Annual Report 2022

MOMENTUM MADE BY YOU
Our Vision
A society where care-experienced people enjoy opportunity, empathy and respect.

Our Mission
To enable care-experienced young people to achieve their full potential through sustainable and fulfilling employment.

Our Values

WE ARE VISIONARY
We explore, learn and thrive. We ask bold questions, seeking to expand our insight and knowledge to drive leading practice, reframe mindsets and build better futures.

WE ARE PEOPLE-FOCUSED
People are at the heart of everything we do. We lead with commitment, champion individuals with compassion, and nurture aspiration.

WE ARE COLLABORATIVE
We know our strengths and actively pursue opportunities to work with people who make us stronger. We evolve together and build a supportive community that strives to elevate one-another.

WE ARE EMPOWERING
We encourage honest reflection, cultivate self-belief, and enable our community to break down barriers to promote positive change within and around them.
Every week I am reminded of why our work is so necessary. Whenever I meet young people who use our services, I am struck by how much they have to offer employers, and how difficult they often find it to get a foot in the door. It shouldn’t be so difficult for one of society’s most let-down groups to carve out a career which so many of us take for granted.

The Care Review further highlighted many issues which converge to negatively affect our young people, and these issues have been further exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

Drive Forward Foundation has supported more young people than ever before during 2022: over 600. However, the demand for our services has continued to grow. Although we employed two new Careers Specialists in late 2021, our delivery team members continue to operate with full caseloads.

Whilst there is increasing demand from care-experienced young people in London needing support, we have a duty to increase our capacity. Our strategy for 2023 – 2026 is an ambitious one, and it includes our plans to double those we work with to 1200 per year by 2026. This will obviously require additional staff, funding, employment partners and other stakeholders who actively support our mission.

However, our belief in employment as the single biggest protective factor remains. Our work as the conduit to facilitate the transition to employment is paramount in achieving our mission of fulfilling, sustainable employment for Drive Forward beneficiaries. Raising aspirations and achieving potential are also necessary ingredients if our young people are to excel in their work. I would like to thank our amazing staff team, our supporters, funders, mentors, employment partners and everyone else who has contributed to making the young people we work with succeed. Their passion, commitment and drive are what propel us to do outstanding work.

Finally, I would like to say thank you to our fantastic young people, the resilience and potential they offer is our motivation to continue our mission, a mission which is needed more than ever before.

Anton Babey
CEO of Drive Forward Foundation
In conjunction with the John Lewis Partnership’s Building Happier Futures Programme and their aim to be the employer of choice for young people who are care-experienced, we ran a London wide pilot with them in the summer. This pilot included a taster session for young people at our office, followed by a store visit and work experience placement over two days. Those that were interested then had the chance to apply for roles at their work placement location and we were delighted that 9 of our young people were offered roles in retail and warehousing at sites across London.

Tuesday 29th November 2022 was the day of our 4th annual Partner Appreciation event, celebrating the successes of the year and recognising the huge contributions made by so many individuals and organisations. This was the first year that our funders were also invited, and it proved a huge success. This year was also a first for the joint winners of our “Above and Beyond” award, with our panel unable to separate the two finalists. The Crown Estate, who have again supported us with internships, employment opportunities, site visits and have connected us to many of their extended networks, and Central and North West London NHS Trust, who for the second year worked with us to provide 4 year-long internships in business support roles, were both awarded trophies.

Our partner breakfast event held in the last quarter of the year was designed to showcase models of best practice and used as a learning experience for our newest partners. We heard from the Civil Service care-leaver internships scheme, young people who had been employed by partners, Thames Water explained the benefits of working with DFF and others spoke of their plans for the year ahead. The morning also reignited our partner focus groups, who came away with many ideas and plans to improve their offer to our young people in 2023.

Key to our plans for 2023 will be increasing the number of employment partners who can offer opportunities to our young people. Providing bespoke training and valuing ongoing communication between employers, young people, and our team, we will build their understanding of care experience, enable them to establish supportive work environments, and create the best conditions for success.
Expanding our impact

2022 has continued the trend for DFF to support more young people year-on-year into sustainable, fulfilling employment. We employed two more Careers Specialists in late 2021, both to satisfy the increased demand and to deliver the increased numbers required for the Youth Futures Foundation evaluation grant.

During the year, we have increased our reach in terms of the boroughs we have accepted referrals from, and the number of individual referral agencies.

The increased capacity to work with young people, and the improved network of referrers has meant that we have worked with more young people than ever before, 600, and the percentages of those into employment, education and training has also been higher in 2022 than ever before.

We have restructured the Careers Team to promote existing members of staff into management positions, readying the organisation for growth, providing a succession plan for the charity and enabling progression routes to aid staff retention.

Haringey Council commissioned us to deliver employment services to young people in their penultimate and final year at university, preparing young people to access graduate schemes and provide the important link between courses ending and employment starting. This has often been noticed as an important transition point for people if their motivation, confidence and ultimately success is to be maintained.

As we have emerged from the pandemic, we have resumed seeing young people in person again, in local hubs and communities. We have established our in-person service in new local authorities, within Hounslow, Twickenham and Kingston, and are actively seeking other partners for collaboration.

However, our learning regarding virtual delivery has been important and adds another way of working to offer an even more tailored service. Whilst recognising the need to be aspirational with those we work with, introducing them to new work environments, industries and networks, we also champion our values of empowerment and being people-focused, meeting each young person where they are to start their journey.

As we head into 2023, and we increase the numbers of beneficiaries again, we are aware of changes in the employment market, coupled with a shift in how young people approach their careers and the world of work and will look to innovate our services to ensure we remain at the forefront of effective practice.
Building the future through evidence

In January 2022, The Policy Institute at Kings College London began to evaluate our work, a project funded by Youth Futures Foundation to ascertain how we are successful in transitioning care-experienced young people into employment. We have long been aware that our services produced better outcomes than that of a generalist provider but have not had the evidence base to prove exactly why.

Recognising that that our existing database was not capable of producing the detailed data which would help support the evaluation and analysis, we had already begun migrating all existing data over to the new platform. Work then began to tailor it to our exact requirements, simplifying processes and streamlining fields to ensure that data was recorded in a conversational manner conducive to delivering services in a relationship-based, trauma-informed way.

Our ambition has always been to capture the very best data to inform our work, whilst making sure that all data capture is necessary, and effectively used to deliver more successfully in the future. To further this ambition, we recruited an experienced Data and Evaluations Manager in August, who has been instrumental in adapting the database for our needs, training staff in new ways of working, and ensuring that reporting is accurate.

We have also seen an increase in data requirements from stakeholders, funders, referral partners, contract managers, employment partners and government departments. A diverse range of agencies have a vested interest in the development of our robust evidence base and it is our priority to create the data needed to demonstrate our impact over the coming year.

We now consider both hard outcomes (employment, education, training, work placements and experience) and personal skills (life skills development, social connectedness, mental wellbeing, self-efficacy) and their correlation to capture a more holistic representation of those we work with.

However, the most important reason for keeping accurate records stems from our commitment to best serve the young people working with us. Carrying out effective, insightful evaluation of our services means that we will be able to further improve our offer and empower more care-experienced young people to transition into sustainable and fulfilling employment. We want to be innovative and flexible to react to changes in the needs of our young people, and we want to do more of the things which have the greatest impact in their lives. The data we keep needs to facilitate these important cornerstones of our services, and we are committed to these aims going forward.
“Youth Futures Foundation launched the What Works Programme in 2021, awarding funding to grassroots organisations supporting young people facing multiple barriers into employment.

