Money Ready | Saffron Building Society

The Hidden Inequality

Understanding Financial Education Gaps for Care Leavers in Essex

Roundtable Report
April 2026

Introduction

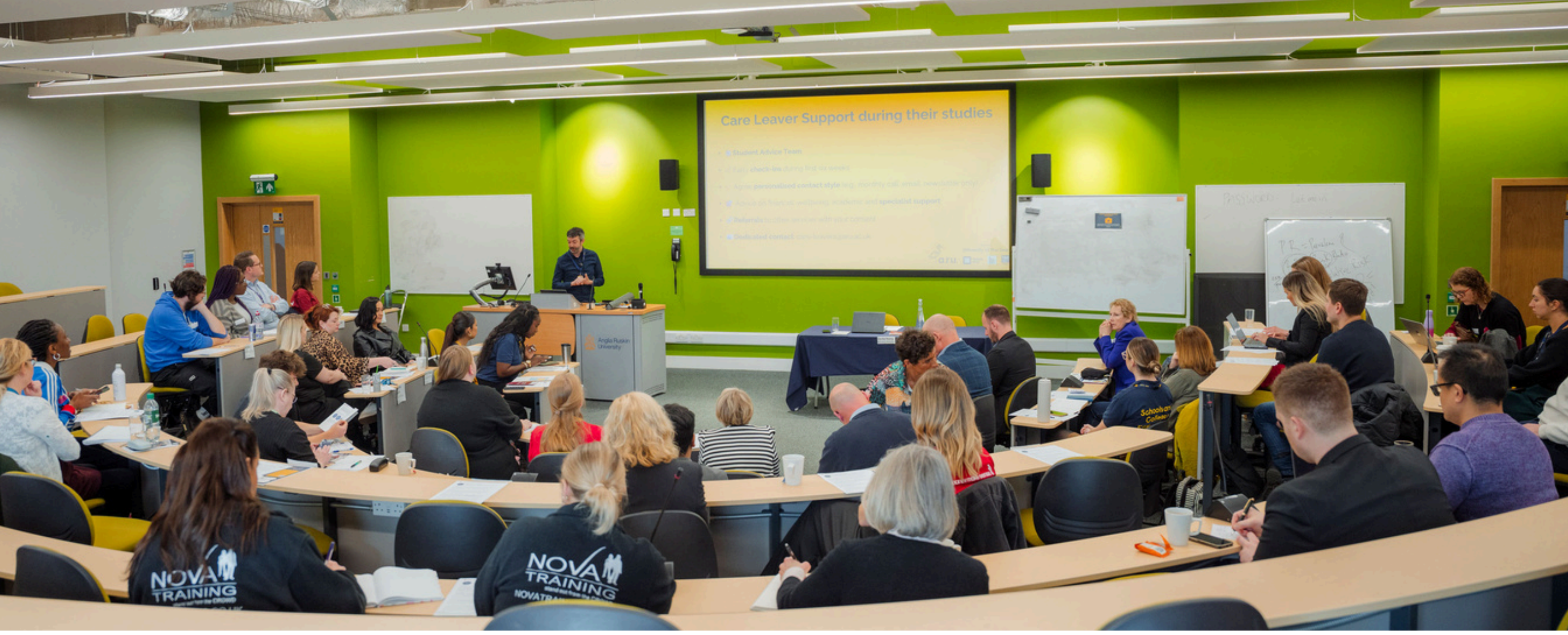
The Hidden Inequality: how can we better support care-leavers in Essex?

Date: Friday 17 April 2026
Location: Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford
Time: 10-11am

The roundtable brought together care-experienced young people, employers, education providers, policymakers, charities, housing professionals and local stakeholders to explore:

- Why outcomes for care leavers and care-experienced young people in Essex remain among the poorest nationally, as revealed by 'The Hidden Inequality – Understanding Financial Education Gaps for Care Leavers in Essex', a data analysis by Money Ready and Saffron Building Society
- The barriers preventing successful transitions into adulthood
- What collaborative action could improve outcomes across housing, education, employment and financial wellbeing
- How practical financial education can form part of the solution

The discussion reinforced the findings of Money Ready's research and highlighted the need for joined-up, preventative and person-centred support. This report outlines recommendations inferred from insights shared by the experts in attendance, including those with lived experience.



