



The Hidden Inequality:

Understanding Financial Education
Gaps for Care Leavers in Essex

November 2025

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Foreword

At Money Ready, we believe that every young person deserves the chance to build a secure and confident financial future, no matter their background. For care-experienced young people, that journey is often harder. Many face financial exclusion, precarious housing and a cliff-edge of support when leaving care.

This paper shines a light on the local challenges in Essex and the wider region, but also on the solutions. Care-experienced young people have incredible potential, and with the right support, they can thrive as they transition into independent living. Through our partnership with Saffron Building Society, we've seen how practical, evidence-based financial education can transform lives. When young people understand and feel in control of their money, they gain more than skills – they gain confidence, independence, and hope.

Essex has the potential to lead the way in reimagining financial education for care leavers. By embedding this support within local systems and working collaboratively across sectors, we can ensure every care-experienced young person has the tools to thrive, not only in Essex but across the UK. I invite local authorities, policymakers, and community partners to join us in this mission.

Leon Ward, Chief Executive Officer at Money Ready

At Saffron Building Society we believe that financial wellbeing is not just about how much money you have, it's about having the knowledge, confidence and support to make informed choices and build a more financially secure future. For care-experienced young people, their financial journey is made more difficult by the lack of stable support network and limited financial guidance. Supporting care-experienced young people, predominately in Essex, is what underpins our support for Money Ready.

As a building society with deep roots in our community, we're proud to sponsor this research. It reflects our ongoing commitment to supporting Money Ready and the young people they support through their financial education sessions.

We hope this research will create meaningful conversation, leading to action from all stakeholders in Essex to deliver increasingly better outcomes for care-experienced young people in Essex – and beyond.

Thomas Clark, External Affairs Manager at Saffron Building Society

Executive Summary

This thought leadership paper by Money Ready, in partnership with Saffron Building Society, examines the financial education needs of care-experienced young people in Essex, highlighting systemic challenges and proposing solutions to foster financial independence. Drawing on data, research, and practical insights from our programmes, the paper underscores the urgent need for consistent, high-quality financial education to support care leavers' transition to adulthood and from care to independence.

Key Findings:

- **Economic and Housing Challenges:** In Essex, 40% of care-experienced young people (aged 17–21) are not in education, employment, or training, significantly higher than the national average of 37% and the proportion of all young people, 12%. Only 20% live independently, below national (27%) and regional (22%) levels, with 10% in unsuitable accommodation. This has been a worsening trend since 2020.
- **Financial Vulnerability:** 67% of care-experienced young people across the UK [report anxiety](#) about finances, with [80% seeking more support](#). [Barnardo's \(2023\) found](#) 82% struggle to afford food, 64% face rising debt, and 31% are at risk of homelessness. Essex's [Financial Vulnerability Index](#) score (48) exceeds the UK average (45.5).
- **Education Gaps:** While most local authorities claim to offer financial education, over half of care-experienced young people report receiving no memorable or effective support, highlighting a gap between provision and impact.
- **Successful Interventions:** The Money Ready-Saffron partnership has delivered impactful financial education to over 200 young people in Essex, with 94% reporting improved financial knowledge, 89% gaining confidence, and 87% intending to change money management habits.

So What?

While some support is currently available, data shows that care-experienced young people in Essex face disproportionate financial and social challenges, including higher NEET rates, precarious housing, and increased debt risks, which threaten their stability and independence. Without targeted financial education, these young people remain vulnerable to exploitation, financial exclusion, and homelessness. The partnership model with Saffron Building Society demonstrates that practical, evidence-based financial education can empower care leavers, equipping them with

skills to manage money, reduce debt risks, and build resilient futures. Scaling this approach through cross-sector collaboration and policy reform, such as a national Care Leavers Guarantee, is critical to closing gaps and ensuring equitable outcomes.

Recommendations:

1. **Local Roundtable:** Money Ready, in partnership with Saffron Building Society, will help to convene a cross-sector roundtable, chaired by a local MP, bringing together education, housing, employment, and voluntary sector leaders – alongside care-experienced young people – to develop a coordinated Essex Financial Education and Inclusion Plan.
2. **Guaranteed Financial Education:** Money Ready seeks to partner with Essex County Council (ECC) to embed high-quality, tailored financial education into all care leaver pathways in the region, supported by Saffron Building Society.
3. **Local Pledge with Care Leavers Covenant:** Money Ready and Saffron Building Society propose creating an Essex-wide *Care Leaver Financial Resilience Pledge*, aligned with the national Care Leavers Covenant, to unite public, private, and voluntary sector organisations behind a shared mission.