Drive Forward Foundation was awarded funding for their Supporting Care Leavers into Employment Programme, which works with young care leavers aged 16-24. Youth Futures identified Drive Forward’s programme as having the potential to support a rigorous evaluation and to help identify what works in supporting young people leaving care and into employment. We aim to gain an understanding of how Drive Forward’s programme drives employment, education, and training outcomes for the young people they support to enhance the evidence base.

Youth Futures worked with Drive Forward and independently commissioned evaluators, King’s College London, over the past two years, to design and implement programme evaluation and conduct a feasibility study. The feasibility study will explore whether the programme is suitable for a trial to compare the outcomes of people who are supported by Drive Forward and those who receive support as usual from their local authority.

Showing whether this programme leads to improved outcomes for care leavers will help us to advocate and influence policy and practice at a national level so that the right support can be made available more widely.”

Emily Preston-Jones  
Senior Evidence and Evaluation Officer  
Youth Futures Foundation
Our impact

Number of care-experienced young people we've worked with. 600

Young people joined Drive Forward for the first time. 350+

15% built skills through training and work placements.

45% of young people working with our Careers Team moved into employment, education, or training.

5% of young people moved into further / higher education.

Number of exclusive opportunities our Employer Partners have offered to young people working with us. ~70

Young people started full-time jobs. 150+
Why we do it

The number of children going into care keeps on rising.

In 2022, the number of children going into care in England rose to 82,170, up 2% on last year.

38% of care leavers aged between 19 and 21 are not in education, employment or training (NEET) compared to around 11% of all young people aged 19 to 21 years old.

50% of care leavers identify as having mental health needs.

25% of England’s homeless population have been in care.
2022 has been a thrilling year for Drive Forward, characterised by challenges as much as positive change, and most importantly, amazing young people and supporters. Some of my personal highlights include The FriendShip Ball which put a spotlight onto the Friend brother’s incredible adventure of rowing the Atlantic all in support of charities close to their hearts. DFF Ambassador and mental health advocate Farhia took the stage and wowed the audience with her passion, drive, and success in spite of all the barriers that lay in her way. The event raised close to £35,000 and I’m particularly happy that Jack and his brothers continue to support Drive Forward and our young people as dedicated mentors.

Another highlight of the year was working with film director James Webber and creating professional quality films that showcase the fantastic work our young people, partners, and teams are putting into making a difference. I’d like to send a big shout-out to Jasper, Daviona, Bradie, King, and Venus for their incredible creative potential, commitment and patience. Big thank you to James and his partner in everything Poppaea, and the Director of Photography Margarida Gaspar.

Juno Schwarz
Director of Fundraising, Policy & Communications

I joined Drive Forward in late 2021. At first, I experienced emotional struggles as I listened to the life stories of the young people I worked with, particularly those who had experienced homelessness, lived in poverty, and dealt with unstable living conditions due to temporary and shared accommodations. These difficult circumstances, combined with poor mental health, made it difficult for them to find work.

In 2022, my main challenge was establishing trust with the young people I was assisting. I noticed that those I met in person were more actively engaged with me, and I couldn’t help but feel guilty for not being able to reach out to everyone. I questioned whether I was doing a good job and fulfilling my responsibilities. However, by the end of 2022, I noticed that many of the people I had initially contacted at the beginning of the year, and had never given up on, had returned to seek my assistance. This was a turning point for me and made me keep doing my job to the best of my abilities every day.

What makes me most proud is the success I’ve had in assisting many of these young people in finding and keeping employment, even six months later. It was truly rewarding to see their confidence and mental well-being improve. It gives me great joy to be able to help these young people and take a part in changing their lives. Also, when young people I’ve worked with reach out to me and let me know about job opportunities at their jobs, it makes me extremely proud. In fact, many of DFF young people now become DFF ambassadors. Their act of kindness and willingness to help others is a perfect example of how our organisation has improved their lives.

Shereen Taha
Careers Specialist
I was recommended to join Drive Forward during Covid. At the time I was finishing my last year of university studying International Politics and I was worried about securing employment.

I began working with Nicholl who helped me understand what kind of roles were out there for me, what I was really interested in, and how to narrow my search for a suitable employment.

Nicholl also helped me perfect my CV so I felt more confident in sending it out to people. I was also introduced to Megan, who was managing the Policy Forum back then, and was able to build a relationship with her based on our similar interests in politics and policy. I was then given an opportunity to join the Policy Forum and give back.

My most prominent memory of Drive Forward was Nicholl’s support in applying for the Civil Service Care Leaver Internship. We had several zoom calls to go through the application, pin point my experience and then writing the application together. When I successfully got to the interview round, I was offered mock interview practice, which helped me get used to the type of questions they could ask.

I was also invited to go to an interview and networking session at Baringa – one Drive Forward’s partner employers - which was super useful. I received tons of feedback on my interview skills and learned how to perfect them.

On the day of my real interview, I was able to use the Drive Forward office, which meant I had a quiet place to talk and a secure internet connection.

What I love the most is that the support doesn’t end once you get a job, and I felt supported throughout my placement. It had been quite tough entering the world of work but it was amazing to have Nicholl’s support during it, knowing I could call and ask for advice or just someone to talk to while things were difficult.

I was also able to receive bespoke counselling with Richard Barnardo which probably saved my life. This provided me with the support I needed during a tough time. The counselling service was so vital to my mental wellbeing and helped me during different events in my life.

I am currently at the end of my internship and back to job hunting. Nicholl has been helping me perfect my job applications and sending me possible job opportunities.

My favourite thing about Drive Forward is that the support doesn’t stop just because you’re at a certain milestone. Regardless of whether my mental health was better or I had a job, I knew there was support if and when I needed it. I knew that there was someone to talk to, which is vital to any young person, especially care leavers who often don’t have a network of support.
Nicholl has been a very special person in my life for a very long time and has been extremely supportive to me since the very day I met her. Her endless support and contagious persistence have really rubbed off on me. She always reminded me that someone had my back, even during the toughest and darkest times of my life.

She was always there for me whenever I was on the lookout for a job, assisting me in everything from fixing my CV, to recommending potential opportunities, to providing tips for my interview process, and even post-interview follow ups to ensure I’m comfortable with my options and ready to take on new career adventures that suit me and my needs. I felt that her approach was specifically tailored to my personality, which has been very effective in my career progression.

Most recently I came back from Dubai after an impulsive decision I had made to quit my job at HMRC and relocate to Dubai for an opportunity I thought I couldn’t miss out on. I didn’t feel Nicholl’s disappointment or dissatisfaction with me, she respected my choice to do so and supported my journey throughout my decisions and when I returned to the UK in November, Nicholl didn’t waste any time picking up where I had left; seeking work AGAIN for the hundredth time. She is relentless in her efforts and absolutely refuses to give up on me which in turn makes me not give up hope.

I am gladly now working as a Receptionist at Metro Bank Headquarters, and I can say I’m really excited about this upcoming period in my life. This is all thanks to Nicholl and her never ending support and encouragement!

Furthermore, I am not the best person when it comes to attending events, however, I appreciate that Nicholl always had a minute to spare for me. She always picked up my last-minute phone calls, that sometimes went on for long periods of time due to pouring myself out to her and explaining my goals. She always assisted me further and gave me ideas on how to go about achieving those goals. She was always attentive to my never-ending needs and prompt with her actioning when I kindly requested something of her such as checking my CV and Cover letters!