Attendees included:

- Leon Ward, CEO, Money Ready
- Colin Field, CEO, Saffron Building Society
- Georgia Downs, ARU
- Shope Fashade, Outreach Officer for Care-leaver and Care-experienced Students, ARU
- Deborah Barker, the named contact for care-leavers at ARU
- Stephanie Doherty, Employability Worker for Care Leavers, Essex Youth Service
- Emma O'Hara, Youth Participation Worker, Southend City Council
- Tyler Ellis, Aliyah Adedapo and Ryana Brown, Southend care-experienced young people
- Marie Goldman, MP for Chelmsford
- Helen Bazuaye, care-experienced writer and advocate for care-experienced young people.
- Fatima Whitbread and Gina Gardiner, Fatima’s UK Campaign
- Charlotte Morrell and Emma Grant, Essex Virtual School
- Perry Norton and Zoe Brampton, Essex Community Foundation
- Pranay Kavathekar and Ryan Nelson, Mitie
- Lourdette Wilks, Barnardo’s
- Tyler Tobin, Money Ready Young Adult programme participant

Key Discussion Themes

1. The transition to independence happens too early and too abruptly

A consistent theme was the “cliff edge” faced by young people leaving care. Participants described many care-experienced young people being expected to manage adult responsibilities significantly earlier than their peers.

While many young adults rely on family support well into their twenties, care leavers are often expected to manage:
- Rent and bills
- Employment pressures
- Housing insecurity
- Benefits systems
- Emotional wellbeing
- Decision-making in isolation

… with little or no safety net.

Several participants noted that the general population often benefits from the “Bank of Mum and Dad”, whereas care-experienced young people frequently face adulthood alone.

Implication:

Leaving care policy and local systems should recognise that independence is a gradual process, not a one-off event at 18, 21 or 25.

2. Housing insecurity is driving poor wider outcomes

Housing was repeatedly identified as one of the biggest barriers to progress. Examples raised included:

- Supported accommodation begins at 18
- High rents and service charges for supported accommodation and temporary accommodation
- Young people reliant on social or council housing even when working full time on entry-level wages
- Benefit tapering meaning work does not always feel financially worthwhile
- Misalignment between wage dates and Universal Credit payments
- Homelessness risk and sofa surfing

Participants emphasised that stable housing is foundational to gaining and maintaining employment, education and wellbeing.

Implication:

Without secure housing, progress in other areas is far harder to sustain

3. Financial education is essential – but must be practical and timely

Participants strongly supported the role of financial education but stressed that it must go beyond generic budgeting sessions.

Young people need practical support on:

- Understanding rent, bills and council tax
- Credit scores, debt and cost of borrowing
- Difference between credit and debit products
- Payslips and tax
- Universal Credit and work incentives
- Better-off calculations when entering work
- Student finance and maintenance support
- Saving habits and crisis planning

There was strong agreement that support must be delivered before key life transitions, not after problems emerge.

Implication:

Financial education should be embedded into leaving care pathways and transition planning.

4. Systems are too complex and hard to navigate

Many participants described benefits, housing and employment systems as confusing, even for professionals.

Examples included:

- Lack of awareness that some benefits can continue while working
- Misunderstanding around PIP / limited capability to work
- Difficulty knowing how extra earnings affect rent or benefits
- Inconsistent advice across services
- Young people disengaging because systems feel impossible to navigate

Implication:

Simplification, better communication and coordinated advice would have immediate impact.

5. Equality is not enough – equity is needed

Several contributors drew an important distinction between equality and equity.

