt as needed in a new area of work. Finally, and as with other funded charities, the willingness to be flexible about programme delivery and adaptation throughout the pandemic has also been appreciated and allowed them to continue putting young people first.

# Lighthouse Pedagogy Trust

## Desk Research Summary

Lighthouse Pedagogy Trust is a charitable organisation that aims to ensure that children in residential care can live in a supportive and life-changing home. Their model of delivery is built upon four key foundations: people, place, purpose, and social pedagogy. The organisation is striving to create children's homes where children can thrive and where education, wellbeing and future opportunities are central to their approach. They are also highly motivated by the potential to achieve wider social impact and improve the system for children in care.

## Summary of progress and activities (2021/2022)

- Lighthouse received their Ofsted registration certificate and opened their first home in early 2022. The first young person moved in in February, and more followed in March.
- In September 2021 Lighthouse's deputy manager started working full time and by May 2022 Lighthouse began recruitment for more home staff and interns.
- Before opening the home, Lighthouse held a three-week induction programme for the social pedagogy practitioners, including a week away to build strong team relationships.
- Over the past year Lighthouse have set up performance management systems; developed home processes; established annual objectives; started planning training and development for our social pedagogy practitioners, including the level 5 foundation degree in therapeutic work with young people. They also started working in partnership with a university to develop their own bespoke qualification for practitioners.
- Lighthouse have continued to build external relationships and share learnings, for example: delivering consultancy work to a client wanting to open a children's home (December 2021); opening events with neighbours, funders and social workers to celebrate the new home (January 2022) and by continuing their relationship-building efforts with local authorities.
- Young people were in the home for the first time over the summer holidays and Lighthouse planned many activities including a holiday to Center Parcs (August 2022).

## Qualitative Interviews

Lighthouse's position remains unique among the funded charities reviewed in this evaluation, as a start-up organisation founding a new model for children's residential care in the UK, with the potential to transform the wider care sector, in addition to meeting direct impact goals. Funding from the Clothworkers' Foundation provided the Director's salary for three years in order to build a secure foundation and develop its governance, funding and team ahead of opening the first Lighthouse children's home. The funding cycle ended at the close of 2021, with a further year of funding granted to support the transition period between hiring the frontline team and the home opening its doors.

Treehouse, the first Lighthouse children's home, opened in February 2022 following a challenging building process which incurred delays amidst the pandemic and Brexit, as well as the time required to meet demanding milestones such as Ofsted certification. Much of the dedicated organisational capacity-building supported by the Clothworkers' Foundation therefore came to a culmination as the building was completed, a governance framework formalised, Ofsted registration achieved and frontline practitioners recruited, inducted and trained. Ongoing profile-raising, research dissemination and advocacy across the wider care sector has continued to take place at an impressive scale given

the early stage of the home itself, with staff noting that demand for advice often outstrips current capacity. The substantive work of care has therefore finally begun, with its attendant successes and challenges, and project committee stakeholders interviewed across the last three years have continued to express high confidence in the learning and decision-making made by the Director and team as they navigate innovation within this tough sector.

In evaluating Year 3 and beyond for this report, we carried out three new interviews across staff and stakeholders, in addition to reviewing written progress reports. Most significantly, we were able to conduct our first interview with a Social Pedagogy Practitioner on the frontline team, as well as to reflect with expert opinion from the project committee on the experiences since opening and providing direct care. Since direct contact with young people currently within the home is not appropriate – and all impact in this field is necessarily longitudinal – our discussions focused on key achievements, early challenges and staff reflections on the anecdotal engagement and short-term impacts seen over the course of 2022. This allowed us to draw the evaluation process to a close with an emerging picture of a working home now putting its innovative care model into practice after three years of vital start-up funding within the Care Leavers' portfolio.

### **Key achievements**

Lighthouse seeks to bring evidence-based learning to the currently dire outcomes for children in care in the UK. While the team have already made strong inroads into disseminating their research and model, Treehouse offers the first test case for their approach, which the team are ready to evaluate and improve on an ongoing basis. Key achievements in this final period of funding include:

#### **Drawing a line under the building project, Ofsted registration and other preparatory processes**

Children's care is a heavily regulated sector and every step of the process has been an intensive learning curve requiring adaptation and agility, as past reports have shown. Drawing a line under this start-up period has therefore represented a key achievement this year. The construction of the first home encountered early delays due to the nexus of Covid-19 and Brexit impacts, which in turn had financial impacts in terms of the timelines around opening the home and starting to receive Local Authority (LA) income. Being able to see the building completed and transformed into a home, characterised by thoughtful design and an intentional use of space, has been a moving experience for staff, particularly given the significance of Place within Lighthouse's model. Staff note the scale of their ambition in this project, which saw them working to a very high spec for the space (the architect of the building went on to become a RIBA Rising Star in 2021) in uniquely demanding circumstances and the home continues to draw positive feedback from all who visit - from young people themselves to regulators.

Formalising governance structures was another crucial task, now accomplished, as Lighthouse scaled up. It became incorporated as a charity and registered with CIO status, with Catch22 holding legal responsibility and continuing to offer operational and strategic support. In addition to the wide range of systems, policies and procedures, including the Statement of Purpose, which needed to be set up for the home over the last few years, registration with Ofsted represented one of the most recently achieved milestones. It has been widely described as a demanding and time-consuming process, while the first inspection is expected soon. The journey Lighthouse has made over the funding cycle has been extensive and well-executed, with hard-won learning along the way. One stakeholder notes that ideally, the path it has taken will not need to be precisely replicated as a blueprint for all their future homes, nor for others seeking to adopt the model. The crucial practical knowledge and insight the charity has accrued along the way (from understanding building classifications to navigating

Ofsted certification), will offer a valuable steer for their future homes, as well as their consultancy offer to others starting out in this space. In this way, their experience blazing a trail in residential care innovation should help to inform a slightly smoother path for future efforts.