I couldn’t be happier that I have Nicholl in my life and the fact that she goes above and beyond for me and acts not like it’s her job but because it’s her passion.
I was studying for my A-levels when I was first introduced to Drive Forward in 2020. Knowing that me and my sister wanted to join some sort of youth club or group, my then carer showed us a poster, and we decided to give it a try.

The first person I met from Drive Forward was Claudia. She helped me and my sister a lot throughout the time we spent on the Breakthrough programme. In my case, Claudia supported me with researching different universities and checking over my personal statements. She encouraged me and my sister to get involved in other activities put on by Drive Forward, which helped me expand my social skills and meet other young people who participated.

In 2022 I began working with Nicholl, who helped me look for jobs as well as putting diverse events on my radar such a Drive Forward networking event where I got to meet business owners, people from different business departments and had the opportunity to ask them questions about their careers.

I found this helpful because I needed some insight into different careers. I had just finished my course at university and wanted to learn more about the different careers available to me.

Having learned more about what I was looking for, Nicholl kept sending me jobs which I could check out if I was interested. She would also support me with applications, which ultimately landed me the job I am in right now, a 12-months Internship at the Civil Service.

So far, I am finding the internship with the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service) interesting. I am getting a whole new insight into what such a job involves. As part of my work, I was even able to attend court and see how the court system in the UK works which I found particularly fun to do. I enjoy working for the CPS so far. However, further down the line I either see myself back at university or in a job in the creative sector.
Youth Programmes: Lessons Learned

“When I first joined Compass, I went to the meeting spot and I entered a building full of people that were actively strangers. However, there was one thing in common with all of us: we all had some experience in the care system. It felt very validating to hear our shared stories every time we met up.”

- Compass Programme Participant

As a charity, we had been supporting care-experienced young people aged 16-26 into sustainable employment for almost a decade before embarking on an exciting new journey in 2019. Backed by The Clothworker’s Foundation and The Mercer’s Charitable Foundation, we developed two distinct pilot programmes accompanying looked-after children and young people aged 13+ over a period of three years.

The Compass Programme was developed specifically to provide additional support, skills and development opportunities for looked-after children in London to aid their transition from secondary education into the next phase of their lives; from further education, to training, to semi-independent living.

Over the course of three years, Compass used the MAD model to instigate positive long-term change and development:

**M – Motivation**
Participants focused on personal development, problem solving and an understanding of self to enable them to deploy their passions.

**A – Action**
Participants focused on education, career and identification of transferable skills.

**D – Develop**
Participants focused on the development of their ideas, aspirations and understanding of their pathway from education to adulthood.

Compass was the first of our programmes to fully adapt to virtual delivery in 2020. Amidst a long-term project with PhotoVoice, the young people bravely rose to the challenge and all of them completed the project. We hosted many virtual learning events and workshops throughout multiple lockdowns, and Drive Forward partners kept on supporting young people on their journeys.

The programme changed leadership in 2021. In the capable hands of our new programme manager, Compass consistently achieved the highest turnout when it came to reintroducing in-person events, a testament to the supportive and positive community the participants had formed.

One of the highlights was definitely the Compass residential trip to Kent in 2022, which saw young people participate in loads of fun activities including abseiling, kayaking, low ropes, swimming as well as team sports competitions.

“One thing I learnt is that there’re, like, lots of hobbies like rock climbing and kayaking that I want to pursue when I’m older and when it’s more accessible to me.”

Compass – Navigating Your Own Way

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After running the programme for three years, our programme managers identified 4 key factors of success:

**Multi-agency approach**: Building a supportive network of people and resources around each young person, we worked with foster carers, Social Workers, health services as well as virtual schools, and teachers.

**Flexibility, patience, and persistence**: Recognising that navigating the world as a teenager is hard and giving individuals the space and support to learn and grow at their own pace.

**Fostering curiosity**: Exposing young people to a variety of new experiences, allowing them to broaden their horizon, feel inspired, and increase aspiration.

**Providing options and opportunities**: Enabling individuals to actively experience different environments, meet people from various backgrounds, and encourage them to seize opportunities when they arise.

And the **Winner** is...

We are beyond proud that our Breakthrough Programme won the 2022 Children & Young People Now Awards in the Leaving Care category.

The awards recognise and reward innovative and outstanding practice in supporting disadvantaged children, young people and families to lead happy, healthy and successful lives. In 2022, more than 450 entries were received, out of which 115 have been short-listed across the 23 awards categories representing dozens of organisations from the sector, including local authorities, public sector agencies, children's charities, membership bodies and private providers.
Before joining Breakthrough, I transitioned from secondary school and I was not attending school that well and missed many classes. My Social Worker at the time introduced me to the Breakthrough programme and I decided to try it.

I did not know anyone who was also in care – at least not really – and I thought it was a good opportunity to get to know other young people that are in care.

I managed to turn my engagement in school around and that really helped to improve my grades. I completed year 11 with good GCSEs and was able to create options to keep studying. I then completed a course in Sports Leadership Level 2 and 3.

Breakthrough really helped me to push myself and make use of all sorts of different opportunities that I would not have access to otherwise. Like for example doing “Go Ape” or the Musical “&Juliet”. It also just helped me to socialise more and grow as a person.

I think the main skill I got from it though, was to learn to stop overthinking too much and to just go for an opportunity when it presents itself.

I did some work as a sessional worker training young people to play football and be a team and I only recently completed a traineeship course in security where I gained some work experience.

When Breakthrough finished, I began working with Felix. It’s been great, but it’s a lot different to Breakthrough. It is a little similar to the change from being in care and having a Social Worker, to being a “care leaver” and having a Personal Advisor. I am asked to be more independent and I feel I carry more responsibility.

With Breakthrough, it was mainly the social side of things, meeting other people and doing activities. Working with Felix really is about getting a job. He helped me a lot with it. But I still need to get used to the being responsible now for my life and a future job.

Felix and I mainly met on Teams and he gave me many interview tips, like using the STAR technique for example. He also taught me how to make an application much more appealing.

He helped me to focus on the application for the Civil Service internship! That is a big success.

On the one hand, I am very proud that I got it. On the other hand, I know that it is a big jump up and I feel a bit nervous about it.

It would be great if Felix can continue to help me in the future and when I start the job. Like, I want to know how the work will be like and what to expect.

My highlight so far is just the people that run the programme and support me. Claudia always was so encouraging and giving me opportunities to grow.

What I take away from the youth programme and working with Felix is that I try to take as many possibilities and options as I can get. I want to learn more and to grow as a person. I believe in my own abilities and in myself, even if it is a bit scary sometimes to carry new responsibilities.

In the future, I want to have an even better idea of what I want to do. I want to save some money and learn ways to have more financial security. I would also like to keep growing my networks and to keep my friendships or develop new ones.
Youth Programme Impact
Youth Programmes Impact 2019 – 2022

97 young people started
74 young people completed
197 events hosted
1057 one-to-one meetings

Compass
- 24% increase in self-esteem
- 18% increase to individuals’ emotional wellbeing
- 27% increase in individuals’ attitude and feelings towards their friends
- 12% increase in resilience
- 15% increase in individuals’ attitude and feelings towards school

Breakthrough
- 12% remained or re-engaged in education
- 45% upskilled themselves by doing a training
- 42% started paid employment
- 100% reported an improvement in their well-being

“Breakthrough gives you the opportunity to be whoever you want to be. If you let them know who you want to be, they are there to guide you for you to be able to achieve your goals.” Lucy, 15.