By better embedding financial education into support systems, Essex can lead the way in empowering care-experienced young people to achieve financial independence and long-term security.

Introduction

Money Ready, the UK's leading financial education charity (formerly MyBnk), has recently joined forces with RedSTART Educate to expand its reach and impact across the UK. Together, we deliver high-quality, evidence-based programmes that build financial confidence and capability from early years through to adulthood.

In Essex, our work with vulnerable young people focuses on those not in education, employment or training and care-experienced young people. This work made possible with support from Saffron Building Society, highlights both the progress being made and the persistent challenges that remain as young people transition into independence.

Essex County Council's Sufficiency Strategy underlines a shared commitment to supporting care leavers to thrive. However, financial insecurity continues to be one of the biggest barriers to stability in housing, education, and employment.

Through partnerships with local authorities, schools, and corporate volunteers, we have seen first-hand how targeted financial education can change life trajectories, improving budgeting skills, reducing debt risks and strengthening young people's sense of control over their futures.

Long-term gains for care-leavers, and for society

This thought leadership paper has been developed to share insights from our work on the ground alongside a detailed literature review, which highlights the systemic gaps still facing care-experienced young people. Our findings demonstrate how effective, collaborative financial education can drive long-term impact. By bringing together data and best practice, we aim to inform policy and practice, inspire greater cross-sector collaboration, and ultimately support better outcomes for the most vulnerable young people in our society.

This ties in with Money Ready's policy asks, the third of which is to create a national Care Leavers Guarantee with financial education at its core. We believe that by incorporating financial education into existing care leaver support, we can equip these individuals with the vital skills they need to navigate financial decisions and challenges.

While care leaver support exists, provision is patchy, inconsistent, and too often focused on financial handouts without the education needed to use them well.

Without change, care leavers remain at a higher risk of debt, exploitation, and financial exclusion.

Money Ready asks government to provide consistent, high-quality financial education as an intrinsic part of existing support for care leavers, with practical money skills embedded alongside financial support so that care leavers can build independence, resilience, and long-term security.

As Essex County Council looks to strengthen its local offer for care-experienced young people, including through their partnership with local employment provider, Mitie, there is an opportunity for all sectors to come together and ensure every young person leaving care has the knowledge, tools, and confidence to manage their money and build a secure foundation for adult life.

Summary Note

- When comparing Essex with national, regional, and similar local authority areas, **the *economic activities of care-experienced young in Essex* is a significant concern**. A similar picture can be seen in relation to care-experienced young people's living arrangements – where **measures such *independent living and being in suitable accommodation* tend to be lower** than national, regional, and similar local authority areas.
- This picture is especially worrying when we look at the wider evidence base. Money Ready's own research (2022 and 2024 – see 'references' below for links) with local authorities and care-experienced young people from across the UK showed that **67 per cent of care-experienced young were anxious about their finances**. Furthermore, we found that there was **a gap between *provision and take up***, where nearly all local authorities told us that they provide some form of financial education, but just over half of care-experienced young people recall receiving basic support with budgeting.
- It is not just Money Ready's research that shines a light on care-experienced young people's circumstances. Barnardo's (2023) highlighted several alarming findings from care-experienced young people.
 - 82 per cent said they were **struggling to afford food all or some of the time**
 - 64 per cent had seen their **levels of debt increase**
 - 31 per cent said **they were at risk of homelessness**
- In Lowell's *Financial Vulnerability Index* (representative poll that covers the UK adult population), we see that several constituencies in Essex rank poorly against the national and Essex regional averages. Combining what we know about care-experienced young people in Essex and this wider financial vulnerability for people in some parts of the county, it is vital that Money Ready continues to grow its presence and be there for those care-experienced young people to safely transition to financial independence.

1. Population

- There are 78,000 young people living in Essex (17- to 21- year-olds). Of this population, 935 young people are care-experienced and *in touch* with their local authority. This represents 1.1 per cent of the youth population in Essex. When compared with national, regional, and similar local authority areas, **the proportion of young people who are care-experienced in Essex is low** – see Table 1 below.

Table 1: Proportion of young people (17- to- 21-year-olds) who are care-experienced and *in touch* with their local authority; **Source:** DfE (2024) and Nomis.

