

Pathways to opportunity

The impact of RNCSEF's university access programme for care-experienced students





SpringForward is an online programme for care-experienced students. It provides no-cost, remote mentoring to boost young people's chances of securing the pathways to higher education that they desire and deserve. It achieves this by connecting care-experienced young people with a member of staff from an independent school who provides one-to-one tailored sessions.



Having access to a mentor outside of their school and immediate professional network gave participants a trusted and knowledgeable sounding board for their ideas, while the mentor's expertise broadened their horizons and opened up new possibilities.

Norfolk Virtual School

Introduction

University education drives nearly two-thirds of upward social mobility in the UK, shaping not only future earnings but also long-term wellbeing, relationships and opportunities.

Yet far too few care leavers progress to higher education. Last year only 13% entered higher education and just 2% secured places at higher-tariff universities. Many report limited access to high-quality guidance, from choosing where and how to apply, to dealing with housing insecurity, confidence and pastoral needs.

Over the past 15 years, Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF) has partnered with more than 200 schools and 70 local authorities to narrow this educational divide through unlocking access to the fully funded bursary places available in boarding and independent day schools. In 2020, Department for Education (DfE) funding enabled us to expand this work further, through a pilot to consider how independent schools can address the specific barriers faced by care-experienced young people applying to university, through their partnership offerings outside of bursary places.

This programme - SpringForward - provides care-experienced young people and those who support them, with free access to a national alliance of committed volunteer staff members from partner schools, working to secure the goal that every care-experienced young person has the confidence, guidance and opportunity to pursue the future they deserve.

None of the impact set out in this report would have been possible without the drive of the young people themselves and the commitment from participating schools, donors and the DfE. The ambition now is to strengthen the evidence base, expand mentoring and reach many more care-experienced young people who might otherwise feel university pathways are out of their reach.



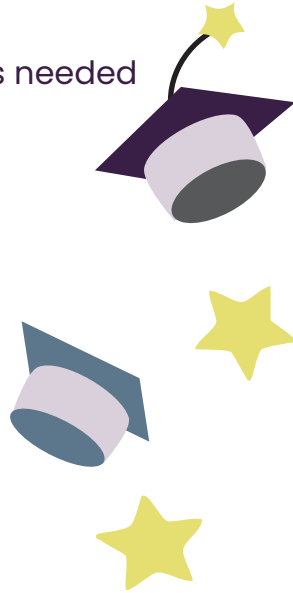
Ali Henderson
CEO



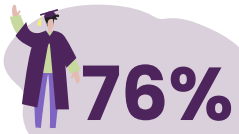
Nick Owen
Chair

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Impact at a glance



Higher education progression rate for SpringForward mentees compared to 13% for care-experienced children in England



SpringForward mentees are 3x more likely to submit a UCAS application than their care-experienced peers



100% of SpringForward mentees felt more confident about knowing how and where to research higher education options



200+ Care-experienced young people have engaged with SpringForward since 2021



It's been a long time since either of us was going through the university application process. We found it a relief to have someone with knowledge of the process who could guide Ryan*. It is a programme that is beneficial to both the young people and the carers.

Helen* and Jack*
Ryan's* carers

Following support from his SpringForward mentor, Ryan is now studying at Imperial College, London*

**Names have been changed to protect identity*



Why the SpringForward programme is needed

The 2022 Independent Review into Children's Social Care included a key mission to "double the proportion of care leavers attending university, and particularly high tariff universities, by 2026"¹. Yet in 2025, care leavers (those who have ever been in care) are around four times less likely to enter higher education by the age of 22 compared with the general population².