“Compass has impacted me through their study socials. We were able to meet professionals and get help from them in subjects where we needed more support in. So, there was like English, Maths, Spanish and ICT study sessions. I have gotten a Maths tutor and together we went through a couple of things which was really helpful and great to see that Compass was organising things that would actually help us. I know for some of us we would like to see ourselves as confident to begin with but Compass has allowed us to like reinforce that in a sense. It has given us the space to express our confidence and build our self-esteem even.” Kieran, 15.

“All of my young people became clear with what they would like to do in the future and what opportunities are available to them. This also helps the young people feel more prepared and reassured about the next steps for them.” Social Worker.
When evaluating our two pilot programmes, Compass and Breakthrough, our biggest finding was that the right level of support at key transition stages effectively prevented negative developments and promoted positive engagement.

When compared to other young people of the same age working with us, programme participants overall experienced fewer school drop-outs or placement breakdowns, as well as a lowered risk of gang affiliation. In fact, they showcased a higher level of educational engagement, stronger social networks, a more future-oriented approach to life.

We found that our expert interventions were most successful with young people in year 11 and 12 (ages 15-17). This is when young people not only face GCSE exams and have to decide what to do next, but it’s also a crucial period in their leaving care journey. It’s when they’re supposed to decide on their future goals and aspirations, putting them into a so-called Pathway Plan, in which their Social Worker will assess and describe their predicted needs and support levels for the years to come.

Combining the benefits of targeted community building work and 1:1 coaching, ASPIRE was designed as a short-term-high-impact programme lasting for 6-months. Bringing together fun social activities, targeted career insight and skills development sessions, as well as personalised guidance and support, the programme pursues three main three goals:

• Help our young people connect to each other, build confidence, trust and access exciting career insights/opportunities
• Keep young people engaged in education and get a better understanding of their desired career paths
• Prepare young people for the transition into leaving care

By September, we recruited approximately 40 young people, most of which will have completed the ASPIRE programme by April 2023.

Working on the ASPIRE programme was an experience I will not be in a hurry to forget. It has given me more insight into the need for young people in care to be exposed to different opportunities; both fun and career-related/educational. It emphasised the importance of early intervention in our communities. ASPIRE has truly and positively impacted all the young people who actively engaged throughout the programme. We had a diverse range of youths who are special in their own way and did really well to respect and accommodate each other. Some of our cohort expressed how vital ASPIRE was because it helped regulate their mental health and gave them a chance to form strong relationships with their peers outside of our monthly events. I am grateful I had this opportunity and it made me realise how much care-experienced individuals deserve to take part in aspects of life that come easy or easier to other young people. It was rewarding and it was priceless getting to know all of my young people and acting in their best interest. Every now and then, they reminded me why I chose this career path.

Daniel Dwumfour, ASPIRE Progression Coach
Kelsey's journey to becoming a psychotherapist came out of a career in teaching, as she observed the impact of stress, anxiety and trauma on the well-being of both students and staff. Kelsey seeks to bring empathy, compassion and research-driven practices to the therapy room to support clients as they move towards a value-driven life.

Born out of a chance meeting in a dance class and an ensuing friendly conversation, the partnership between the Drive Forward and Power to Live Foundations began in February 2022. Our two organisations make a great match, with similar values and an appreciation of the impact of mental health on the long-term success of care-experienced young people. Since then, the collaboration has grown, expanded, and impacted over twenty young people with more than 230 behavioural psychotherapy sessions delivered to date.

At Power to Live, we approach psychotherapy from a behavioural change perspective. Our clients are encouraged to detach from their thoughts in pursuit of meaningful action. The goal is to support clients in acknowledging the impact of their past experiences on their present behaviour, whilst also validating their pain. The success of treatment relies heavily on fostering trust and building a strong therapeutic relationship. Helpful behavioural change is reinforced and practised in-session. Clients are encouraged to carry their pain, anxiety and challenges along with them whilst moving towards a value-driven life of their own creation.

Working with the young people of Drive Forward comes with a high degree of complexity at times. The impact of being care-experienced on a young person cannot be underestimated. Attachment trauma often makes positive relationship building difficult, increases hypervigilance, and can contribute to ongoing mental health concerns. Some of the young people experience symptoms of complex trauma such as flashbacks, reliving, wariness of support, suicidal thoughts and poor emotional regulation skills. Building trust and encouraging engagement with the therapeutic process requires a high level of patience, reinforcement and compassion. To better meet their psychological needs, we have increased our own internal training, supervision and therapist support.

Although working with care-experienced young people comes with challenges, it is also incredibly rewarding. They are courageous and willing to confront their difficult pasts. The young people are resilient, compassionate towards others and grateful for our support. Being able to help a young person feel accepted, empowered and prepared to take valued action is incredibly gratifying. As therapists, we also gain an opportunity to learn and improve our skills. In engaging with the complexity of and supporting Drive Forward’s young people, we too are challenged, changed and given the chance to make meaningful connections. We must also practice what we teach: the difficult emotions and thoughts are inevitable, yet we control our choices. Being willing is what matters.

Breaking down barriers to progression: A bespoke Counselling Service

Power To Live: It’s not ‘just’ therapy

Kelsey Wiemer, Senior Therapist and COO
For the fourth year, Barnardo Counselling offered consistent therapeutic support, working with 40 young people. This includes 12 individuals receiving additional support as part of our Low-Cost Service offer. Following 12 free sessions, DFF clients have the option of accessing this service at a 50% rate.

**Kim, 25**

“I have had 11 weeks of free Counselling with Barnardo Counselling through Drive Forward, it has been amazing and very useful. It provided me with the opportunity to explore and discuss some of the trauma I have experienced in and out of Foster Care in a safe environment. The Counsellor, Richard, was very friendly and supportive, he gave me some practical and helpful tips for dealing with anxiety... Overall, it is an amazing and a very vital service that is offered to Care Leavers for free and has the potential to really transform a Care Leavers’ life.”

**Sarah, 26**

Hi, my name is Sarah, I’m 26 years old and I live in South London. I first came to Drive Forward in 2018 when I was looking for part-time work. I started with Richard some time ago (possibly less than a year but it feels longer as to how comfortable I am with him!) and have counselling once a week.

Being comfortable with a counsellor has been something quite important to me as I’ve had counselling over 10 years with multiple services. However, it came to an end due to travel, strict times, and feeling uncomfortable and unimportant when discussing my sensitive past of domestic violence growing up, and it was made into a joke by a counsellor. I don’t feel confident going back to this type of service.

I also experienced extremely long waiting times where my mental health would have suffered during this time, affecting my studies and ability to mother and uphold my home. This is an area I needed help in and couldn’t find it elsewhere.

I cannot express enough how lucky I feel to have been offered the opportunity to take up these sessions with Richard. He is someone who has shown to be very skilful in his psychological approaches and uses his work experiences to advantage this even more. For example, when addressing my needs as a client and making me feel important, cared about and listened to.

Richard, from the start, had made it clear that it needs commitment from the both of us working together, like a team. He has always followed my lead which has seen to improve my mental health and supported that ability to be open and use my voice. As well as being flexible with time and cater to my busy schedule, he has always shown patience and worked towards what was best for me.

