

National Network for the Education of Care Leavers

NNECL *pronounced neck-ell*



The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers, NNECL, is the UK's only organisation solely dedicated to transforming the educational outcomes of young people with experience of being in care.

We work with colleges, universities, UCAS, Office for Students, DfE, education practitioners and care system professionals to transform the progression of young people from care, estranged and sanctuary seeking backgrounds into and through further and higher education, including higher apprenticeships, so they can enjoy fulfilling careers which sustain them for life.

We are a registered charity independently raising our income through membership, training and consultancy, Quality Mark assessment fees, donations, and grants. We do not have any property or endowment funds and receive no funding from central government.

100+

Partners

300

Practitioners

800

Strong
community

5000+

Student
reach

Some of our partners flipping the script for young people from care backgrounds



Housing Futures: A NNECL perspective on what works for accommodation



NNECL
National Network For the
Education of Care Leavers



Children &
Young People Now
Awards 2025
Winner

Launched in June 2021, the **NNECL Quality Mark** is an evidence based and impact driven change management process for universities and colleges to demonstrate their support for the inclusion and success of students with care experience and who are estranged.



50 Quality Marks awarded: in FE

Bolton College
Bury College
Carlisle College
Exeter College
Hopwood Hall College
Kidderminster College
Leeds City College
Lewisham College
Newcastle 6th Form College
Newcastle College
Oldham College
Oldham Sixth Form College
Southwark College

St John Rigby College
The Manchester College
Trafford College Group
West Lancashire College
Wigan & Leigh College
Wirral Met College
Xaverian College



50 Quality Marks awarded: in HE

City St George's, University of
London
De Montfort University
Edge Hill University
Kingston University
Liverpool John Moores University
Manchester Metropolitan
University
Oxford Brookes University
Queen Mary University London
Queens University Belfast
Royal Central School of Speech
and Drama
University of Bath
University of Bedfordshire

University of Bedfordshire
University of Birmingham
University of Bradford
University of Bristol
University of Cambridge
University of Exeter
University of Law
University of Leicester
University of Lincoln
University of Liverpool
University of Manchester
University of Nottingham
University of Salford
University of Sheffield

University of Sunderland
University of Wolverhampton
University of York

Plus 2 institutions unable to renew



Grace Mpeso and Lucy Lanfear
Oxford Brookes University

The Quality Mark operates around 7 areas, covering the whole student lifecycle, culture/leadership, collaboration & partnership, plus ongoing evaluation and response.

Proportionate and contextualised, reflecting diversity of institutions across HE/FE and the different policy contexts across the UK.

Awarded for 3 years with mid-point review of action plan.

Is undertaken voluntarily by NNECL members.

Accommodation sits in the 'Student Wellbeing' section of the Quality Mark, along with provision for physical and mental wellbeing and financial support.





The Leaving
Care Award



Our work was cited as good practice in Josh MacAlister’s 2022 Independent Review of Children’s Social Care.

The Quality Mark was independently evaluated at the end of 2024 by The Lines Between who found that colleges and universities pursue it reported enhanced outcomes for care experienced and estranged students.

In May 2025, The London Assembly recommended all London universities should work with NNECL and work towards the Quality Mark.

The 2025 Education Select Committee recognised NNECL’s contribution to the sector and highlights the importance of year-round accommodation, noting that many care leavers lack a “home” to return to during holidays or term breaks.

In November 2025, The Quality Mark won The Leaving Care Award for its positive impact on care leavers.



Department
for Education

On 2 December 2025 Minister MacAlister and Minister Smith wrote to all Vice Chancellors in England asking them to review the support they offer for care leavers and consider a range of measures to drive up access and attainment, including undertaking our Quality Mark.