Care-experienced young people often start adulthood from very different circumstances, including:

- Trauma
- Placement instability
- Interrupted schooling
- Lack of family networks
- Limited exposure to career pathways
- Low confidence

Treating everyone the same does not produce fair outcomes.

Implication:

Support should be weighted according to need, with enhanced provision for care-experienced young people.

6. Relationships and belief matter as much as services

Care-experienced speakers highlighted the transformational impact of adults who believed in them.

Examples included:

- Teachers who cared
- Advisers who gave consistent encouragement
- Professionals who helped navigate university or employment
- Seeing role models with lived experience succeed
- Being able to experience unconditional love

Participants noted that aspiration grows when young people feel success is possible.

Implication:

Trusted relationships, mentoring and visible role models should be central to support models, not luck of the draw.

7. Employment systems need reform and employer flexibility

Employers and employment specialists discussed barriers including:

- GCSE-based entry requirements excluding capable young people
- No family support after difficult days at work
- Low-paid work not meaningfully improving finances
- Apprenticeship income triggering housing cost pressures
- Limited awareness among employers about care experience

Implication:

Employers can play a major role through flexible recruitment, mentoring and inclusive progression routes.

8. Education settings need stronger post-16 support

Participants highlighted a gap between school-age support and post-16 provision.

Suggestions included:
- Stronger pupil premium-style funding post-16
- Additional tutors, mentors and work coaches
- Greater aspiration-building in colleges
- Better pathways into university and professions
- Continuity of support during summer holidays

Implication:

The post-16 phase is a critical intervention point.

Actionable Takeaways

Many of the barriers identified were not abstract structural issues, but highly practical friction points: rent due dates, confusing benefit rules, transport costs, poor financial knowledge, lack of trusted advice, and systems that penalise rather than reward progress.

Systemic barriers include:
- UC pay dates vs wages misalignment
- Lack of better-off-in-work calculators
- No clear local directory of opportunities
- Rent costs for working young people
- Lack of pre-tenancy budgeting education
- Summer holiday support gaps
- Credit / BNPL knowledge gaps
- Transport and lunch costs blocking engagement
- GCSE filters in recruitment
- Confusing benefits communication
- Banks to accept student accommodation as permanent addresses where they are permanent

Short-term opportunities for public sector and third sector consideration

1. Create an Essex Care Leavers Financial Inclusion Taskforce
Bring together local authorities, DWP, colleges, employers, housing providers and charities to coordinate action.

2. Embed Financial Education in Leaving Care Pathways
In collaboration with Money Ready, ensure every young person receives structured, practical, impactful money guidance in the two years before independence. This guidance will provide an understanding of how to read a payslip, navigate credit, and make informed borrowing decisions.

3. Provide an Essex 'Better Off in Work' Guide
In collaboration with Money Ready, produce a booklet offering clear local and pertinent guidance showing how earnings affect rent, benefits and take-home income, as well as an understanding of how to read a payslip, navigate credit, and make informed borrowing decisions. Make this guide available both on and offline.

4. Maintain Safe Spaces During Holidays
Keep colleges, hubs and/or community venues open during holiday periods for food, advice and continuity. Provide sufficient storage for personal belongings as there is no option to store items back home/with mum and dad.

5. Expand Role Model and Mentoring Programmes
Work with care-experienced graduates, professionals and community leaders to inspire/mentor others.

Medium-term policy priorities for public sector and third sector consideration

6. Review Housing Cost Pressures for Working Care Leavers
Explore local exemptions, taper reforms or transitional housing support.

7. Strengthen Post-16 Funding and Accountability
Introduce targeted progression support for care-experienced students in FE and sixth forms.

8. Promote Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic
Several participants felt this would materially shift awareness and accountability.

Long-term systemic change recommendations for public sector and third sector consideration

9. Move from Survival to Thriving
The aspiration should not be simply preventing crisis but enabling care-experienced young people to build meaningful, ambitious lives.