### **Training and inducting the new children's home team**

The recruitment of the core team was a significant success over the funding period and was carried out in Spring 2021 to high satisfaction from all we have spoken to. The interview process had incorporated online, phone and in-person stages, received great feedback from many applicants and a strong response from high calibre candidates (around 200 early application and 120 complete submissions). The team also noted last year that around 85% of their roles have been filled by graduates, compared with 10% in the care sector generally. Further feedback received in our interview with the frontline team itself this year confirmed the rigour of the recruitment process, as well as the immediacy of the appeal once the in-person assessments were held:

*"I got [to the full day assessment] and within 10 minutes, I was like, "These are the people that I want to work with" ... There is an energy about how to work with young people that I think only comes across in person. That felt really dynamic and quite different." Social Pedagogy (SP) Practitioner*

With all team members on board by November 2021, the last year saw a rigorous induction and training programme get underway. The team now number fourteen staff in all - including eleven Social Pedagogy Practitioners, a Manager, a Deputy Manager, and an Office Manager. Complex rotas are in play, with two staff members staying overnight on any given day, and dayshifts running alongside. Stability and consistency of care is at the core of all rotas, timed to ensure day-to-day continuity so that young people know what to expect. The training process involved a three-week residential and the team have regular meetings to improve their communications, consolidate their organisational values and debrief/troubleshoot on an ongoing basis. As a further key achievement, a high retention rate is already evident as staff come up to the end of their first year with almost all opting to stay on.

### **Opening Treehouse – the first Lighthouse children's home**

The core achievement of the year, and of the funding cycle overall, was the opening of Treehouse to its first resident in February 2022. At the time of research, the home in Sutton was home to two children on long-term placements, with another five who have passed through on shorter-term placements. This has seen Lighthouse moved into a new phase of growth, as it puts the financial and social pedagogy models at the heart of its mission into practice. Staff note that further to this, the overall journey of settling its first children in, and creating a stable placement has been the key task of the year; the project of turning a house into a home and creating a family life, as frontline staff put it. These experiences are discussed further below.

### **Continuing to work on impact frameworks, funding and influencing work**

While getting the home successfully up and running has been the team's first priority this year, the core team have continued to work on the development of the model, particularly via ongoing work on its impact frameworks, as Theories of Change for both Lighthouse's homes and its advocacy are translated into new frameworks for measurement. Fundraising bids have also continued, as well as a venture into donor funding such as a recent London to Brighton bike ride. The sharing of research and advice with a range of stakeholders and partners also continued as the charity's experience grows,

and they regularly feed into wider discussions and forums within the Care Sector, discussed further below.

### **Ongoing learning and adaptation**

Staff note that the objectives have always remained constant for Lighthouse and work is structured across themes (e.g., for Home, Staff etc.) using OKR's, to keep their ambitions focused and measurable. However, they have remained highly adaptable to circumstance throughout their early years, building flexibility and resilience into their approach and accommodating 'disaster planning' wherever necessary, for example throughout the pandemic. Reflecting on the period now, for example, staff acknowledge a wide range of learnings for the next home purchase: ensuring they are even more proactive from the start when seeking the next site, keeping building classification factors top of mind, and strengthening their networks and partnerships for support in finding the right property.

Across our three years of interviews, the team have described an organisational focus around reflecting on their experiences and learning in real time, before adapting and reiterating. They continue to balance carrying out what they have set out to do and staying true to mission, while learning on the job, adjusting to new realities, and ensuring that they are growing and running in a sustainable way. In this respect, while Lighthouse has had to deal with many curveballs throughout the funding period, most of the potentially 'unexpected' challenges were already factored into an overall process of setting out to do something different and exploratory within an established space: *"We always used to say, once it opens that's when the real work starts. Which doesn't really feel like that when you've been involved in a project for seven years! But I think that's very true."* Lighthouse stakeholder

### **Key challenges**

#### **A rapidly growing team**

With a team that has almost tripled within the last year, staff note the large challenge around hitting the ground running with new staff, who are taking a new pedagogical approach, within a new children's home. Induction and training have been a great success but the scale of the task as the first home opened meant that Lighthouse's work this year has consisted of many moving parts, with colleagues still getting to know one another and developing their working culture. Systems and processes around teamwork and logistics are still being built, while organisational mission and values are continuing to be defined and consolidated to ensure the whole team are invested in the same vision. This work is taking place within the frontline team running the home, as well as between the core and frontline teams as the organisation readjusts to a dramatic increase in size.

Diversity of background and experience within the frontline team is felt to be a key asset, spanning wide-ranging work and educational backgrounds and skillsets. However, staff also note the ongoing communications work it requires across all dimensions of care and logistics as the team learns to work together as a whole and develop its daily practice: *"The team building focus around communication [was important] and around us having to bond not just as colleagues but as people... Rotas are complicated [and] you are essentially sometimes trying to co-parent with people that you might not have seen for five or six days and having to have consistent boundaries for children. The children need to really hear one voice from a big team. Yeah, it's a challenging environment."* SP Practitioner



Core and frontline staff members note that what holds together the demands and complexities of developing the model in practice, are genuinely shared values and buy-in across the team, with a firm commitment to stable care for the young people at its heart. At the time of research, staff had recently attended an away day, reviewing Lighthouse's values, and consolidating their shared mission: *"The vision remains really clear and it's quite basic at the core of it, I think - providing children with this unwavering foundation of love and support."*

### **Innovating within a flawed system**

The second challenging theme of the year is the tension that while Lighthouse seeks to take a radically different approach to residential care, it must nevertheless work within the existing, flawed system which continues to face all the difficulties Lighthouse's research has identified: from quality staff support and retention, to a revolving door of short-term placements, to overstretched services on a permanent crisis management footing. As the home opened, the organisation has been learning how to work within the wider system without compromising its own vision for care. This can be as simple as maintaining the importance of place within the home, so that Lighthouse continues to meet the necessary regulations while avoiding the alienating institutional feel so common within residential care. Given the weight of regulation in the sector and the practicalities of running a large household this can be difficult and practitioners remark on the need to push back against regulators at times, to find ways to minimise the institutional characteristics of a typical children's home; be that the number of fire alarms or how to avoid juggling multiple sets of keys.