Domain	Young People	Young people who are care-experienced	
England	3,410,000	50,670	1.5%
East of England	342,000	4,970	1.5%
Kent	83,000	1,688	2.0%
Suffolk	38,000	672	1.7%
Norfolk	50,000	704	1.4%
Hertfordshire	62,000	791	1.3%
Essex	78,000	935	1.1%

2. Economic Activities

- Young people who are care-experienced tend to experience a more precarious transition to the labour market when compared with the wider youth population.** Rees Centre (along with University of York and University of Exeter) explored *care leavers' transition into the labour market in England*. Through a series of in-depth interviews with care-experienced young people, they uncovered how challenging it is for these young to get into and make a positive start in their working life.

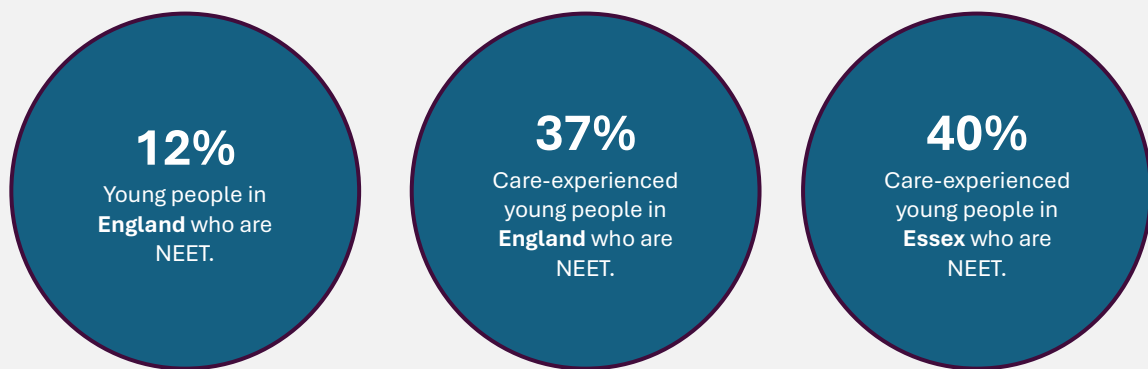
“Job opportunities were limited and often insecure and poorly paid ... Many care leavers therefore enter work that is unlikely to provide a sound platform for their long-term emotional and economic wellbeing.

“While this experience is shared by many young people, care leavers are without the family ‘safety nets’ that others are able to draw upon, increasing their precarity further.

Care Leavers' Transition into the Labour Market in England
Rees Centre, 2024

- Twelve per cent of young people in England are not in education, employment, or training (ONS, 2024). When we take a closer look at the numbers relating to care-experienced young people, the proportion is far higher at 37 per cent. However, **in Essex the proportion of care-experienced young people who are *not in education, employment or training* (NEET), stands even higher, at 40 per cent.** These types of differences were shown to be statistically significant by Rees Centre (2024).

Figure 1: Proportion of young people *and* care-experienced young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (ONS, 2024; DfE, 2024).



- It is also noteworthy that **these levels in Essex have stayed above national and regional levels for the past five years** – see Figure 2 below. When compared with similar local authority areas, Essex has experienced similar levels and trends – see Figure 3 below. This is not withstanding the fact that on the last data release (2024), Essex (40 per cent) was second to Hertfordshire (41 per cent).

Figure 2: Proportion of care-experienced young people (17- to-21-year-olds) who were *not in education, employment or training*; **Source:** Department for Education – August 2024.