Richard goes above and beyond in providing additional help outside of the sessions to support me throughout the week, based on what we focused on during our session. This is something I’ve not seen a counsellor do before. I find it extremely useful in my ‘recovery’ or road to understanding myself more and bettering my mental health.

Receiving information on the areas I’m struggling with helps me to build skills on how to get a better understanding of those areas and know of the various ways to challenge them. Also, it’s been very wholesome in gaining a sense of who I am and why I am behaving in certain ways or how areas of my life are affecting me in a negative way.

How to change and challenge this positively affects the way I’m present and communicate with others; how I deal with situations in a healthier way and reach my full potential through this way. All of this helps me to live a happy and fulfilled life away from all the trauma I experienced as a child and the damaging thoughts that I carry.

The outcome of these sessions every week builds upon the ability and strength I have to challenge my anxiety, depression and other areas - and it has been evident to how it works. I feel so much better about myself currently and better equipped with the relevant tools to express my emotions than I ever did before!

Even though I have felt success from the sessions, it is important for the sessions to continue as it’s a continuous process and extremely hard to do it alone. As I wouldn’t have the resources and may give up on the challenge. Every week there does tend to be stress or the realisation that I want to speak to someone about it.
Stories from our partners and mentors

Steven & Laura: Strategic Mentoring

Stephen and Laura met in March 2022. “I wanted more of a strategic work mentoring relationship rather than a ‘let’s hang out in town kind of thing,” says Laura. She first heard about Drive Forward at university in Manchester and initially got involved with the Policy Forum before moving to London for work.

Laura remembers that one of her top priorities was to rebuild her network in the capital. “It’s very isolating. London is a big place.” What made it even more challenging for her, was the fact that she had just made the jump from the charity sector into the corporate world.

“When I moved into corporate it was a totally different world, like its management is so different. Where I was before, my manager was very supportive and I’d talk to them all the time. But then I moved into a sales environment where all they care about is figures.”

It was clear to Laura that she didn’t need hand-holding, but that she would clearly benefit from someone to talk to who could offer some guidance. She wanted someone “at the top of their game, who I could aspire to.” Stephen definitely fits that profile. His board level career stretches back over 30 years in housing and banking, holding positions ranging from Finance Director to Managing Director, and now CFO.

Stephen previously supported another young person with their business plan when he learned about Laura. “Drive Forward rang me up and said to me: We’ve got this young girl. You’ll really like her. She’s just like you.” The two of them went straight to work and over a couple of hours created a mind-map of Laura’s goals and aspirations, her beliefs and challenges.

“It was very trusting, and very comfortable. Very early in the relationship, I’d say. Very strongly boundaried, which is what it needs to be. It’s just been so rewarding,” Stephen explains.

Over the past 12 months, Laura has seen some major achievements including being headhunted, promoted, and doubling her salary. One of the biggest goals she was able to tick off was owning her own place. “My biggest thing was. I wanted to buy at 25”. And so, one day Laura walks into Stephen’s office with 6 inches worth of paperwork.

“I suppose having a mentor was just to have somebody that could guide me through how to apply for things properly, like when I was about to buy my flat, having someone to read my mortgage papers because I had no idea what any of it meant. Thankfully Steve said ‘don’t worry’ and guided me through it,” she remembers.

When the two of them are not scraping through mortgage applications, they talk about Laura’s professional future. About their relationship Laura says, “He is someone I could talk to weekly about what to expect in the world of work, and I didn’t really have that before. He takes me through how you manage up, how you manage down. Or to talk through why I’ve had a bad day at work.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s that difficult being a mentor,” Stephen remarks, “as long as you can listen and just reflect. You don’t perhaps have the answers, but you can reframe the issue and put the question in a different way. All the answers came from her.”

Stephen has lived experience of the care system himself and understands better than anyone the difference positive relationships can make in a young person’s, and everyone’s, life. “When you come through more difficult backgrounds, you always have that imposter syndrome. You always feel, you know, that you’re not as good as everybody else. And the vast majority of what we end up doing is really reframing Laura’s questions. It’s just been lovely getting to know her, and watching her thrive and grow and reach objectives like buying her own flat. And you know, we got the mind map out again probably about three months ago and many elements of her checklist were ticked off.”

But Laura’s checklist is by far not completed, “In the long run, I think teaching is something I’d really want to go into. If I stay in the corporate world, there’s lots of impact-driven and CSR roles available, which I might be looking into in the next 10 years, just to see what it is they’re looking for.”

When we asked Laura whether Stephen would be part of that journey, she smiles and says, “Yes, massively! It’s really good to have somebody I can talk to about work, about life, somebody who just kind of gives up guidance as and when and also doesn’t just give you their opinion. It’s just nice to have someone who is willing to spend the time and invest the time in you. I’m a massive believer in mentoring.”
“My main motivation to come to work every day is to develop, to be influential, to make some change, and to become valued member of society.”

Approximately 12% of care-experienced young people attend university compared to over 40% of their peers. With this in mind, Habtom was quite exceptional. He first came for opportunities to gain experience in his chosen field before building a career within the energy sector.

Whilst we come across many young people who are very eager and motivated to succeed, it’s not often that our Careers Specialists get to hear such specific career goals. A breath of fresh air, a challenge, a chance to test how versatile our network of business partners across the capital really is!

“Drive Forward and the Crown Estate

“The partnership came about because of my experience of working with Drive Forward through my previous role at Lambeth Council,” says Callum Simpson, National Skills and Training Partnerships Manager.

Over the past decade, the number of children and young people going into care has consistently increased across the UK. What hasn’t changed, is that 40% of those coming out of the care system (19–21-year-olds) are not in employment, education, or training.

“I recognised the great work that Drive Forward do in supporting care-experienced young people across London. At the Crown Estate, we want to support the people in the community who need the support most... we want those opportunities to be going to those people that it benefits the most where we can make the most impact.”

Over the past three years, The Crown Estate have supported Drive Forward and our young people with offering work placements, running employability skills training and interview prep events, as well as providing financial and in-kind support including a bespoke tech fund.

“My most memorable moment of working with the Drive Forward Foundation,” Callum recalls, “is working with Habtom and seeing him progress within the organisation.”

Getting a foot in the door

It wasn’t clear from the outset that Habtom would be successful. When we introduced him to The Crown Estate, he still needed to undergo a stringent application process.

“I spent a lot of time filling out the application form and the questionnaire,” he remembers. “I forgot to attach the cover letter and this might have been the end of it.” But it wasn’t. The Crown Estate got in touch with Habtom and gave him another chance. “Young people, especially care leavers, need support like this.” Whilst he wasn’t successful with this initial application, he was now on The Crown Estate’s radar and able to gain feedback and advice on his application as well as future career steps.

“There was a continuous period of engagement and when the government released its Hydrogen Strategy and there was an opportunity with us. Habtom’s skillset, experience and knowledge, seemed like a really great fit,” Callum explains.

And so, Habtom started his 3-months internship in the Marine Department.

The Head of Engineering, Adrian Fox, had put together a brief outlining the businesses’ strategic needs in the Hydrogen sector and Habtom was put straight onto it. “When I first saw that one page, I thought like, I’m going to finish it within a few days,” Habtom recalls. But as Callum puts it “it was a challenging brief, something that we would probably have instructed a consultant agency to go away and produce a piece of work and report back.”

“I used that challenge as an opportunity to showcase my capabilities,” says Habtom whilst recognising all the support he received and what he needed to learn, grow and complete the project successfully within the three months of his internship. Having proved himself, he then applied for another 6-month contract, before gaining a permanent position last year.