However, the most critical example of this tension between Lighthouse's approach and the wider sector has been in confronting the referral system for new residents. As discussed further below, the home emphasises child-centred care from referral onwards, including rigorous research and preparation for any young person coming to live there, informed by the young person's needs, circumstances, their own motivation to move, and the fit with current residents and staff to ensure the right level of care can be provided, as an ideally long-term placement. This is often at odds with a system which staff observe to be operating in constant crisis mode, where a rapid turnover of emergency or respite care dominates referrals for residential placements, and inaccurate information abounds.

One stakeholder acknowledges that with two children in place at the time of research, in addition to several shorter-term placements who have passed through, the home is currently under-capacity compared with what they might have hoped. However, they note that getting the referral process right has been a large job, to ensure the right fit for new residents as well as the sustainability of the home as a place for stable, longer-term care rather than another pitstop in a cycle of short-term interventions. Stakeholders always expected these readjustments and negotiations but remark that the extent to which they would need to manage the referrals process in terms of local authority transparency and processes has still come as a shock: *"There have been quite a lot of challenges in getting accurate referrals. How do you balance what is best for the young people but also the sustainability of the home in general? I think that is something being negotiated and what that's looked like is kind of slowing down the process of filling the spots."* Lighthouse stakeholder

Slowing things down to ensure accurate information and understanding of a child, as well as moving at the child's own preferred speed in terms of settlement preparation, means Lighthouse will necessarily find itself unable to take on some referred placements if it is not to compromise its mission and get sucked into the existing dynamics of the sector. While the daily challenges of providing care

for high-need young people are in line with staff expectations, how they protect their care model within a web of wider stakeholders, regulations and systems requires ongoing realignment and flexibility.

*"There's a kind of balance which I think is still constantly being negotiated. Which is between how closely we align to do exactly what we set out to do and trying to get things, quote, unquote, perfect. (Which isn't possible). Then on the other hand making sure things run in a kind of sustainable way... in a feasible way going forward."* Lighthouse stakeholder

## **Opening and running Treehouse: growing experience and emerging impact**

### **Welcoming the first residents**

Opening the home, welcoming the first child and developing a new 'family' life are widely described in interviews as the critical processes of the year. Lighthouse's approach values connection and relationships first and foremost and seeks substantial preparation for a child's transition to the home. Staff describe a 360 approach to new referrals, where they meet other adults and organisations involved in a child's current care to understand the young person's life as fully as possible. They also manage the settling process carefully, meeting a young person in their current placement, encouraging visits to the home for dinner, and building up to spending the night or weekend. Agency and engagement are key, with the best fit considered to be a situation where the team have extensive information about needs and background and the child themselves wants to be there.

*"We want to really ensure that all of the checks and balances [happen] - and I don't mean that in terms of paperwork bureaucracy but from really reaching out to that child's broadest network, their previous carers, their schools, other adults that know them, youth workers... Who are all of the people that can give us the best set of information about that child [so] we are equipped as to whether we can meet their needs or not? Because what we don't want to do is create further instability by them moving in and then moving on."* SP Practitioner

On moving in, a favourite meal will be prepared on the first night and practitioners will begin to building a young person's plan, across education, tutoring, social life and family relationships. Staff emphasise the importance of coming together to build relationships and provide as much stability and continuity of care as possible. An expert stakeholder notes that the settlement process into the home should never be expected to be easy – and if it is going as hoped, it shouldn't look smooth, since testing boundaries is a crucial part of getting comfortable for young people coming with backgrounds of considerable complexity and trauma.

*"It's not going to be easy. And if it goes well, it shouldn't look seamless because these are young people who might have lived in many different places and it would be strange for a young person to arrive, settle in, and behave totally perfectly all the time. If I was observing that I would feel a little bit concerned. I guess it would lead me to wonder if that young person was comfortable enough in that space. Because often what you see is, once a young person is comfortable, then they feel, well I can show my distress and I can show my anger and I can let out some of the difficult things which have happened."* Lighthouse stakeholder

Practitioners note that for young people it is a fundamentally strange situation to have a large, revolving care team within your home, however carefully planned. Yet they emphasise that rotas have been designed to ensure, for example, that the same person who does school drop-off in the morning is present for pick-up that afternoon, and that the staff there at bedtime are those greeting you in the

morning. The work of connecting and providing consistency are challenging but the new team continue to learn and meet regularly to debrief and improve their day-to-day routines and practices.

The process is widely described as one of making the house into a home, developing routines and rituals, and essentially creating a family from a large, varied staff team and the young residents:

*"We've spent loads of time making a house, but a house turning into a home will only happen with the children in it and they're the ones that breathe life into it... All those moments of warmth and laughter and love, of 'Oh actually, there are real relationships being built here' and a lot of it kind of mundane family life things, like the weekly shopping and not having the right cable for the TV. And yes, we've had wonderful days out and holidays and all these bigger things - but for me, a lot of the joy and success is in getting people around the kitchen table and children helping, having helped cook the meal and setting the table and seeing the relationships [develop]." SP Practitioner*

### **Coming together as a frontline team**

The team have continued to build their group dynamics through initial training and throughout their first year in post, while getting to know one other better. Staff settlement is going well, interviewees note, and there is an ongoing learning curve of developing their teamwork, collaborating and negotiating differences in experience and outlook. Practitioners note that what helps is a clear and shared vision; that despite their diversity of experience, opinions and communication styles, when it comes to support for young people in the home, everyone meets on the same page and offers something different.