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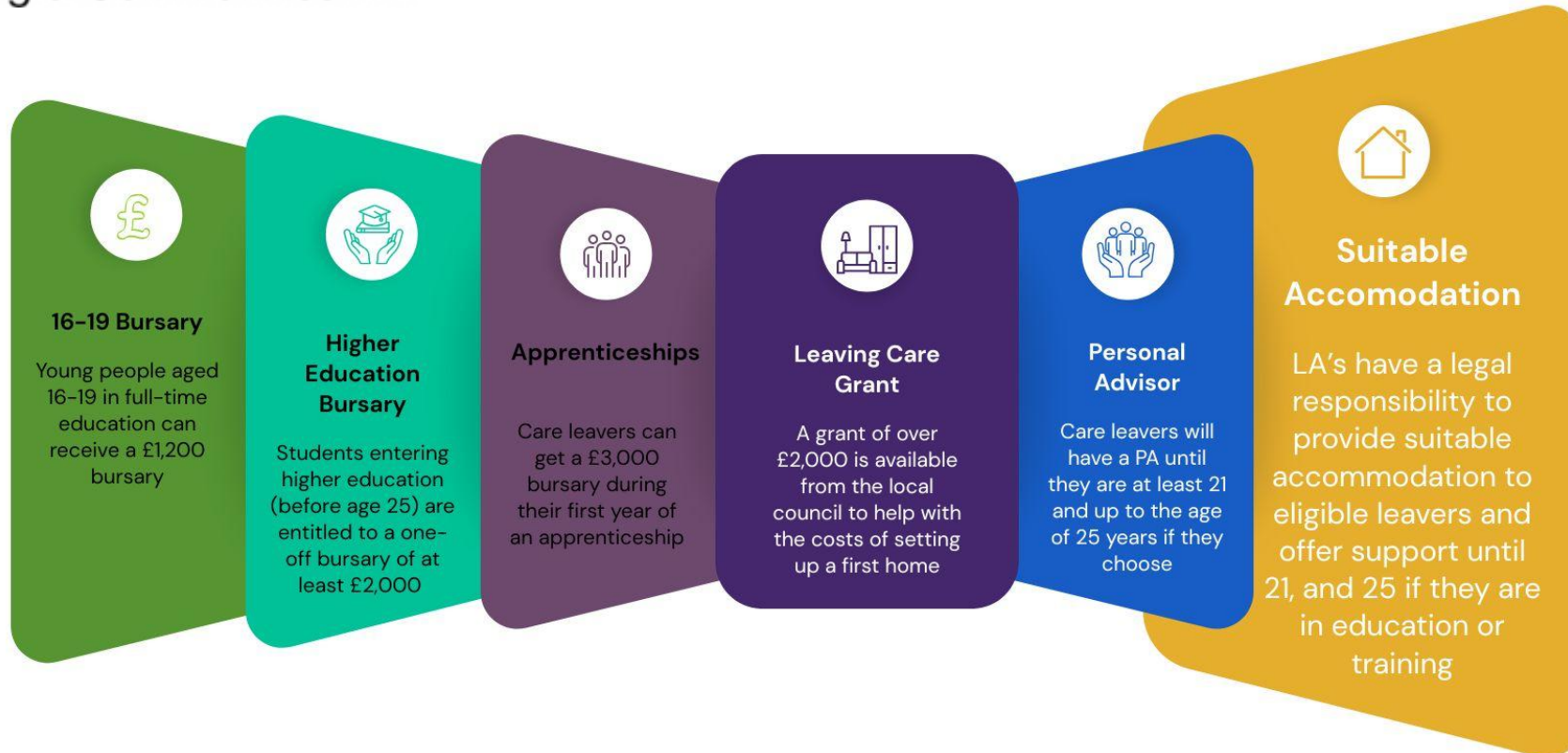
Children &
Young People Now
Awards 2025

Winner

Local Authority Responsibilities



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities



Key numbers

Care-Leaver Population

83,630 looked-after children in England (March 2024)

5,539 children left care at age 18 in 2024

Average age leaving home for most young people in the UK is 24

Higher Education Participation

14% of those ever in care enter university by age 22 (vs 48% of general population)

15% of care-experienced 19-year-olds enter university (vs 47% of peers)

Current Undergraduate Cohort

7,290 care-experienced students (up to age 25) enrolled in UK universities (2024)

18% are expected to drop out or postpone their studies

We've moved beyond bursaries

The challenges preventing young people with care backgrounds achieving good education outcomes have been well researched over the last 20 years. Accommodation is part of a complex discussion.

Accommodation

Bursaries

Student wellbeing & mental health

Pre admission support

Building social capital

Student attainment

Post graduation support

Belonging

Trauma aware practice

Graduation

Career development

Career development

Accommodation across FE and HE

- Universities and colleges operate independently; support is shaped by history, context, and resources.
- Most universities own their student accommodation; colleges typically do not and expect students to live locally.
- Traditional systems assume students return to a family home out of term time - an assumption reflected in Student Finance England's term-time-only funding rules.
- Many universities repurpose accommodation outside term, limiting year-round access.
- A 2024 Social Market Foundation review found significant disparities in accommodation experiences between care-experienced and estranged students and their peers.

