



LOUISE FAIRCLOTH

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

With the care leaver's bursary due to be increased to £3000 from 1st August there has never been a better time to support care experienced young people into NHS careers and apprenticeships.

Lucy Hunte, National Programme Manager – Apprenticeships at NHS England, had the pleasure of hearing Louise Faircloth speak at the Amazing Apprenticeships Diversity and Inclusion Conference in February and had to follow up on her inspirational story and journey. Louise is a Leaving Care Case Worker in the Leaving Care Team for North Yorkshire Council. Having been care experienced herself she has some very useful and honest insights into how employers can best recruit and more importantly retain these young people.



Louise, please tell us about your personal story:

I was care experienced from age 11 when I was placed into foster care with my siblings and then had several foster families up until I was 18. Then when I turned 18 until I was 25, I was supported by the Leaving Care Team.

I had to move schools in Year 9 which is a very critical year in terms of GCSE options and choices, so my education was disrupted and through no fault of my own I probably didn't have the same opportunities as my peers. I was very conscious that I was perceived as different due to being care experienced. During primary school, before I left my birth mum, my home life was very volatile and rocky and what was classed as naughty behaviour was, just me trying to deal with what was happening at home.

When I moved to senior school things didn't really improve as I was labelled as disruptive and a bad influence. Whenever anything happened in class, even if I wasn't involved, I would be singled out and blamed. So, as well as general teenage angst, I had all these issues to deal with too.



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Due to my childhood and being neglected and then taken away from everything I knew, I did have a very low attention span and being singled out in class just made me retreat and rebel even more. I was never naturally academic and struggled to concentrate and I will always remember one of the teachers telling me that I would never amount to anything in life!

That was kind of standard in terms of low expectations for care experienced young people and being written off. I just felt constantly judged for not having parents who raised me which obviously I had no control over and so I became hardened and didn't want to trust anyone. It just felt that no one considered everything that I had been through and didn't make any adjustments for me. I always felt there was a stigma, and all care experienced people were tarred with the same brush that they would be disruptive and wouldn't get a job or go onto achieve great things.



What was your journey from school to your apprenticeship?

I left school with only couple of GCSE's and I didn't really actually know what I wanted to do but I knew that I enjoyed the practical side of PE (Physical Education). That is where I was excelling so I went to college to do a sports course. Again, due to my home and personal life, I had lots of issues to deal with in the first year. I wasn't in the best of relationships, so my grades suffered but in the second year I left that relationship and turned my grades around and passed with 2 Distinctions.

I then went on to do a degree at Newcastle College. I did Level 4/5 as a foundation degree and then topped up to the Level 6 degree accredited by Teesside University. This was good for me as it eased me into studying at that level and I graduated with a 2:2 and was just a couple of points off a 2:1. This was a huge achievement for me, and I was determined to prove that teacher wrong! I was a care leaver and a foster kid and yet I ended up with 2 degrees!



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I felt like I had had my childhood taken away from me, but I was not going to allow the rest of my life to be affected and I have had that mentality ever since. Through my PGCE, I was working in a care home and saving up for my first mortgage, I don't do things by half!

I wasn't even looking for the apprenticeship role when it came up, I had finished another relationship and I was moving back to North Yorkshire and was just looking for a job to come back to when I saw the **Level 3 Youth Support Worker apprenticeship** being advertised. I had never been told about apprenticeships when I was at school, but it looked like the perfect opportunity for me.

They were offering roles for care experienced young people and more importantly were offering a good living wage. Many employers offer the national apprenticeship minimum wage but if you are a care leaver then that is not enough to be able to support yourself financially, especially as most of the time we are living independently and relying on ourselves. Right from the start North Yorkshire Council felt like a supportive employer.

Before I even started, I had had all my documents and ID stolen from a car which was just a genuine nightmare, but I was worried they would think it was because of my past and having a chaotic life but they were very understanding. I was treated as just a normal person who unfortunately had a bad event happen to them, but I instantly got that fear, that it's going to be that stigma again. And it wasn't. Jonny Hoyle was my manager at the council, and he is an absolute angel and being care experienced himself, I never once felt judged.

We also had a mentor Nicki who we were able to get support from, she navigated us through, along with Jonny, to learn the skills and knowledge we needed to progress in the future. They both have always been so supportive and encouraging even when I was going through some rough times. They never gave up on me and I finished my apprenticeship and was offered a permanent position.



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I am so happy to be in the Leaving care team as obviously due to my background I have a real passion to help other young people exceed expectations. I love it here, it is just such a great team to work for. I get up and I want to come to work because it's just such a supportive environment.