*"The recruitment process [has] created the most diverse team I've ever worked in. You would never come across this group of people in any other context. There is no pub that I could sit in; there is no train carriage that I would be on where the 12 of us that work in this house would be sat together because our lives just would not cross... What it means is that [for] the children coming into this home, hopefully there'll be someone within the team where they can meet at that point." SP Practitioner*

A lot of active thought about group formation and development was evident within our interviews, from stakeholders to senior core staff to frontline practitioners. Care staff also create time to ensure progress is being reviewed at a substantive (not just procedural) level, in terms of how relationships throughout the home are working. It is viewed as a strong endorsement of this year's work that almost all staff opted to stay on for another year:

*"I've been pleasantly surprised by the retention. Because there's one thing to have hope that this is what we want in terms of retention. But I did not think that we would achieve that within our first year. I was really impressed by that." Lighthouse stakeholder*

### **The referral process: theory meets practice**

As noted above, getting to grips with the referral system has constituted one of the biggest learning curves of the year and it has been a key challenge to refine this process in line with Lighthouse's organisational values, while adjusting to the care system it operates within. Staff note that for their longer-term residents, settlement has been going as they would hope, while other young people have come on shorter-term placements, particularly where their circumstances have not been well represented in the referral or the fit has not been right in other ways. While responsibility for the

accuracy of referrals lies with LAs themselves (often due to the inevitable pressures and constraints of the system), staff note that they are getting better at managing the process, holding the line and securing the information required to prepare for young people effectively.

Referrals are only accepted from LAs themselves and staff note there are 15 LAs in the framework. Each can work quite differently but are generally all operating via emergency responses to short-term high need. There are substantial risk assessments required for all incoming candidates yet frontline staff note that a high quantity of inaccurate (or missing) information comes through when referrals are made. This was not an unforeseen issue, as the team are acutely aware of both the high levels of need among young people within the residential care system and the degree of strain on the system as a whole, but it has still posed a real obstacle during the first year:

*“Managing referrals of new young people to the home has been somewhat unexpected. Not in terms of the young people themselves and what they might be bringing. But in terms of local authority transparency. There might have been some suspicion of how that might be, but the reality is sometimes a bit of a shock, as to how inaccurate referrals might be.”* Lighthouse stakeholder

The team note that social services remain overstretched and locked into cycles of crisis management, requiring urgent responses from providers, often to provide respite care at immediate notice and with short-term turnarounds. This results in an LA being motivated to ‘sell’ the referral, as interviewees put it, regardless of a longer-term fit. Yet for Lighthouse, committed to working in a sustainable, child-centred way, ensuring substantial knowledge, checks and balances are in place is essential for establishing stable placements.

*“[The team] go talk to the previous carers, talk to the teachers, get a bit of a 360 view on this young person. Because the local authority is motivated to sell a young person because they need a place for them, even if it’s temporary in their eyes, [and] that’s not the same motivation a carer or a teacher would have.”* Lighthouse stakeholder

Practitioners therefore describe a learning curve around the tension of having capacity for new referrals – and the desire to provide a safe place – while maintaining their commitment to child-centred processes and outreach, rather than becoming part of a revolving door of professional interventions.

*“A lot of children are referred at the point of emergency. Their previous placement is possibly already broken down, they’re trying to find respite care, but these are not easy children to find respite care for. So a lot of the calls and referrals we get are like, ‘It’s 12 o’clock, can you take this child by six?’ And we are not short-term residential placement [but] social services exist in this complete cycle of crisis management of ‘We’ve got children who are sat in social services buildings with the duty teams, can you take them?’ We are on a learning process with this of how do you not have emotions override that? You can hear about children in really distressing circumstances and just think ‘We need to take them.’ [But] are we going to create further damage by saying, “Yeah, 100% come in”? Some of the transitions that worked best are when we’re able to do outreach, we’re able to go meet them in their communities. They can see whether it’s right for them... It’s working at the child’s pace of like, ‘Maybe you can come around tomorrow night for a meal and then maybe you want to leave a bag of your stuff here - or maybe you don’t. Maybe you want to go away and think about it a bit more. But*

*there's different time scales we're working on versus where social services are at." SP Practitioner*

Stakeholders note that residential care invariably skews towards higher need young people, since those with low to moderate needs are likelier to be placed in family settings (foster or kinship care) as prioritised by government policy. They are also likelier to be younger, since at 16+ there may be wider housing options available to them. This means that any young people placed at Lighthouse are likely to be moderate-high need, but the team view it as less likely that they will be suited to those with the highest or most acute needs, at least in the short-medium term. For now, as the team consolidates its foundations and continues to build staff experience, the emphasis is on growing the home sustainably and in-keeping with its values, while making referral decisions informed by accurate background information, existing staff skillsets and the welfare of current residents.

### **Green shoots: early indicators of impact**

Practitioners describe the daily challenges experienced within the home, including all the behavioural issues to be expected in residential care. Staff note that the complex external circumstances and trauma experienced by so many young people arriving into new care placements mean violence and property damage can be commonplace and they acknowledge that not all needs can be dealt with inside the home. With external services as overstretched as ever and young people passing through frequent placements, Lighthouse's provision is a longitudinal process, however committed its team.

*"[One] girl came to us and she'd been in 14 other placements this year. [Whatever] environment you are building, that is going to take a long process to unpick some of the trauma of that." SP Practitioner*

*"The [behavioural] challenges are huge [and] a reflection that I have is that whilst we can invest everything in trying to create a more therapeutic environment and trying to really sort of be very child-centred in our approach, some of the children coming to us require incredibly intensive therapy that isn't going to be provided in this home. It's going to be provided from external services that – as we know – are overstretched, under capacity, have got huge waiting lists." SP Practitioner*

When it comes to considering impact and any early signs from Lighthouse's first months of operation, observations are necessarily anecdotal and indicative. Expert stakeholders note that work on monitoring, evaluating and reporting within the home is still in design as Lighthouse develops a new set of frameworks to ensure it captures not just what diverse stakeholders need (from Ofsted and funders to schools and social workers) but meaningful qualitative measures that speak to its own Theories of Change and residents' holistic wellbeing. Conventional, often quantitative, metrics around attendance, attainment and interventions struggle to capture the kind of change Lighthouse hopes to make and its measurement tools must be rethought so that they can monitor impact more appropriately. One practitioner notes the importance of something as apparently simple as tailoring form layouts, to allow for different narratives about care and the possibility of tracking young people's daily, incremental achievements. Staff and project committee members are therefore working together on new frameworks to make sense of these kind of outcomes, while keeping the reporting regime light-touch for residents:

*"We have to record just as much as all other children's home, but how do we record that in a different way? How do we reflect on all the positives of their day rather than a million times*

*you've been called to come. We don't have the answers to a lot of these things but I believe this is a home that can start to explore that."* SP Practitioner

*"How do you, in a meaningful way understand, methods of change and impact? What are people's experiences? What meaning do they make of the home? What meaning does it have in their lives? And that's not something which is part of traditional [measurement] systems... It's going to be ideally like a living process. There's not a stagnant framework."* Lighthouse stakeholder

Evaluation challenges aside, staff perceive signs of positive emerging impact in young people at Lighthouse, even for those in short-term placements. They flag the depth of training which has gone into creating routines and rituals and ensuring consistency in their collective approach and boundaries; difficult in any nuclear family, practitioners note, let alone care teams of fourteen. Strong value is placed on creating a shared home life, where young people themselves contribute from the start (for example with meal planning and preparation), in a way that has helped create connections very early on: *"We're a big team of foodies, so we put a lot of emphasis on our meals and there being a time to bring people together in a day... I think all of those have been really important in the children forming relationships"* SP Practitioner

The impact of the building itself, meanwhile, is remarked upon widely and allows for perceptions of residential care to shift: *"Every person who comes into this home, their opinion of a 'children's home' shift on arrival. We have regulators who come in every month and say, 'I've never been in a home like this before'. And children that are going, 'I don't want to live in a children's home - will you lock my door and walk me in my room?' You go, 'No, this is actually a really beautiful home that we want you to feel like this is a space to be in."* SP Practitioner

Staff find everyday satisfactions in their work as they observe incremental progress in young people, in terms of their learning and emotional wellbeing. They value both seeing and reflecting small steps back to the children, to reinforce accomplishments and emotional shifts that would often go unnoticed in care reporting: *"Rather than being what's gone wrong and what incidents occurred and did they attend school- it's holistic learning, it's well-being and happiness."*

*"Sometimes they're small achievements. It's like, '[You] looked at the clock and told me the time today. That's huge, you couldn't tell time last week'. That's because we've been chipping away at breakfast everyday... and how do you capture those moments of learning? It's not necessarily about 'Oh, he attended a full school day and did all his Maths and English.' There's so many wins."* SP Practitioner

The most notable emerging impact measure so far for the practitioner we spoke to is when young people talk about their future in the home or project ongoing relationships with the staff into their future lives. They imagine a time when they might be living in the self-contained top floor flat at Lighthouse, prepared as a semi-independent space for 16-17 years old, or they talk about next year's summer holidays. In these ordinary conversations, staff get a sense of the stability and security the home has given children with little experience of them and, even in this short time, that residents are already beginning to trust in a future with the team.

*"One of the things that I love the most is when children talk about and envisage their futures here. Whether that's just projecting forward to Christmas or to their birthday or 'Well when I*

*move up to the flat'. Children might be hesitant to at first unpack their belongings because they don't know when they're going to move on. [But then] they talk about wanting to go to university, but where will they keep their stuff? Then we say, "Well we can keep your stuff here." It's a kind of like intangible impact at this stage, because we are still so new in this journey. But I think children vocalising a future for themselves in this home is like a sense of the impact that stability in those relationships are having." SP Practitioner*

In all the emerging impacts cited, staff consider relationship-building to be key. The practitioner discussed one child who stayed for a short-term placement, with Lighthouse just one stop among many. They reflected that even in these brief stays, the example of their work may mean this young person knows care can look different. As an example, the fact that Lighthouse don't use physical restraint marks it out as quite different within residential care. For young people growing up institutionalised within the sector, the practitioner notes, those presenting challenging behaviours may arrive with huge, even daily, past 'restraint' records. While the difference at Lighthouse could potentially be confusing for those who then move on, their hope is that the experience of being met with love and respect remains valuable.

*"Where [it's] difficult, that classic thing is people don't remember what you said - they remember how you made them feel. I do think that for a child who will maybe pass through this home... I hope [they] will remember how we've made [them] feel. We're putting together this scrapbook of [one former resident's] time at the home and it is just filled with pictures of [them] beaming and laughing and being child-like really, in a world that is making [them] grow up far beyond here". SP Practitioner*

*"It's all a relationship-based way of working. Those relationships do really take time to grow and I think that is one of the joys that I hadn't really anticipated in residential care... I mean some of the children that moved to our home have left already, [it has] not been incredibly long-term placements for them. But the kind of relationships that are being built within that time, they're often deep." SP Practitioner*

## **Influence and impact on the wider care sector**

While the team have primarily focused on the opening and running of the first home this year, significant work continued across knowledge-sharing and consultancy. Stakeholders note that Lighthouse has achieved far more in terms of its influencing reach over the funding period than they could have hoped for, particularly before the home itself was up and running. They observe that the extent of the systemic issues in the sector perhaps exceeded their expectations, and the challenges of innovation are substantial; from assembling the teams and multiple expertise needed and learning how to navigate the regulatory framework, through to how you can work against the grain to secure the appropriate funding, rather than pursuing a big private investor. While many private investors or homes built within a for-profit model can be excellent, Lighthouse note, the profit motive nonetheless implies very different priorities and dynamics when trying to create something innovative.