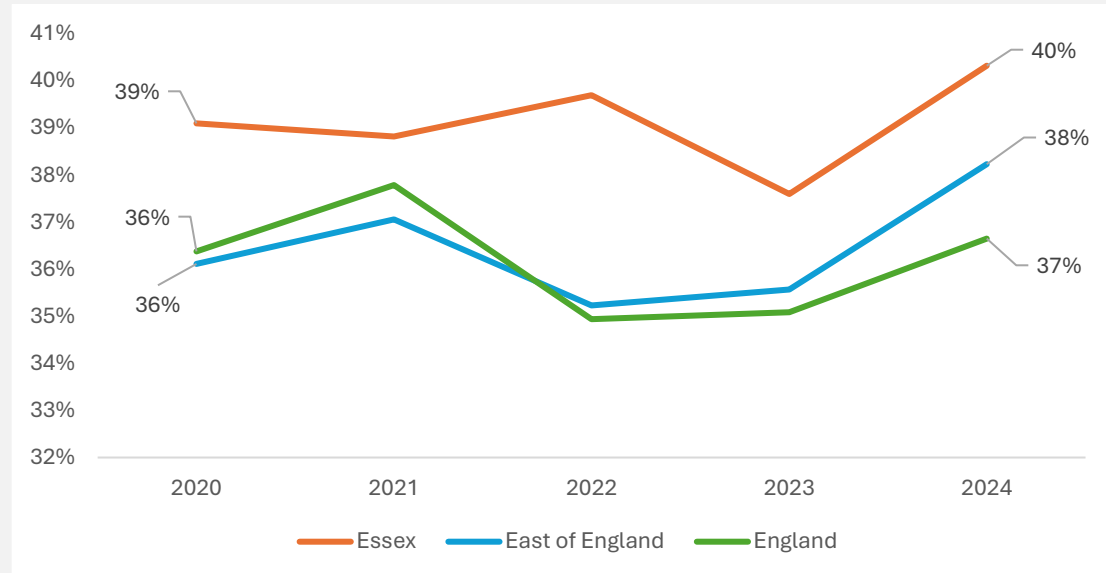
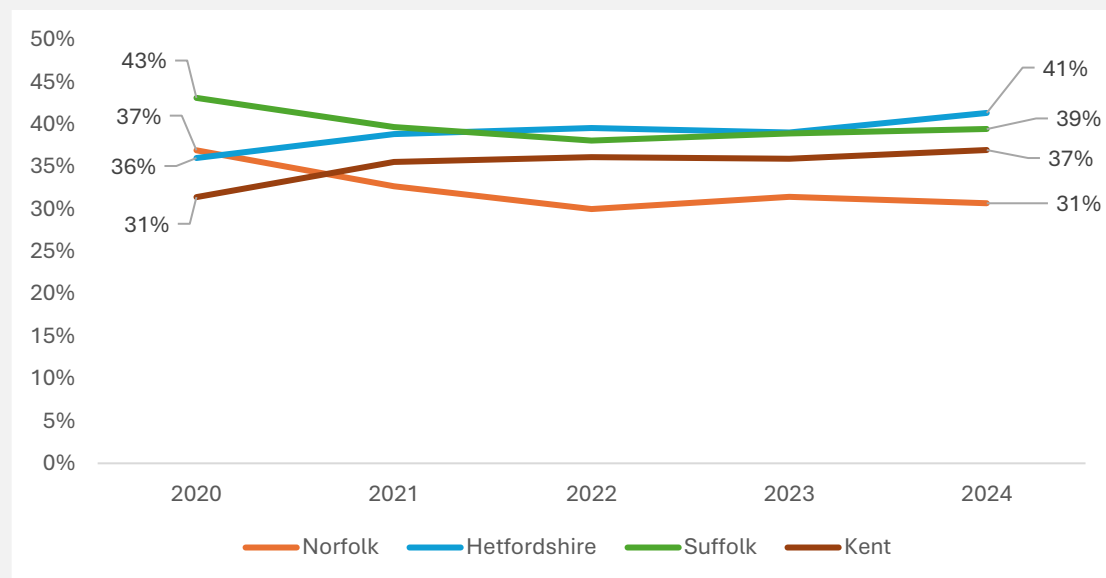


Figure 3: Proportion of care-experienced young people (17- to-21-year-olds) who were *not in education, employment or training*; **Source:** Department for Education – August 2024.



3. Housing

- **An abundance of research shows the precarious nature of transitioning from living-in-care to independent-living.** Our own research in 2022 and 2024 heard from care-experienced young people about the cliff-edge of support – that upon leaving care they are no longer eligible to receive a range of financial support from their local authority. The national care leaver charity Become are campaigning on what they call *End the Care Cliff* (Become, 2024).
- The National Audit Office (2016) reported that **care-experienced young people are over-represented in the homeless statistics**. They reported that *25 per cent of those who were homeless had been in care at some point in their lives*. While this research is nearly ten years old, Money Ready does not expect these figures to have improved.

“At the age of 18, many care leavers have to manage running a home or tenancy for the first time, buying furniture, budgeting, and paying bills whilst also having to adapt to other important transitions, such as starting work, university or both; moving to a new place; and big changes in the type and amount of support they receive.

“As a result, most care leavers have more practical and financial responsibilities than their non-care-experienced peers, from a much younger age, and without the same family support or safety net to fall back on if things go wrong.

Support Every Step of the Way
Become, 2024

- **The proportion of care-experienced young people in Essex who are in independent living (20 per cent) is below national (27 per cent) and regional (22 per cent) levels.** More worryingly, these levels in Essex have stayed below national and regional levels for the past five years – see Figure 4 below. When compared with similar local authority areas, Essex has sat bottom in each for the past five years with regards to care-experienced young people who achieved independent living. There has been a decline in Hertfordshire from 35 per cent to 21 per cent, and Suffolk has slightly higher numbers than Essex.