Driving Change with The Crown Estate
Driving Change with The Crown Estate

It takes a village...

Drive Forward have supported close to 1000 care-experienced young people into sustainable employment in London. But we could have never done it on our own. We worked with hundreds of employers, local authorities, universities and other organisations over the years to ensure that each young person has a supportive network that enables them to thrive.

In 2022 alone we trained over 200 line-managers, 50 mentors, and entire teams to empower them to create nurturing work environments, celebrate diversity, and provide opportunity for each individual.

Having provided several work placements previously, The Crown Estate already knew that every young person is different and that there’s no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to supporting them. This was especially true for Habtom’s line-manager.

“One of the things I was most impressed with, was Adrian and his approach to line-management,” Callum explains, “it’s been a while since he managed somebody as junior as Habtom, and he was considered and reflective of his management style. He recognized that he had to adapt.”

At the same time, Callum took on the role of a sounding board for Adrian and a mentor for Habtom.

“The three of us being joined-up helped massively... If there was any feedback from Adrian, I could work with Habtom around that feedback and vice versa as well.”

This approach allowed Habtom to feel valued, engaged, and supported on his personal and professional journey. “I think a good line-manager is creating opportunity,” he says. “Everyone is talented, but you need that opportunity to show your talent.” At the same time, a good line-manager needs to recognise that “failure doesn’t define a person” and organisations need to accept that “care leavers have specific qualities like resilience and being mature” due to the fact that they had to grow up so much faster.

Habtom was only 14 when he left his family. At 15, he was living with ‘strangers’ who he “tried to accept as family”. Whilst he was confident in his ability to look after himself, he recognises the lack of networks care leavers have. “There’s no one to hold your hand and introduce you to people... employers should have tailored programmes that can set them up for success.”

Social impact and business success go hand in hand

One of the biggest challenges for employers and individuals alike is to build mutual trust and understanding whilst honouring and respecting each other’s positions. To do so, employers need to create the space and opportunity allowing young people to feel safe and supported.

“Lived experience is so important. Really understanding what it’s like to be in somebody’s shoes from a different background and different perspective... and using that as a collective voice to help effect change within the business,” Callum points out. “But also, highlighting the success stories of people like Habtom... and showcasing how great these people are in their roles.”

Habtom reiterates that he had never been open about his care experience before, not in the workplace.

“So, the first time I came to The Crown Estate, and they started being open about it, it showed me that I’m not only receiving support, but that also with my story, with who I am, I can support other people.”

Habtom’s journey in The Crown Estate is a really good example of how businesses can adapt and change “whether that’s through our recruitment processes, the types of individuals that we’re looking to now bring into the business... it feels very different to when I first joined the business,” Callum says. He admits that, “we’re never going to get everything right... but what we can do is make sure that once we deliver a pilot, we learn from it. We review the processes and the systems.”

Habtom has shared his life story with colleagues, other teams, and other Drive Forward employers to inspire and motivate them to do more to drive effective change. He points out that, “flowers are beautiful because we see different kinds of colours and diversity and inclusivity is like literally the same thing. To see the beauty of a society, you have to accept diversity and inclusivity.”

What the future holds

Habtom is certain that his life will continue to take him to unexpected yet beautiful places, and he has big dreams. “As an engineer, I want to solve problems like the energy crisis, for example, the lack of infrastructure in the UK and globally. But beyond that, my main motivation to come to work every day is to develop, to be influential, to make some change, and to become valued member of society.”
In Partnership with John Lewis

“I’m a Futures Analyst and you can be one too.”
At John Lewis Partnership, Nova has not only found a career she is proud of and passionate about, but also a work environment and family she wouldn’t want to miss.

In 2021, Nova had been unemployed for about a year and had not found anything financially stable or intellectually satisfying. At 21, her CV read like a mosaic of industries, jobs, and sectors. She had dipped her toe into hospitality, retail, film, social media, hairdressing, and administration. Nova had tried it all, but hadn’t found a career that would allow her to pay the bills and follow her passions.

“When I first met Nova, I saw a young woman with all this potential that had just not been tapped into yet,” says Nova’s Careers Specialist Felix Fry. Initially, the two of them were talking about getting Nova ready to apply for a 12-months placement with the Civil Service, but then another opportunity popped up on their radar.

“If you told me at 18 that I would be here I wouldn’t believe you. I didn’t know this job existed. I’m a Futures Analyst! Now, I can think about a career and everything makes more sense. If you don’t go to university and don’t have that path laid out, you’re unsure as to what to do. I’ve really found my purpose here. I feel listened to, heard and valued.”

I met Nova and her manager, John Vary, at their ‘science den’ and recently repurposed podcasting studio somewhere within the walls of John Lewis’ head offices in Victoria. After signing in, John picked me up at the main entrance and we began our journey through heavy steel doors, past a grand storage hall, and along LED-light corridors. Then a sharp right and through another small door into a small office where Nova was already waiting for us.

The room reminds me more of an inventor’s lab than a fancy London office. A big white desk in the middle with some laptops and a microphone; some woodworking machinery, other crafts material, and a variety of items stored all around. John points to the wall behind me,

“At one point that wall was covered in all the possible roles of people in 2042 linked to their place in the household.”

In my head I now have an image of a wall plastered in photos and images, with post-it notes, pins and threads linking one piece to the other. Like you know them from any modern crime series.

John is a Futurologist at John Lewis Partnership.

“And in a nutshell, that means that I get to explore some really interesting topics and themes with other areas of the business to try to translate emerging weak signals into opportunities in the here and now.”

This future oriented job also necessitates keeping up with the younger generations, their world views, needs, and interests. So, each year John gets to fill a student placement in his team.

“This year, I had the opportunity to think far and wide, and that meant that I was invited to speak to Drive Forward. And that is how the relationship with Nova came about.”

John Lewis and Drive Forward

Last summer, we were approached by John Golding, Care Experienced Specialist at John Lewis Partnership. He is leading the London pilot programmes to fulfill John Lewis Partnership’s commitment to support care-experienced young people to build their careers. As someone who has been working with Drive Forward to kickstart his own career, John knew that we’d be able and eager to help him succeed in his ambition.

They worked with Drive Forward and other organisations to develop a supported employment approach comprising CV guidance and interview skill training, store tours and work placements, as well as a guaranteed interview and permanent roles.
Nova describes the recruitment process into the Futurology team as “super easy”,

“Having John involve me was great, especially as he set aside time for me to meet the entire team, have lunch with him and Katie, who is our manager, and also allowed me to get to know, like the dynamic of the team: who does what… what days we all come in and things like that and really familiarize myself with the building and everything here.”

For John too, meeting and working with Nova has been “completely different to the process I’ve worked on before, but I think that’s part of the beauty of the way that we work in the futurology team.” He explains that rather than recruiting people in line with a pre-defined job description they “focus on the needs of the person, the people that are interested in the role. And then we tried to find a way that we map that value to the role within the team.”

Having worked with Drive Forward for close to a decade, I’ve come across many innovative recruitment practices; from blind recruiting, to guaranteed work trials, and even on-the-spot job offers at mock interviews. What John described, however, was new even to me and I wanted to find out more. I was particularly interested in what made Nova stand out from all the other candidates, those working with other charities and university students alike.

“The first one was her courageousness,” John began. “These are quite intimidating times when you meet people over virtual calls and someone who maybe doesn’t do this often can be quite retracted if you like. But Nova was asking questions and leaning forward and I really got that feel that she was really interested in the call.”