The team feel a real momentum has grown over the years, as they now have the concrete experience to offer to the wider care sector, from innovative idea through to fully operational. Lighthouse receives more requests now for advice and partnerships than they have capacity to take on, with multiple offers for new homes and many requests for advice from others setting up new homes. As work at Treehouse is consolidated, the team look forward to having increased capacity and experience to take on more influencing work:

*"I do think it has built momentum and it will be exciting to get to a stage when we've sorted our house first and then have a bit more capacity to share that. It's almost like cycles of 'try, and then share and then try and then share'. And I think we're in a bit of a 'try' phase. It will be great to go into a bit [more] of a sharing phase once the teams have any breathing space."*  
Lighthouse stakeholder

Over the funding period, staff have spoken regularly with the Department for Education and liaised with the Children's Commissioner, the Chief Social Worker and local authorities nationwide. They typically find LAs full of curiosity and eagerness to learn, which they link in part to the DfE funding available to develop new homes. There is particular interest in the detail and practicalities of how Lighthouse runs its home, across organisational structure, rotas, keeping young people engaged, and approaches to staff recruitment and retention. The team have contributed to the Care Review, as well as working with the Catch22-led National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum and attending Children's Home Networking Association meetings. Wider work raising Lighthouse's profile has also continued apace with the Director and Head of Communications regularly attending and speaking at events, where they discuss the model and share insight, as well as the Director's participation in BBC Radio discussions. They note that early on they were often speaking to known networks, whilst their reach has since grown and widened far beyond their original audiences as their brand has grown.

Growing experience in the day-to-day practicalities of running the home has deepened Lighthouse's credibility in their advisory work, contributing to a now in-depth understanding of the purchasing process, governance work, the financial model, certification processes, as well as the recruitment and training necessary for their approach. This has enabled them to share their hands-on learning alongside their earlier research into social pedagogy: *"We've gone from being an organisation with an idea to... actually having knowledge of those practical things that need to take place in order for things to be implemented"* (Lighthouse stakeholder). They have also been transparent about their journey from the start, with a commitment to sharing knowledge in real time. The team notes a series of big jumping off points in their development, e.g. securing early funding in order to spend time developing the project and, later, securing capital for the building purchase itself. One stakeholder notes that ideally much of their learning won't need to be replicated exactly and view sharing their knowledge as a way to empower faster and smoother innovation for others following in their footsteps – whether through encouraging more LAs to invest or inspiring existing property owners to convert what they already have – *"I'm hoping that it's the start of the process of innovation rather than 'this is the end model of how you should do it'"*.

The team note that Lighthouse's innovation insights are not just for organisations starting from scratch or LAs seeking guidance. They feel that there is extensive learning for existing homes too, in how things may be approached differently, from negotiating with regulators about fire alarm placement to how best to record their monitoring each day, or how you might set about capturing more accurate information at referral stage and preparing for a young person's needs. *"Lighthouse have always been really transparent with what has been learnt on that journey...I think it's really refreshing to be part of a team where there's not kind of storing of that information"* (Lighthouse stakeholder). The team are ambitious to go further and faster in their contribution to wider sector change but continue to show a keen sense of the balance involved in building stable foundations, centering the needs of the young people in their care and ensuring the sustainability of the model, in order to really demonstrate best practice before extending their influence further.



As just one anecdotal example of the inspiration Lighthouse has been able to offer, one stakeholder recalls feedback from a residential care leaver now helping to set up a charity in the sector, for whom their example was energising their own work and indicative of word-of-mouth reach: *"They were saying, 'Oh have you heard of this, this home Lighthouse? They're really changing the way that people talk about residential care and like I feel like they're speaking to young people like me.'* This young person always found living in a family-like setting really didn't suit them. They found it really uncomfortable but then the residential care option was like an extreme situation... This young person was like, *'There wasn't anything out there for me, where people don't understand that you can have family like that. And you can have, like, a community.'* You don't have to join someone else's existing nuclear family. And I thought it was amazing. Something getting out there to the extent that young people now feel differently about their experience and how that's been presented." Lighthouse stakeholder

### **Legacy and impact of Clothworkers' funding**

The Clothworkers' Foundation funding has unreservedly succeeded in supporting crucial early capacity-building at Lighthouse, where supporting the Founder/Director's salary has enabled him to lead the organisation from a vision to a fully operational reality. Stakeholders on the project committee report that it simply wouldn't have been possible to build the existing team or get to this point of delivery without the Clothworkers' investment. They note that it was especially crucial for them starting out, where they acknowledge the challenge and leap of faith for a funder to buy into an idea and to trust a small group to deliver: *"It's so important, particularly at that stage where it's buying into an idea and belief in a group of people to kind of execute that. And to do it to a high standard. That's really appreciated."* They realise that this is a difficult commitment to secure as a start-up, unless founders wish to partner with for-profit companies, and view this funding as having been critical to supporting Lighthouse to stay true to its mission and values.

*"There isn't a very straightforward route to starting up immediately in a financially sustainable way, independently, unless you partner with a for profit organisation. And so, I think working with funders like Clothworkers' Foundation has allowed us to stay true to the mission of what we're trying to do and not compromise on the preparation for that. And make sure everything is done to a high level. Rather than having to negotiate how to turn a profit for a private company, which would create a real challenge to the integrity of the project."* Lighthouse stakeholder

In terms of the day-to-day management of the funding, there has been a strong appreciation of both the flexibility and trust in the relationship which the Clothworkers' Foundation have provided. They have been perceived as respectful of the team's capabilities and judgement in trusting the Director and growing core team to make the right decisions, without any temptation to micromanage. They have similarly found the evaluation and reporting process useful in providing reflective opportunities for the group across different levels and job roles, while also allowing them plenty of space to take things forward without onerous reporting and feedback cycles.