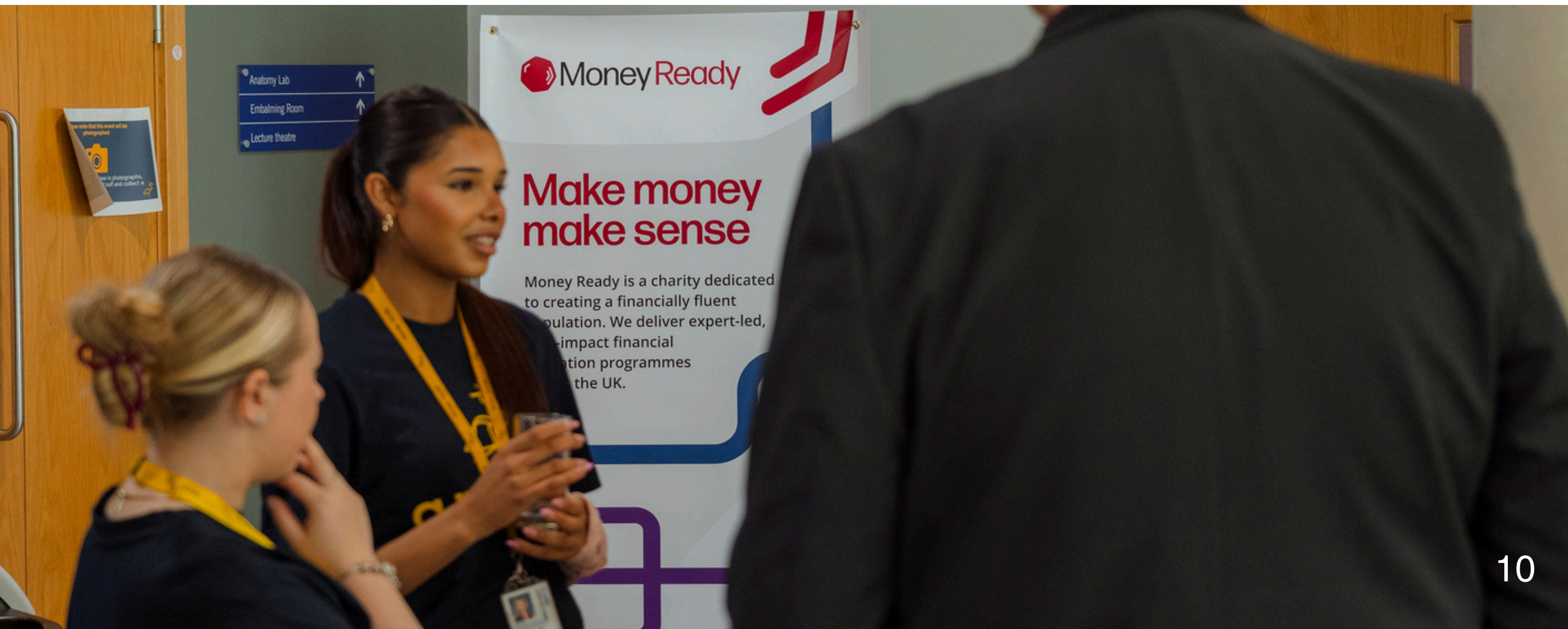
10. Build a Standardised Essex Offer
Young people's outcomes should not depend on geography or "luck of the draw".

Closing Thoughts

The strongest message from the roundtable was that poor outcomes are not inevitable. Care-experienced young people repeatedly demonstrate resilience, talent and ambition. What is lacking is not potential, but systems that match that potential with the right support.

Essex has an opportunity to lead nationally by creating a more joined-up model that combines impactful financial education, housing stability, trusted relationships and pathways into work and learning that result in more opportunities and improved outcomes for care-experienced young people.

In response to this event and our research, we have put together a free Care Pledge resource for employers. Find out more at www.moneyready.org.



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