The second attribute that made Nova stand out from others was her curiosity. “I had a look at her CV, and some of the work that she was interested in and noticed this curiosity around learning new stuff.” When John met Nova for the first time after offering her the job, he asked her why she decided to take up this role and Nova responded, “I promised myself that I would do something that made me feel uncomfortable every day.” That’s when John knew that Nova was the kind of person that he could still learn from on top of his 20 odd years of experience.

What does a Futures Analyst do?

“It is probably the hardest job that I’ve ever had to like explain to people because I don’t think I do one thing and that is probably what the most confusing,” says Nova. She tells me about how no day is the same. “I’m doing a speech on a panel next week, I’m doing research. Every week I’m writing on a platform that we have called ‘The Garden’ where I research things and post about it… it is about being curious about the weak signals and exploring ideas, questioning things.”

John goes on to explain how “The Garden” is helping partners (people working at John Lewis) to learn from the department’s work. “We have around 3,500 active members and one of the things that Nova has smashed out of the park is basically writing these little nuggets, these stories each week that just help people shift their perspective. And, you know, it’s been a breath of fresh air to have her perspective in The Garden.”

“It’s quite natural in a business to have lots of different perspectives. But I think Nova brings a very different way of thinking to innovation, to culture, to society, to technology, to even the books that she’s reading.”

Nova is part of John Lewis’ Care Experienced Network and has been invited to share her experience, perspective and opinions with people across the Partnership. “I’ve taken pride in my past and my history. I advocate for people like me and our future, what we need and want, and what I want for future generations of Care Experienced People, and how the Partnership can support that.”

It is not surprising that Nova’s most memorable experience so far has been sharing her own life story at John Lewis’ Virtual Directorate Day. “It was super emotional,” she remembers and admits before that day in 2022, she had never spoken about her care experience in front of a larger group of people. “Sometimes, when friends ask you, you tell them a snippet here and there. You never really delve into: you know, everything.”

Today, Nova believes that telling her story has made her stronger, “I’m really glad I did it and was actually probably one of the scariest things I’ve ever done. I think that’s like my proudest moment so far.”

Most importantly, John Lewis have given Nova not only a platform, but a safe space to speak from, “I think within JLP I’m seen as more than just someone on the payroll, which is why I think I’m so happy to share my story and my perspective and just speak to people. I can’t say that for any other job I’ve had.”

When we spoke, Nova was almost half-way into her placement, which means that she had to start thinking about what the future may hold for her.

“I just hope I’m doing something where again I’m heard and listened to, where I’m valued and I do something that I actually enjoy. I like doing loads of things and I like sharing my opinions and having a voice. I look forward to work and I still want to have a purpose.”
Wisdom – finding a career of your own choice

A first-class degree in Maths, excellent communication skills, and a ton of motivation – this is how Wisdom’s Careers Specialist would describe him today. When they first met him, however, he was in his final year at university, lacking the networks and professional experience to progress into his aspired career in finance.

“I didn’t have anyone at the time to advise me or go to for my next moves, I didn’t realise how important work experience was going to be for my career. The last thing on my CV was a retail position at Toys R Us.”

So, Wisdom and his Careers Specialist got to work.

“We updated his CV to emphasise skills he had not thought to highlight before. For example, Wisdom had done some fantastic volunteer work at university as treasurer for the Afro-Caribbean society. That’s gold-dust for someone fresh out of university.”

At the same time, we began building Wisdom’s professional networks, organised shadowing at Lloyds bank and matched him with a mentor from Salesforce.

“My Careers Specialist suggested to share my CV with Drive Forward’s network to see if anyone could help me get a foot in the door. I didn’t get my hopes up and was so surprised when someone actually wanted to meet with me.”

Seeing the potential in Wisdom’s CV and letter of motivation, our contacts at Parkwalk Advisors suggested a project suitable at his unique skillset. This growth fund management firm invests in new technologies and innovation. The prospect of working in the field of AI, life science, and big data was very exciting for Wisdom, who joined the company as an intern.

Initially set up as a two-weeks opportunity, Parkwalk Advisors decided to extend his internship by another couple of weeks. In this time, Wisdom proved himself invaluable to the company. He taught himself how to use different applications and researched how the company could restructure their database to make information more accessible and user-friendly for different parts of the team.

Subsequently, Wisdom was offered a permanent role as an Associate Analyst and hopes to progress further within the company. In the near future, he wants to join the Investment arm of the business. As an ‘Investment Analyst/Associate’ he will gain more responsibility and use his analytical skills to help the company with financial modelling and forecasting of potential companies, making informed decisions in regard to investments.

Drive Forward’s unique approach to building mutually beneficial partnerships

Having no bespoke internship programme in place, Parkwalk Advisors took a more speculative approach when taking Wisdom under their wing. Based on his CV and personal statement, they saw a potential great fit and created an opportunity that worked for them and for Wisdom alike.

“Wisdom was eager to learn, showed a growth mind-set and was super polite, bright and easy to get along with... this was a great cultural fit,” comments Moray, co-founder of Parkwalk Advisors.

Explaining why other organisations could benefit from linking up with Drive Forward Moray remarks that “it allows you to link up with candidates you normally would not get the opportunity to meet and this plays into the diversity and inclusion of the team as it genuinely enriches the network of applicants available to you.”

His manager John further says that “young people can miss out by not coming into the office, and Wisdom was very keen to come in and benefit from all the extra knowledge and networking that he wouldn’t otherwise have gained.”

By not shying away from in-person work, Wisdom had the opportunity to meet different people from across the company who pop into the office, allowing him to broaden his networks and skillset alike. He met with senior management from FTSE 100 companies and gave highly praised presentations.

Wisdom now feels positive about his future:

“Working with Drive Forward has been a transformative experience as without their support I would not be in such a position now and have the security and job satisfaction that I really value... I would encourage other young people to definitely get work experience as this proved ultimately the most valuable thing, I could do... Until you do this, you really don’t know what to expect.”
Hakim – Finding your way after the pandemic

Hakim joined Drive Forward in the summer of 2022. Holding a bachelor's degree in law, his primary goal was to kickstart his career whilst also finding financial stability and freedom.

Like many young people he had left care when he turned 18. He remembers how hard it was to balance working and studying, but he had no choice given the cost of living in London. When Covid hit the country, his situation worsened. Care leavers are twice as likely as other young people to experience high levels of loneliness and Hakim was no exception. He became more isolated, his motivation dropped, and so did his grades.

“When I graduated, I found it very hard to even secure an internship,” Hakim remembers. The world around him had changed, the jobs market had become even more competitive, and Hakim had no networks or mentors to turn to for support.

“It felt as if employers didn't care about young people's qualities like resilience or where they came from. None of their programme was truly inclusive of care leavers.”
Finding your fit

“Working with Drive Forward and Nicholl has been the best thing that ever happened to me in terms of my job search.”

Sometimes in life it’s the timing that counts the most and this is definitely true for Hakim’s professional journey. When we met him, one of our business partners had just opened up their first post-pandemic internship programme ring-fenced for a Drive Forward young person.

Hakim didn’t need too much prep work, but a little bit of extra brushing up his CV and cover letter, as well as some pre-interview tips and practice would still help him win the day. And so, he soon started his internship.

Sabina Szablowska, Tech Comms Manager at ITRS Group, managed Hakim throughout his internship. She remembers:

“Hakim has made a very positive impression on myself and my colleagues. He worked with my team, asked questions, found his own solutions to problems he encountered, and he found his own way of making some of the tasks easier.”