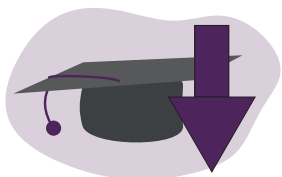
Care-experienced students



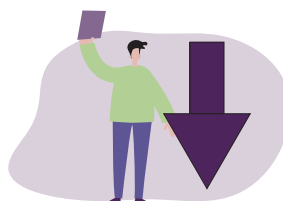
£1.2 million per child cost of poor outcomes¹



Only 2% go on to higher tariff universities³



4x less likely to go on to higher education¹



Greatly decreased lifetime outcomes

Care leavers

3x

Care leavers aged between 19 and 21 are 3x more likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) compared to all young people⁴

15x

Care leavers are fifteen times more likely to become homeless⁵

4x

Care leavers are four times more likely to have a criminal conviction by age 24 than those who have not been in care⁶

Inconsistent higher education advice

60%

of care-experienced students state they received no guidance specific to being in care during their higher education application journey⁷

39%

felt unsupported by their personal advisor, while only 50% of care-experienced students who applied to university had discussed their application with their personal advisor⁷

20%

of care-experienced children were encouraged by a teacher/advisor to share their background during application, allowing for contextual offers and additional support⁷



Just when I thought I had no informed support, I met my mentor and realized my dream was do-able. I would have had a difficult journey without my mentor and possibly burnt out. I want to say a huge thank you.

SpringForward Mentee - 2025

- 1 MacAlister, J. (2022) The Independent Review into Children's Social Care: Final Report. (Accessed 08/03/26). https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp/_https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf
- 2 Feinstein, L. et al. (2025) Pathways into and Through Higher Education for Young People with Experience of Social Care. (Accessed 08/03/26). https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025-03-Pathways-higher-education-people-experience-children-social-care_TASO_REES.pdf
- 3 Young, F. & Lilley, D. (2023) Breaking the Care Ceiling. (Accessed 08/03/26). <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf>
- 4 Foley, N. (2024) Support for Care Leavers. (Accessed 08/03/26). <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8429/CBP-8429.pdf>
- 5 House of Commons Education Committee (2025) Children's Social Care. (Accessed 08/03/26). <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48718/documents/255354/default/>
- 6 Office for National Statistics (2022) The Education Background of Looked After Children Who Interact with the Criminal Justice System. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/theeducationbackgroundoflookedafterchildrenwhointeractwiththecriminaljusticesystem/december2022>
- 7 UCAS (2022) Next Steps: What Is the Experience of Students from a Care Background in Education? (Accessed 08/03/26). <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-reports/next-steps-what-experience-students-care-background-education-report>

How the programme works

Utilising the expertise available across the independent schools sector, SpringForward coordinates a coalition of specialist volunteer mentors available at no cost, to help support care-experienced students who are considering higher-education pathways. Most sessions take place online to remove any geographical limitations, ensuring that each allocated mentor is best suited to the individual circumstances and needs of each individual student.

1. Identify and allocate

Local authority post-16 and leaving care teams share details of a care-experienced young person who could benefit from mentoring. The SpringForward programme coordinator assigns a volunteer mentor aligned with the subject(s) they may want to study and possible preferred higher education institution, if known.

2. Pre-application mentoring

Volunteer mentors support mentees to explore relevant higher-education pathways and navigate through the application processes. Sessions support with decision making and practical application steps, including the personal statement, degree/institution choices and student-specific advice.

3. Post-application mentoring

Once university applications have been submitted, the mentoring sessions transition to focus on navigating offers and the practicalities of going on to higher education (e.g. applying for student finance and accommodation). Sessions support with preparation so that the mentee can start and thrive at university.



67
referring
local
authorities

27
mentor
schools

Theory of change

1

Our vision

We believe all children should be able to access high quality educational opportunities as the firmest foundation for fulfilling futures.

2

Our mission

To improve life outcomes and career opportunities for care-experienced young people by helping them access university and other higher-education pathways, through partnerships between local authorities and the UK's independent schools.