Among Lighthouse's many key milestones over the course of the funding cycle are:

- Growth from a two-person team to almost 20 staff recruited and trained in office and frontline roles

- Recruitment, induction and training of a 14-strong frontline team in social pedagogy approaches, in line with Lighthouse's ambitions for high-quality, high-support and high-retention staffing
- A building purchased, designed, and completed to a high specification as a new model for children's homes
- A successful fundraising record including capital for the purchase of the first home
- Successful profile-raising and research dissemination, including input into the Care Review, discussion with government departments and LAs, media work and consultancy across other homes projects
- The set up and development of a stable governance framework under the incubation of Catch22, including setting up CIO status and registration of the first care home with Ofsted
- The opening of the first home, Treehouse, and welcoming of its first residents in 2022

### Next steps for Lighthouse

The team's primary concern remains to develop the home, providing the level of care and connection at the heart of their mission, growing and consolidating the experience of the staff, and honing Lighthouse's navigation of the wider care system when it comes to referral processes and impact frameworks. Practitioners' goals centre around the love and support they will continue to provide each day: *"We are still right in the infancy-inception stage of the home [but] my hope is just that children that come into this home continue to be met with that love, continue to be able to envisage futures for themselves here [and] actually making the present kind of joyful and playful and imaginative as possible."* They also cite specific social priorities around the kind of networks and community they hope to build within and around the home, such as creating wider connections with the neighbourhood as well as adults already in their young people's lives, to create real local community. *"Children in residential care have got this web of professionals around them. Every time something goes wrong you just think, "Oh, I'll just throw another professional in there." For me, some of that joy comes in [with] how do we build relationships with our neighbours down the street? So that people can knock on the door and children can host and feel proud of the home that they're in and have their friends come around."*

For stakeholders, there are many different directions in which Lighthouse may go in terms of how its expertise develops as capacity grows. However, they view the priorities of the next year or two as working to ensure they get the foundations right at Treehouse in terms of referrals, care provision, staff support and learning/evaluation frameworks, before identifying future growth areas in terms of staff skillsets. Beyond this, they are looking ahead to identifying the second home and are currently looking for social investors as Lighthouse's profile and credentials grow in tandem with its practical experience. They look forward to continuing to share knowledge from this first phase of development and beyond.

# Become: Personal Advisor Programme

As explained in the Introduction section of this report, Become is on a slightly different funding timeline to the other three projects in the Care Leavers portfolio. We will be catching up with staff, key stakeholders and programme participants in greater depth in Spring 2023 and will update this report accordingly.

The project at Become which the Clothworkers' Foundation is funding has significant potential to bring about change in the sector, via a five-year pilot to develop a training programme for Personal Advisers who work with young people leaving the care system. The funding was awarded at the start of 2020 but the programme experienced delays in its first year due to Covid-19 and the influx in demand for Become's existing services, which led to some of the Year 1 funding for this project being repurposed to meet that need. However, once the project was up and running, positive early progress was made, and we have since carried out two rounds of interviews with staff and key stakeholders working on the project.

We have agreed with the team at Become that the Year 3 interviews will be carried out in early 2023, at which point we will update this report with our findings. In the interim, we met with our key contact at Become in November 2022, and therefore provide a short summary of recent progress here:

- The first cohort of learners have now completed the course and submitted their portfolios. From an initial 38 learners who started the course, 21 finished it and 10 submitted a complete portfolio.
- The four original local authority partners that were chosen to take part remain engaged and on board, and others have expressed an interest and are on a waiting list. The plan is to hopefully expand their offer due to this demand, but the team also need to carefully monitor the recruitment process for the second cohort of learners with existing partners, due to some local authorities having put forward a lot of PA's initially for the first cohort.
- True to the nature of a pilot programme, since the completion of the first cohort, the team have been busy reflecting on what they have learnt and reviewing ways to minimise the challenges faced as they prepare for the next cohort of learners. This has included exploring ways to:
  - **Mitigate drop-off rates.** The need to provide ongoing support to learners has been a key learning in this respect. As has recognising the different learning styles and educational backgrounds of those on the course. The team are looking to embed tutorial support from the beginning with the next cohort.
  - **Achieve better engagement and ringfence PA's time.** The first cohort has enabled Become to develop a better understanding of PA's time commitments, and they are now focused on trying to obtain a firmer commitment from participating local authorities to help their PA's find the required time to dedicate to the course. While during the first cohort, local authorities did make commitments to protect learning time, this was not supported by the lowering of caseloads. The team conducted a

focus group with learners in October to explore in detail their perceptions and experiences of the course and barriers to completion.

- **Restructure the recruitment process.** The team have developed plans to use a new application and interview process for the second cohort to help manage the expectations of potential learners and enable them to better understand what they are signing up for in terms of the time commitment required. They are also working on an expanded induction process to better embed learners at the beginning of the course. The recruitment process was underway when we spoke in November 2022, and the next cohort is due to start learning in mid-to-late January.

For Become, the next few months will involve busy practical preparations for the second cohort of learners, including managing the application process, revising materials, and working with their accreditation body to prepare for the new intake. Meanwhile, they continue to learn from all of the important feedback they have gathered and celebrate their achievements to date. We look forward to catching up with the team on the progress of the second cohort in Spring 2023.

# Concluding thoughts: wider learnings and legacy

From the perspective of our evaluation team at nfpResearch, capturing the key learning and milestones of the projects within the Clothworkers' Foundation's Care Leavers funding stream over the past three years has been both enlightening and inspiring. As the charities running these projects have navigated the path of translating their ideas into reality, we cannot emphasise just how truly challenging the context and external environment has been for them over the course of the funding period. We will use the concluding section of this final report to summarise what we consider to be the portfolio's wider learnings and important elements of its legacy. There is some overlap with the comprehensive common themes sections included in our two preceding reports, but these concluding pages will place more emphasis on what has been achieved across the projects and what might come next. We want to take the time to reflect on the interrelated problems being tackled by the charities, each working in different spaces and at differing stages of young people's lives, and the role of the Clothworkers' Foundation in enabling them to realise their transformative potential.

All four of the funded projects aimed to have some tangible impacts for their participants in the short term, but from the outset, their work was also about a wider strategic goal of testing pilot models that could prove the value of different ways of better supporting care-experienced young people. This, in turn, would have the potential to influence policy and practice and, ultimately, change the landscape. For some charities, the work was intended to be particularly innovative and groundbreaking, while for others it represented an opportunity to expand their existing work into new contexts and reinforce its value. While the wider influence and systemic change is harder to measure in what is the relative short term, all of the charities have pursued successful external engagement and influencing activities over the past three years. All have taken positive steps toward communicating and sharing their work beyond their organisations, and they have found abundant interest in and receptiveness to their ideas.