I don't get judged by my colleagues and I also don't get forced to share my own experiences, it is up to me if I would like to discuss anything. I'm literally just one of the team and my background never gets brought up, even though a lot of the people in the service will have known my background without me having to tell anybody.

Jonny even wrote a letter to support and help secure my mortgage application as it was important to me to have my own safe space and a place to call my own. I am now putting my house on the market and I'm able to buy a bigger house due to working my way up through my pay bands. It has meant so much to me to have my own house and have that sense of security that I was not going to be asked to leave.

I was forced into independence a lot earlier than most and I am one of the lucky ones who it's paid off for, unfortunately that is not the case with many care experienced young people. From age 18 they can often be placed in shared accommodation which is not always the best environment for those wanting to work or study due to other tenants' anti-social behaviour and paper-thin walls!

What is your advice for employers wanting to recruit care experienced young people?

I think it is important to look at each candidate as an individual, on a person-by-person basis and don't make assumptions. Ask them about their homelife and what support or adjustments they would find helpful. Also, practical things like help with travel expenses or food until their first salary is paid. With the changes to the Care Leaver Bursary from 1st August, then employers and training providers can also access £1000 so could utilise these to support their new recruits with any additional expenses.



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It is also important that the apprentice has a mentor as well as a line manager who can support with different things like the requirements of the apprenticeship or help with assignments or answer questions around the expectations for the role and little questions on the day-to-day work. That really helped me. Also, other practical things about the reality of the role, like is the office accessible? If the young person can't drive, then can they get to work easily by public transport? When I was doing my apprenticeship one of the other apprentices didn't drive and I did so we found an office space that worked for both of us and there was never any feeling of exclusion because that person couldn't drive. We just made it work and if we were going to joint meetings together, obviously I could drive, or we could get the train together and claim on expenses which was good in terms of our feeling of independence and being trusted.

I think it is fantastic that the bursary has gone up. Mine was £1000 but £3000 payable in 3 instalments during the apprenticeship is amazing. With this though comes responsibility and the employer must liaise with the apprentice's training provider to ensure that basic financial management is covered as part of their induction. Again, it is about not making assumptions based on their backgrounds and supporting the young person to be responsible and manage their own budget plan and behaviour.

More practical solutions are to support with a dress code if there is one? Is smart casual acceptable or is a uniform provided or can they access a grant for formal office wear if needed?

I know there are 350 different job roles in the NHS and it not just clinical roles so if a young person likes IT or Estates & Facilities or Finance or HR then they should look at NHS apprenticeship opportunities.

Employers should ask potential apprentices at interview or in an open discussion if there are any struggles or barriers that they think they might encounter and have a plan in place to support with these. It is important that the young person feels they can trust their employers and be honest if they are struggling with their mental health.



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Another thing to think about are the benefits that these young people can bring to your organisation and the motivation they will bring if it is a role they are passionate about and believe they can progress in rather than a dead-end job. I think incentives could be a good idea for the young person to stay on track even if things do get tough. I love my job so much I never call in sick but for the young people I work with that can often be a sign of other issues at home and their first response is to call in sick rather than ask for help. I always wanted my yearly pay increase, so I made sure my absence was minimal.

Another important thing is equipment. What will they need to do the role and their apprenticeship properly? Is it a laptop or a work phone? All things that the employer and training provider incentives could help with. It felt important to me when I joined the council that this equipment was provided, and I was a trusted and valued part of the team.

The final and probably most important thing is to have an inclusive recruitment process and for the young people to have a designated contact if they need any help with their application or travel costs etc. Young people in general are not good at listing their transferable skills so any support employers could give, or a template with guidance and examples as to what they are really looking for, would be so useful. Also is your application process young person friendly, asking for 3 years' work experience is a barrier for many.



ACCESS APPRENTICESHIPS CARE LEAVERS'
BURSARY GUIDANCE



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What is your advice for employers wanting to recruit care experienced young people?

Go for it! It can be incredibly rewarding for you as an employer but also for that young person. You're giving somebody a sense of value and letting people come into job roles that they really want to do. Also care experienced young people have had to be independent from a young age and have valuable key skills that employers are looking for. They want to make a difference in the world, and I believe if you take a chance on the care leaver, you're probably going to have them in your organisation for a very, very long period of time.

NHS England plan to work with local authorities across the country to support care experienced young people into careers with the NHS. Employers should also look at offering paid work experience to allow easier transition into these roles. Also consider any flexibilities or job carving you can offer. A series of employer engagement webinars and resources are also planned.