3



Our outcomes



Increasing the number of care-leavers applying for and securing offers to study at university and other forms of higher education and apprenticeships



Supporting **ambitious aspirations** of care-experienced students so that they can access the best higher education pathway for their long-term goals



Positive relationships between students and mentors supports a growing confidence for the care-experienced students participating



Advancing social mobility of care leavers through increased access to higher education

4

Who we work with

Care-experienced students receive bespoke 1:1 mentoring sessions to support higher education applications and preparation.

Coordinating with **local authorities** to systemically identify care-experienced students who aspire to access university and other forms of higher education but may lack the advice to do so.

Experienced **staff** from **independent schools** who volunteer to support care-experienced students.

5

How we do it

Leveraging existing relationships within RNCSE's 'accredited' school network to identify volunteer mentors with the appropriate subject area knowledge and experience of the higher education application process.

Delivering training and tailored **support** to mentors, independent schools and local authorities to provide next step advice and ensure high quality and effective mentoring.



Outcomes



Increasing applications



Ambitious aspirations

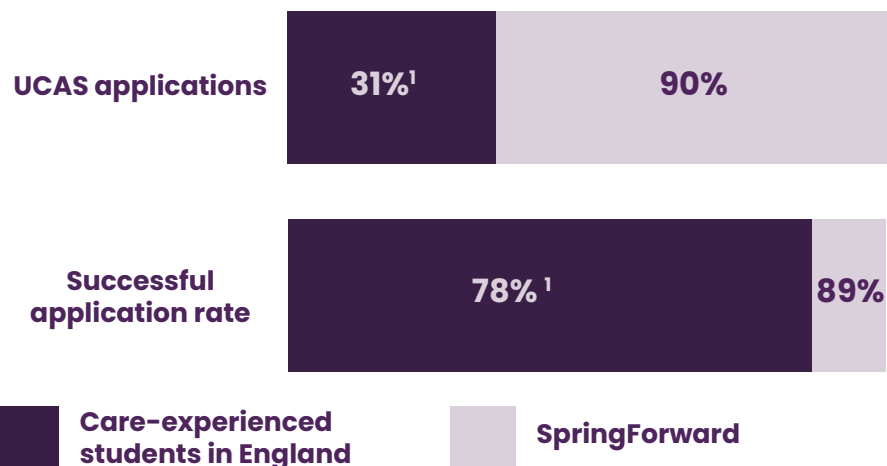


Positive relationships



Advancing social mobility

Increasing applications



3x

SpringForward mentees are 3x more likely to submit a UCAS application than their care-experienced peers

¹ UCAS (2025). (Accessed 08/03/26). <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-of-cycle-data-resources-2025>.

SpringForward mentees were more likely to apply to a higher education institution and more likely to be successful in their applications, compared to their care-experienced peers. Although a high percentage were already considering a higher education pathway at the start of the process, all felt more confident in their choices and more confident about the opportunities on offer to them as a result of the advice received during the mentoring relationship. When asked what mentees valued most about their mentoring sessions, the UCAS personal statement was highlighted most frequently (52% of respondents), with many reflecting that receiving advice from someone who is a clear expert in this area was the most valuable aspect of the programme.



My mentor helped me to transform my personal statement from “promising” to “exceptional”, without my mentor’s guidance I doubt I would have been able to make the changes I did.

Kyra*, SpringForward Mentee



*[My mentor explained] that there can be different routes into the courses I wanted to study and you don’t necessarily need to get straight A*s, as you can get in with a contextual offer or a foundation year. This changed my view on going to university and gives me hope that I may be able to get in even without top grades.*

Alex*, SpringForward Mentee
December 2024

Alex had four mentoring sessions through SpringForward and is now studying Criminology at the University of Sussex

*Name has been changed to protect identity

Ambitious aspirations



of Local Authority referrers felt that mentoring encouraged the SpringForward mentees to have more ambitious aspirations



After mentoring:

100%

Felt confident knowing where and how to research university courses

100%

Had increased confidence about choosing the right course

92%

Had a better understanding of the next steps they need to achieve their goals

68%

Felt mentoring had benefited their decision making process when choosing higher education

6%

Felt mentoring had not helped them to prepare for life after schools

“ ”

Being able to receive such tailored sessions for such a niche subject like classical singing as a care leaver was genuinely the best thing to have happened, it showcased that no matter what stage of life I am I can make my dreams work.