## **Funding from the Clothworkers' Foundation has allowed charities the space to pursue experimental and exploratory work**

For all of the charities in the Care Leavers portfolio, their journey throughout this funding period has certainly offered up more than they initially expected in terms of learning opportunities; opportunities that may have only been possible due to the unique circumstances brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The charities have felt the nature of the funding has enabled them to be agile and flexible in their approach, and that they have been given ample space to learn and experiment, as well as the ability to pivot and shift objectives where necessary.

For example, Lighthouse, despite multiple frustrating setbacks, have felt trusted to pursue their unique vision, and have built an organisational culture that emphasises adapting their work based on a continual process of reflection and learning. They continue to balance meeting their objectives and staying true to their mission, while learning on the job, adjusting to new realities, and ensuring that they are growing and running in a sustainable way. In the case of the Compass programme, funding from the Clothworkers' Foundation has allowed for the innovation and creativity that is seen as essential when working with young people in care, while enabling them to pursue new approaches and adapt as needed in what is a new area of work for their organisation. For Bright Light, this funding has offered staff the space to learn and the freedom to deploy and share the experience of the two

partner charities working on the project. Bright Light was also a project where the team were able to provide a highly relational and specialised service, that recognised each young person was on a unique journey. The charities running the project told us how in the children's social care sector, this level of attention to individual needs is the exception rather than the norm. Likewise, Become, who have a longer funding timeframe, have really embedded learning at the heart of the development of their five-year project. All charities agree they have carried learning from these projects into other areas of their work, and are certainly better equipped to confront future challenges.

### **The project's achievements are the result of the tireless commitment of skilled and knowledgeable staff members**

Even in cases where funding has not directly contributed towards staff salaries, investment in these projects has been an investment in the individuals who are their heart and soul. From our interview conversations, it is clear that particular staff members have not only positively influenced others in their organisations and their project beneficiaries, but also others further afield. In the case of Bright Light, we have continually highlighted the dedication shown towards young people by their careers coaches. The importance of staff to Lighthouse has been shown by the emphasis placed on the recruitment process, with diversity of background and experience within the frontline team seen as a key asset. Likewise, the well-managed handover between programme managers at Drive Forward Foundation has shown their commitment to consistency. Despite this personnel shift, both individuals who held the role during the funding cycle were widely endorsed by staff and young people alike.

This funding has enabled staff to deepen their understanding of the sector and the experiences of the young people whose lives they all seek to improve. They have all shown that they are experts in nurturing a sense of community and understanding needs. Creating a community has been a particularly important aspect of the work in the cases of Drive Forward Foundation and Lighthouse. The Compass programme gave young people a space to be their authentic selves and encounter others with similar experiences. By taking part they broadened their horizons in unintended ways; developing a highly supportive peer network and new shared interests. In our concluding set of interviews with Lighthouse, we have seen their ideas realised as a fully operational reality and community has been equally important to them as they build a family-like unit at their first children's home. Bright Light's highly relational approach has brought their staff closer to the young people they work with. Ways of working during the pandemic enabled the development of their relationships with young people in a way that wouldn't have otherwise been possible. It enabled them to meet young people on their terms, support them in new ways and gain unique insights into their home lives. Importantly, Bright Light were able to translate this knowledge to employers, building a shared understanding of the barriers faced by these young people. For Become, the first years of their project have put an important emphasis on listening, be that to local authority partners, their learning cohort, or care-experienced young people. The team have used workshops and a participatory approach to gain insight from Personal Advisors and care leavers in order to inform the development of the training course.

### **The value of flexible, long-term funding cannot be overstated**

In each round of our research, we have sought the views of staff members on their relationship with the Clothworkers' Foundation. Charities have consistently expressed their gratitude for the Foundation providing them with longer-term funding, offering continuous flexibility, demonstrating trust in their vision, and for allowing them the space to get on with the job. While a hands-off relationship demonstrates these qualities, some of the charities expressed that, at times, it was difficult to engage beyond the transaction. More soft-touch interaction and further opportunities to build their relationship

with the Clothworkers' Foundation would have been welcomed, especially in those instances where the funding came closer to its end. Undoubtedly there has been sadness where the projects have wound up without recommissioning, but also pride in what has been achieved and an undeniable optimism about the potential of going further if the circumstances are right.

Throughout our time following the progress of these projects we have sought to achieve a balanced understanding of their achievements and challenges. We want to emphasise their success, and it would be remiss to ignore the desperate need for more funding of this nature in this sector. Over the past three or so years, charities and their funders have been innovating and simultaneously fighting fires to meet basic needs and uphold the basic fabric where central government is failing to provide adequate services and tackle systemic issues in the children's social care sector. We hope in this series of reports to have provided clear insight into just how special and necessary charities in this sector are. This funding has unreservedly succeeded in supporting these charities both with their capacity-building and making immeasurable impressions on the sector, while enabling them to learn valuable lessons along the way. It is to the Clothworkers' credit that it funded this work and this sector, when many other funders haven't. Ultimately, it is up to funders and those with power and influence to not only take notice of these charities' achievements, but continue to enable them to make this crucial difference. Arguably, the level of need is even greater than it was when this funding stream commenced. What we have as a result of this funding is a remarkable, collective body of work from these charities and tangible examples of what works. We are humbled to have been able to see this exceptional work in action.



# About us

nfpResearch is a leading market research agency in the not-for-profit sector. We put information in the hands of charities, to help them to help as many people as possible.

What sets us apart is the quality of our research. Using sophisticated analytical tools, we drill down into the detail to produce rigorous analysis that can take your organisation to the next level. We might not always tell you what you want to hear – but we promise to tell you what you need to hear, and to listen to your vision of where you want to go.

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