Something that stood out about Hakim was his attention to detail and eagerness to go above and beyond and learn as much as he could.

“He was in the office every day even though he was not required to. He took part in a charity event we organised and was extremely active on that day... He himself was also very appreciative of all the advice he was getting from other colleagues.”

Everybody who came in contact with the junior law professional was very impressed with how determined he was to achieve his goals and how much he has done and sacrificed in the past to get on the right path to achieve them.

“Listening to his stories about how difficult it was for him to get to school on time and to study in peace which resulted in him often getting bad grades, opened my eyes to how many things we take for granted when we judge people’s work, people’s behaviours, people’s education, etc.” says Sabina.

For Sabina, Hakim’s positivity and outlook on life left a lasting impression.

“Hakim not only asked questions and talked about what challenges he had while working with us, but he also shared all the positive experiences which is something that does not happen that often.”

One day, she invited him to join her for lunch letting him choose the restaurant. Hakim promptly decided to go to an Afghan restaurant in Tooting.

“He was very eager to share with me the food from his home country. He was extremely happy to talk about the food and its background and how it was originally made where he comes from. It was a very nice experience for me and I appreciated his positivity a lot.”

This was the first time Sabina had taken on a young person with care-experience in her team.

“It made me realize how many things I take for granted when I start working with new people. While with young people from care, there is so much more I should be thinking about and taking into consideration.”

Sabina highlights how important it is to treat each employee as an individual. Whilst being fair and providing equal opportunities for all, “we also need to be able to understand why they behave in certain ways in certain situations.”

Summarising her learnings, Sabina continues:

“While I realize that care-experienced young people face challenges that others do not, working with Hakim made me understand it much more. I hope I will be able to work with people like Hakim again and that the experience I gained will help me help them more.”

Always looking forward

Following his success at ITRS, Hakim soon went on to gain more experience with other Drive Forward partners including A.S. Watson and Baringa Partners, before nailing a 12-months internship with the Civil Service.

“This is a stepping stone for me to secure a full-time job either in civil service or in the private sector.”
Over the past year, care-experienced young people took up a variety of opportunities to use their lived experiences to raise awareness and drive social change.

At the beginning of the year, one young person decided to shed a light onto the additional challenges care-experienced young people face in the context of the cost-of-living crisis. For R., sharing her story with the Metro was, “an incredibly empowering and surprisingly positive experience... I was so nervous and anxious, but the team at Drive forward and the journalists were there and... it was good.”

We then began working on a BBC radio 4 commissioned podcast exploring “Lives in Care.” Initiated by Drive Forward Trustee Tony Simpson, the podcast invites the listener into the lives of 5 care-experiences young people, juxtapositioning their experiences with Tony’s own story of growing up in care in the 60s and 70s.

Through a collaboration with the Media Trust, we then had the opportunity to produce a professional charity film. Two young people stepped up to the opportunity and shared their story and experience in front of the camera. “I never thought that I’d be doing anything of this sort... not with a professional movie Director... It’s been fun,” says Jasper, who was working with Drive Forward’s partners at Baringa at the time. In the film, he shares his professional path and aspirations, highlighting the importance of opportunity and people who believe in your abilities. His co-star, Daviona, had only completed our 3-years long Breakthrough programme and was only starting out on her journey into sustainable employment.

Having experienced how the process of making this film positively impacted participants confidence, instilling motivation and aspiration, and positively encouraging them to step out of their comfort zone, we decided to continue our partnership with the film’s Director. We then co-created another ambitious film project with three care-experienced young people. This film is part of a wider collection of visual assets to raise awareness, inform, and inspire the viewers, and will be published in the second half of 2023.
Towards ending unnecessary criminalisation

Over the course of 2022, our criminalisation campaign focused on disseminating the London Wide Protocol they had established previously in partnership with MOPAC (Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime). This protocol aims at ending the unnecessary criminalisation as well as reduce police call outs of young people currently residing in residential care. We hosted regular briefings with care homes, police constabularies, and Local Authorities from all over the country to ensure that this information was being spread efficiently.

Additionally, MOPAC approached us to co-produce a bespoke training video to support effective dissemination. Working with a professional film director, we created a comprehensive 20min video encompassing young people’s testimonies, guidance for professionals when consulting the protocol, and best modes of practice.

For the past year, we have also been working on drafting guidance for barristers and other legal representatives on how best to represent care-experienced young people in custody and court. We have delivered training and are directly working with Garden Court Chambers and various barristers to have this guidance published by the Youth Justice Board and available to all legal representatives. A launch is due to take place in the second half of 2023.

Additionally, we have also been working alongside members of the Crown Prosecution Service to help draft the newest version of their Children Looked After Checklist as well as their Child First Time Entrance Checklist. These are to ensure that care-experienced young people have effectively been identified in a holistic and supportive manner by police officers to allow the correct form of support to be put in place. The newest version is yet to be published by them.
It’s an undisputed fact that half of mental health problems arise before the age of 15, and close to 75% of them before the age of 18. MHFA England (2023) states that, ‘In an average classroom, ten children will have witnessed their parents separate, eight will have experienced severe physical violence, sexual abuse or neglect, one will have experienced the death of a parent and seven will have been bullied’.

There’s a clear link between an individual’s exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences such as parental substance misuse, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, parental mental illness or a parent in prison, and mental ill-health. Care-experienced young people are about four times more likely to have a mental health condition than their peers who haven’t been in care. Predominantly, they may live with anxiety, PTSD, or behaviour disorders, all of which can have a significant impact on their day-to-day lives as well as their ability to successfully move into and sustain education or employment.

Unfortunately, it’s a widely acknowledged truth, that the vast majority of young people in need of mental health support actually do not receive it. Worryingly, even if they are lucky enough to gain access to services after exhaustive waiting times of six months to two years, the support available is often not adequate and insufficient.

Another common challenge is the inconsistency of service provision. Children and young people moving across areas, a common phenomenon of the care system, often lose access to services and practitioners with whom they had built a working relationship. Similarly, young people transitioning out of care are not guaranteed a smooth transition from CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) to adult mental health services and may lose this support completely.
As a small London-based charity, we recognise that we are not able to tackle these challenges on our own. Thus, our aim for 2022 was to expand our network of professionals and practitioners who are committed to making a positive difference to the system from within. Initiated by the campaign’s founder and Drive Forward Ambassador Farhia Yussuf, we, together with the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, established and chaired a pan-London working group. Over the course of the year, the group shared good practice examples, conducted research, and learned from each other’s experience. We managed to build a more in-depth strategic understanding of each other’s challenges, and began to entertain different approaches to find practical solutions.

We also completed a collaborative project with the University of Huddersfield, which saw a group of Master’s students map out available services for care-experienced youth across London. Whilst all the participating boroughs offer some kind of Mental Health support services, only 21% of them indicated the availability of an established transitional pathway from Children’s to Adult’s services. It also reiterated the lack of consistent mental health support for young people moving across Borough borders, making it more difficult for them to continue positive therapeutic journeys.

On a more encouraging note, the study also found that most boroughs have existing collaborations with the NHS for the purpose of delivering Mental Health Services. This means, that there is a potential for more joined-up work to finance and deliver quality mental health services to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our society, regardless of their home council.

Over the next year, we will continue to promote such an inclusive and holistic model, closely working with our partners and care-experienced community.
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