**Alesha*, SpringForward Mentee
August 2025**

Alesha is now studying musical performance at a conservatoire after receiving bespoke mentoring through SpringForward

**Name has been changed to protect identity*

Before starting mentoring 65% of SpringForward mentees wanted to go to university. Of those for whom we have data, all were successful.

Of those who started as unsure or who had other plans - 74% said that their SpringForward mentors helped them to choose what/where they would study next and 86% said they had greater confidence in what they needed to do to achieve their goals.



Positive relationships



My mentor was an amazing and lovely person, who would give me any advice and guidance that I needed. I felt that I had her full confidence and trusted my mentor to assist me in making my UCAS application as amazing as it could be.

**Jon*, SpringForward Mentee
September 2025**

**Name has been changed to protect identity*

Advancing social mobility

Higher education progression:

76% SpringForward progression rate

14% Care-experienced progression rate (England)¹

13%

41%
Care-experienced
children in England²

13% of care-experienced children supported by SpringForward became NEET. Only one of these young people tried to go on to higher education and was unable to. The others all had circumstances in their personal lives which meant that they did not complete their school education.

¹ Young, F. & Lilley, D. (2023) Breaking the Care Ceiling. (Accessed 08/03/26). <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf>

² Harrison N. et al. (2023) Care leavers' transition into the labour market in England (Accessed 08/03/26). <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CareLeaversLabourMarket.pdf>



[My mentor] helped me to choose a course - he supported me by doing the research about what university courses would be suitable for me.

**James*, SpringForward Mentee
February 2025**

James started SpringForward not knowing what course he wished to study, as he had not had any advice. Following support from his mentor, James considered applied to a local university and is now studying Game Design and Computing.

**Name has been changed to protect identity*

67%

of SpringForward mentees in 2025 wanted to stay in contact with their mentor while they studied in higher education

95%

of Local Authority referrers felt that SpringForward mentoring increased the confidence of their care leavers to apply to university

61%

of SpringForward mentees start the programme having low confidence in how to approach higher education application processes



Testimonials



SpringForward mentors have offered invaluable support to our care-experienced young people, helping them to explore their higher education options and build confidence in their choices and with the application process.

Jamie

Post-16 advisor – Norfolk virtual school



The SpringForward programme is a key part of our efforts to widen access, giving staff a meaningful way to support care-experienced young people as they navigate their routes into higher education. The SpringForward team's excellent coordination makes our involvement easy and allows us to focus on what matters most: building confidence and encouraging aspiration.

Our mentors, from both operational and teaching teams, consistently find the experience deeply rewarding. Working 1:1 with students lets them see real growth in confidence, a clearer sense of direction, and increased readiness to apply for university.

Jenny Stanley

Dulwich College – Deputy Master (External)



My mentor was patient and flexible, allowing me to access support around my UCAS deadlines. My mentor spent time with me to help me choose the right course and I found the support that he offered with my personal statement and answering the questions I had about the UCAS application process really helpful.

Jess*

**Jess is now studying
Biochemistry at Imperial College University**

**Name has been changed to protect identity*



From our perspective I think the mentoring was extremely helpful. Although Jess received guidance at school, having a dedicated mentor that was focussed on supporting her was far more effective. She has high expectations of herself and has difficulty asking for help – especially in a group environment. Having a mentor allowed for Jess to ask questions without the fear of sounding silly and without the “child in care” label.*

John* and Sarah*

Carers of SpringForward mentee

**Name has been changed to protect identity*





Looking forward

“ ”

The disadvantage faced by the care-experienced community should be the civil rights issue of our time

Josh MacAlister - 2022

Independent review into children's social care

What next

At a time when graduates face tougher competition, uneven job opportunities and more insecure early-career work; widening access to university remains essential for social mobility. For care leavers, higher education provides a safe and structured environment to build independent living skills, critical thinking and confidence. With a persistent gap between disadvantaged students and their more privileged peers, university pathways continue to open doors to professional careers and networks that are otherwise difficult to access.