Figure 4.i: Proportion of care-experienced young people (17- to-21-year-olds) who are in *independent living*; **Source:** Department for Education – August 2024.

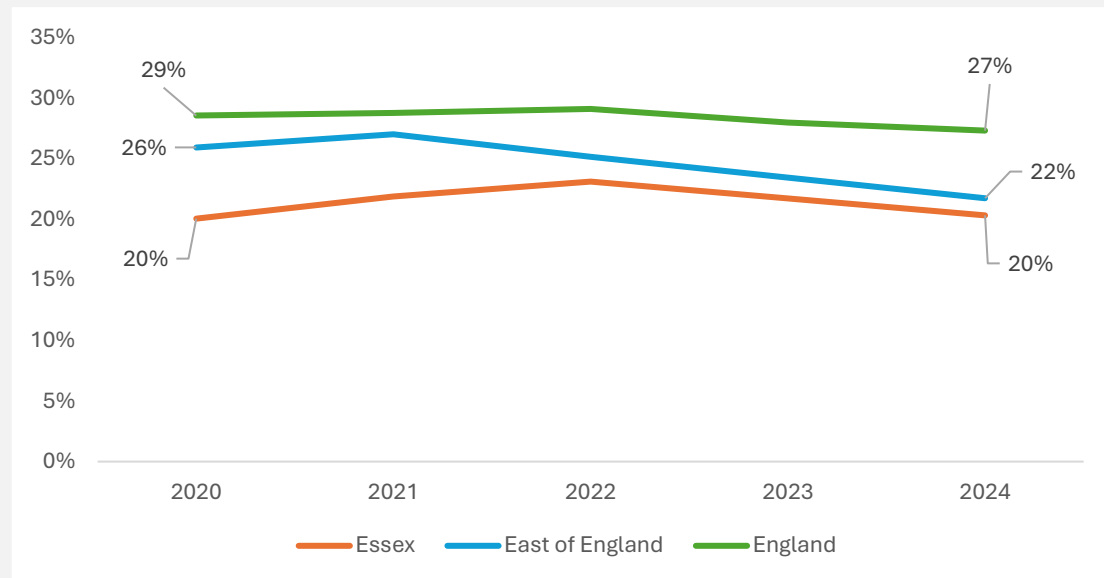
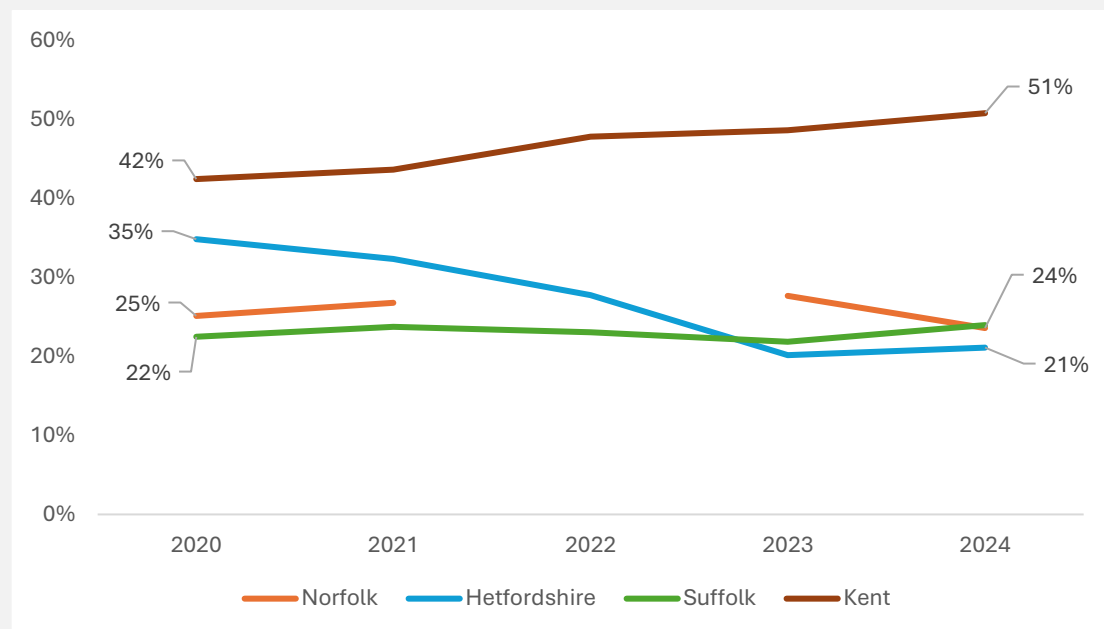


Figure 4.ii: Proportion of care-experienced young people (17- to-21-year-olds) who are in *independent living*; **Source:** Department for Education – August 2024.



- **The proportion of care-experienced young people who live in accommodation considered not suitable in Essex has slightly increased since 2020.** Furthermore, Essex does not compare well with national, regional, nor comparable areas. In 2020, the proportion of care-experienced young people in Essex who were in *accommodation considered not suitable* was the same as in the East of England region and in England (six per cent) – see Figure 5 below.

However, in the following four years this worsened to 10 per cent, whereas in the East of England and England it remained stable. In comparable local authority areas, Essex's four-point rise was shared only by Hertfordshire. Essex still tops the table among these local authorities – where Norfolk follows with nine per cent of care-experienced young people who were in *accommodation considered not suitable*.

Figure 5.ii: Proportion of care-experienced young people (17- to-21-year-olds) who were in *accommodation considered not suitable*; **Source:** Department for Education – August 2024.

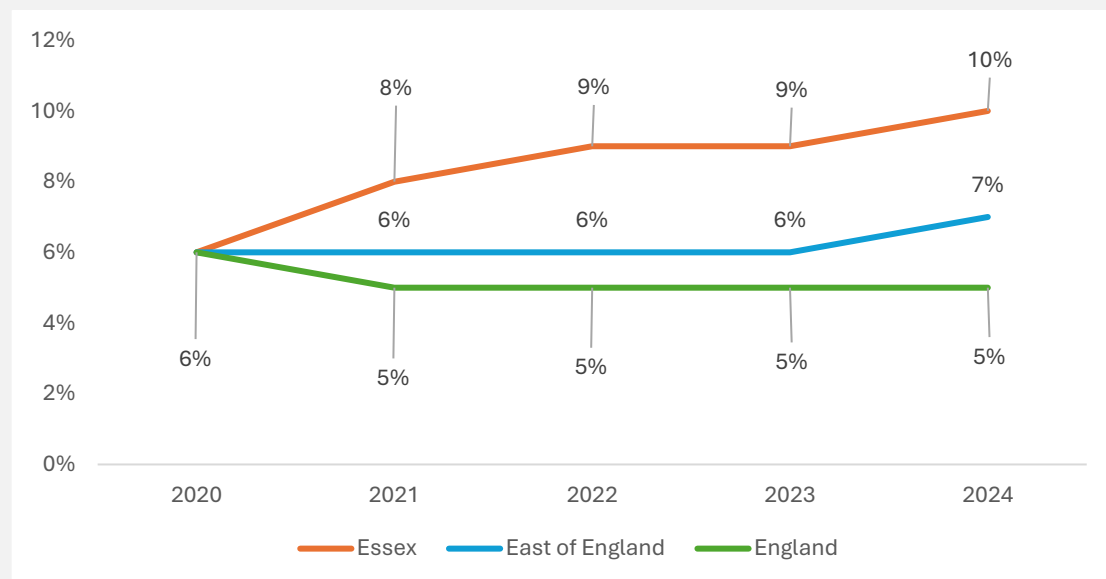
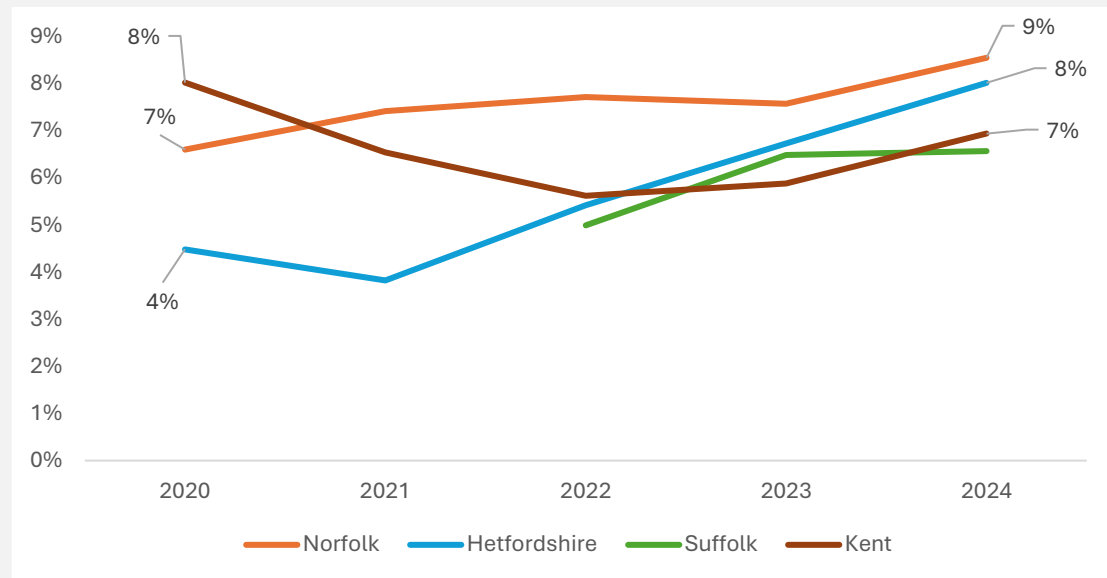