To strengthen outcomes for care-experienced young people, SpringForward will continue to expand, while adapting to the changing education and employment landscape. Our priorities for the coming year are:

Expanding apprenticeship pathways

We will respond to the rising demand for apprenticeships, as a faster and more secure route into work, by introducing a dedicated apprenticeship strand alongside university preparation, encouraging independent schools to create tailored routes into high-quality apprenticeship positions for care leavers within their employment strategies.

Preparing for skills-based hiring

As employers increasingly prioritise demonstrable skills over traditional qualifications, mentors will help care leavers understand and develop the capabilities they need to evidence—such as emotional intelligence, critical thinking and adaptability. These strengths are often rooted in their lived experience but must be supported and articulated clearly to stand out in applications.

Strengthening longer-term support

While strong relationships form between mentees and mentors before university, few students maintain contact after arrival and young people tell us this is not always the support they most value. Alongside sustaining mentoring where helpful, we will connect all SpringForward participants with the growing community of alumni from within the RNCSF school bursary access programme (“SpringBoarders”) at their universities, providing a relatable peer network and an ongoing source of support and role models.



Funding

Leveraging RNCSF's existing schools network and existing infrastructure allows for a cost-effective delivery of bespoke and tailored mentoring and employment opportunities. The only costs of the programme are for coordination and monitoring, with all mentoring and support offered at no cost.

The costs associated with liaising with local authorities care-experienced students and their carers, and coordination and monitoring of school staff volunteers is approximately £60,000 p/a. The Department for Education initially provided a co-funding grant, which was matched by the generosity of RNCSF donors, to allow for the programme to be piloted in the period 2021-24. Since 2024 these costs have been met entirely through donations.

Looking ahead, we have bold ambitions for the programme to scale and extend. To do so will require an annual operating costs budget of £80,000 p/a. This represents a significant economy of scale, with numbers of participants due to rise due to the maturity of relationships and systems that have been established in Phase I of programme delivery.

With your help, we hope to secure ambitious higher education and employment/apprenticeship pathways for hundreds of care leavers each year, through SpringForward's low-cost, high-impact model.



I am a strong supporter of RNCSF, whose model leverages the excellence available across the independent schools sector to deliver high impact for some of the UK's most vulnerable children. We must be more ambitious for care-experienced children and SpringForward delivers this for young people at a relatively low cost, with significant impact.

Lord Nash – SpringForward donor



Participating Schools

Aldenham School
Berkhamsted School
Bradfield College
Brentwood School
Caterham School
Dulwich College
Goldolphin and Latymer School
Highgate School
King Edward's School, Birmingham
Magdalen College School
Malvern College
Millfield School
Monkton Combe School
Norwich High School
Norwich School
Oundle School
Radley College
Royal Grammar School Newcastle
Sevenoaks School
Sherborne School
Shrewsbury School
St Paul's Girls' School
St Paul's School
Wellington College
Westminster School
Wetherby Senior School
Whitgift School



Our involvement in SpringForward has been an incredibly positive and rewarding experience. There is a great deal of expertise that we are excited to share to support care-experienced children's next moves, and at the same time, the experience of working with these students is invaluable. They bring fresh perspectives and a desire to succeed that only serves to make us more invested each year—our commitment to widening access aligns wonderfully and we are honoured to be part of it.

Simone Benn
Deputy Head – St Paul's Girls' School



Find out more

To find out more about our work,
visit our website:

www.royalspringboard.org.uk



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