Figure 5.ii: Proportion of care-experienced young people (17- to-21-year-olds) who were in accommodation considered not suitable; **Source:** Department for Education – August 2024.



4. Managing Money and Debt

- In their 2023 report, **Barnardo's concluded that care-experienced young people continue to experience poorer outcomes than their peers in relation to financially getting by** – where 82 per cent said they were *struggling to afford food all or some of the time*, and 64 per cent had seen their *levels of debt increase*. Similar findings emerged from the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, where 60 per cent of care-experienced young people *worry about their debt* and another 57 per cent have *struggled to manage without falling into debt* (NLCBF, 2022).
- Barnardo's findings are worrying when combined with the debt picture in Essex. Lowell (a credit management company) reported that **Essex has a higher average score (48) of financial vulnerability than the average score across the UK (45.5)** – see Table 2 below. Moreover, the Essex region contains some constituency areas with *Financial Vulnerability* scores high above the UK average.

Table 2: Financial Vulnerability Index scores (Lowell, 2025)

Domain	FVI Score
United Kingdom	45.5
Essex	48
Clacton	56.7
Harlow	56
Thurrock	53.5
Basildon and Billericay	53
Southend East and Rochford	52.5
South Basildon and East Thurrock	49.9
Harwich and North Essex	49.1
Colchester	48.9
Chelmsford	47.3
Southend West and Leigh	46.7
North West Essex	46
Castle Point	45.9
Witham	44.4
Braintree	43.4
Rayleigh and Wickford	43.1
Brentwood and Ongar	42.9
Maldon	42.9
Epping Forest	41.8

Note: parliamentary constituencies in the Essex region.

Note: **Red** is above regional and national scores, **Orange** is above national score, **Green** below regional and national scores.

Source: Lowell's Financial Vulnerability Index: [click here](#)

- Money Ready research found that 2 in 3 care-experienced young people (67 per cent) from across the UK were **anxious about their financial situation**. Furthermore, we found that 80 per cent wanted *more help managing their finances* (Money Ready, then known as MyBnk, 2022).
- Our research also found that nearly all local authorities in the UK said they offer financial education to their *in-touch* care-experienced young people. However, our survey of **care-experienced young people said they either could not recall what topics were covered or they did not get support to manage their money** (Money Ready, 2022).

A Local Solution That Works: The Saffron Building Society & Money Ready Partnership

One model already demonstrating real impact in Essex is the partnership between Saffron Building Society and Money Ready. Together, we have delivered financial education programmes to young people across the county, including for young people who are in care or are preparing to leave care, helping them to take their first steps into independent living and building lasting financial confidence.

[Thomas Clark](#) recently wrote about our partnership for the Building Societies Association's magazine, Society Matters, he covered how together we are providing:

- **Practical financial skills training** to help young people manage real-world costs.
- **Small grants of up to £100** to help participants purchase items that support education or employment.
- **Community events** such as Mini Money Masters, where young people can learn money skills in a fun and accessible way.

Through this collaboration, we have mobilised skilled volunteers, sharing practical knowledge about saving, borrowing, and budgeting. Money Ready's expert-led workshops and digital learning tools ensure that young people not only understand how to manage money but also feel confident applying those skills in everyday life, from paying rent to planning for their future.

In the first year of our partnership alone, Money Ready delivered training to more than 200 young people in Essex, over the course of almost 300 hours. That's 200 more young people managing money with confidence, feeling empowered to live independently and hopefully living with greater financial resilience.

Key outcomes show that this partnership approach works:

- 94% felt they had improved their knowledge about money
- 89% had greater confidence managing money
- 87% would make changes to how they money as a result

There was also a 79% increase in those who felt managing money is important, compared learner feedback from before and after our session.

One participant shared: *"Money Ready helped me focus my mind and deal with the hardships and some of the confusion I have in my life."*

A Money Ready delivery partner in Colchester said:

"The content has highlighted significant gaps or misunderstandings [in] student's awareness of finances, and this highlights how important the sessions are for young people."

Recommendations

To make this ambition a reality, we invite local leaders and organisations across Essex to collaborate on a shared commitment to financial inclusion and empowerment for care-experienced young people:

1. Cross-Sector Roundtable

Money Ready will help to convene a roundtable bringing together education, housing, employment, and voluntary sector leaders, to be chaired by a local MP, with the goal of developing a coordinated Financial Education and Inclusion Plan for care-experienced young people in Essex. The roundtable will:

- Map existing support and identify gaps across local services.
- Hear directly from care-experienced young people about their experiences and needs.
- Produce an **Essex Financial Education Action Plan** by Summer 2026, with clear commitments from each sector.

This convening role positions Money Ready as a neutral facilitator and evidence-based expert, ensuring decisions are informed by both data and lived experience.

2. Guarantee Financial Education Access & Build a Sustainable Model

Money Ready seeks to partner with Essex County Council (ECC) to embed high-quality, tailored financial education into all care leaver pathways. This approach will:

- Ensure every care-experienced young person in Essex has access to practical money skills.
- Pilot a scalable, sustainable model for integrated financial education and transition support.
- Track outcomes and share learning nationally to inform future policy and practice, supporting a potential national Care Leavers Guarantee.

3. Develop an 'Essex Care Leaver Financial Resilience Pledge'

We propose creating an Essex-wide **Care Leaver Financial Resilience Pledge**, aligned with the national Care Leavers Covenant, to unite public, private, and voluntary sector organisations behind a shared mission. The

pledge could include commitments such as:

- Providing every care leaver with access to a free Money Ready financial education course.
- Guaranteeing interviews, apprenticeships, or paid work placements for care-experienced young people.
- Funding or in-kind support from local businesses to sustain financial education delivery.

Money Ready and Saffron Building Society will facilitate the development of this pledge, ensuring it is co-designed with care-experienced young people and launched at the Roundtable event.

Appendix: References

- **Barnardo's (2023)**, *No Bank of Mum and Dad*: [click here](#)
- **Become (2024)**, *Support Every Step of the Way*: [click here](#)
- **Building Societies Association (2025)**, *Society Matters: Empowering young people – The Saffron Building Society and Money Ready Partnership* (Thomas Clark): [click here](#)
- **Department for Education (2024)**, *Children looked after in England including adoptions*: [click here](#)
- **Essex County Council (2024)**, *Greater Essex Trends June 2024*: [click here](#)
- **House of Commons Library (2024)**, *Support for Care Leavers*: [click here](#)
- **Lowell (2025)**, *Financial Vulnerability Index*: [click here](#)
- **Money Ready (2022)**, *Do local authorities provide support that care leavers need to help them manage their personal finances and transition into independent living?*: [click here](#)
- **Money Ready (2024)**, *Helping Young Adults with Care Experience towards Financial Wellbeing*: [click here](#)
- **National Audit Office (2015)**, *Care Leavers' Transition to Adulthood*: [click here](#)
- **National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (2022)**, *Impact of Cost of Living Crisis on Care Experienced Young People*: [click here](#)
- **National Youth Advocacy Service (2024)**, *What support are councils offering care leavers in need of private tenancies across England and Wales?*: [click here](#)
- **National Youth Advocacy Service (2024)**, *Challenges Facing Care Leavers*: [click here](#)
- **Nomis (webpage)**, *Labour Market Profiles*: [click here](#)
- **Office for National Statistics (2024)**, *Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)*: [click here](#)
- **Public Health Wales (2022)**, *Preventing homelessness in care experienced individuals*: [click here](#)
- **Rees Centre, University of York, University of Exeter (2024)**, *Care leavers' transition into the labour market in England*: [click here](#)
- **The Children's Society (2016)**, *The Cost of Being Care Free*: [click here](#)

Appendix: Methodology

- Money Ready analysed Department for Education datasets relating to care-experienced young people in the Essex local authority area. We undertook this alongside comparable data from national, regional, and similar local authority areas. These other areas include Hertfordshire, Kent, Norfolk, and Suffolk, which were selected because they either neighbour Essex or neighbour London. Only four local authorities could be included because their datasets were adequate – others local authority dataset had too many missing data items.
- In addition to the above, we also undertook a rapid evidence review of published research. We created a short list of 16 data sources and publications. This evidence base provided us with a clearer contextual picture and deeper understanding about the challenges commonly experienced by care-experienced young people.



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