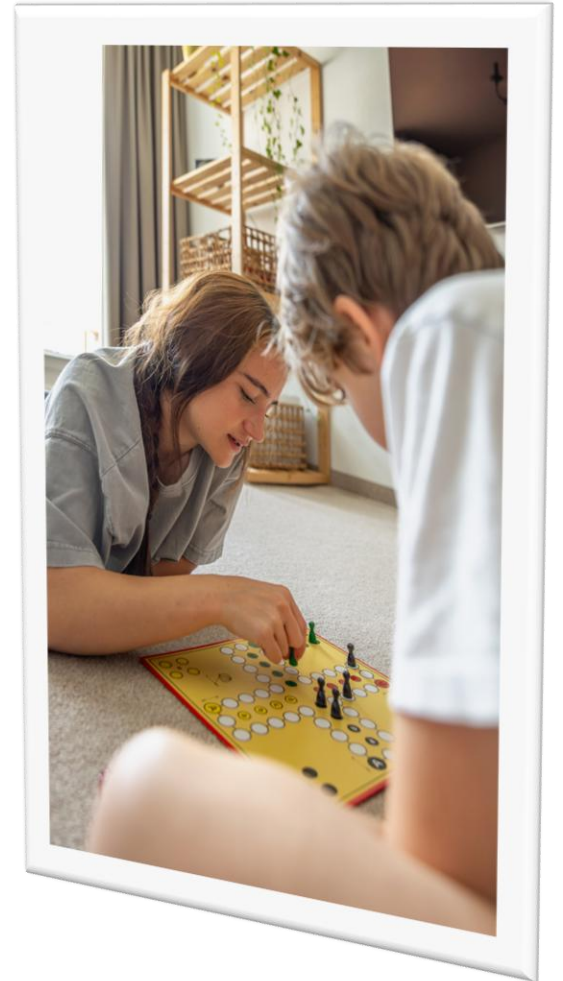


What NNECL already know

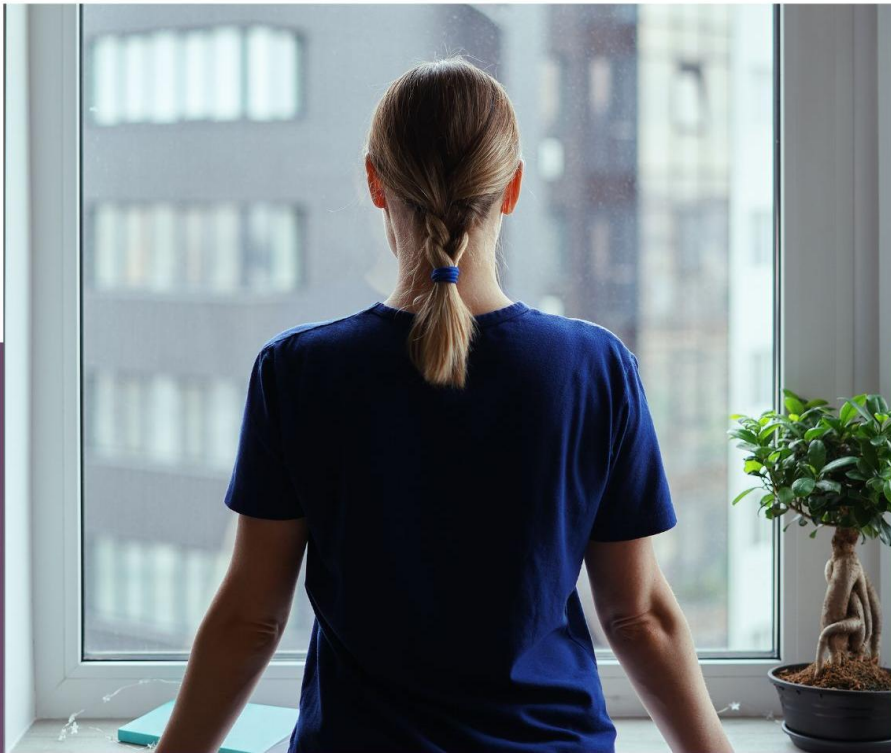
Accommodation sits in the 'Student Wellbeing' section of the Quality Mark, along with provision for **physical and mental wellbeing** and **financial support**.

The Quality Mark sets a benchmark but does **not** prescribe how support is delivered; it focuses on the rationale, effectiveness, and sustainability of an institution's chosen interventions.

The majority of NNECL members and QM holders report that around **70%** of their care experienced and estranged learners live in **privately rented accommodation**.



What works for accommodation; Insights from the Quality Mark



Access and settling in

All QM holders offer year-round accommodation.

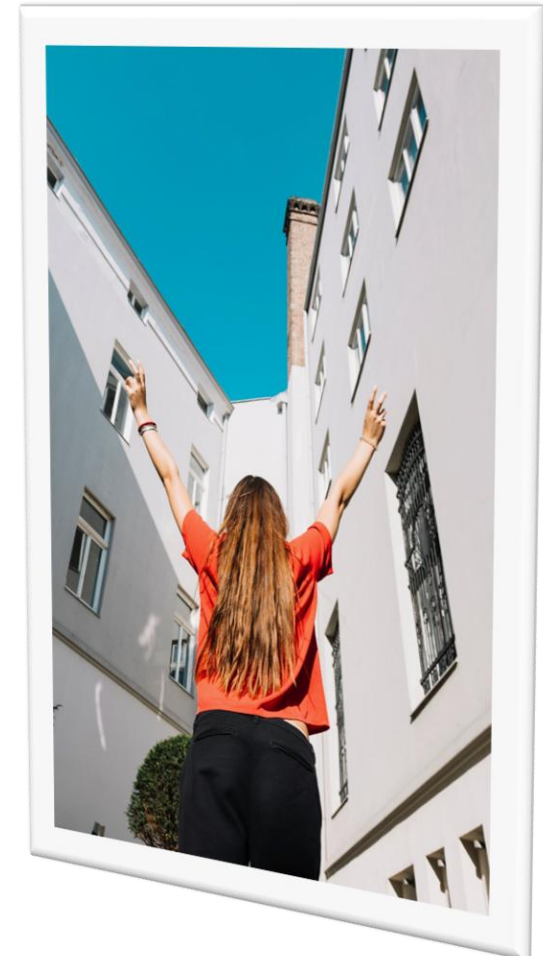
When students cannot stay in the same room this because they are required for other purposes, or to allow for deep cleaning.

Alternative accommodation is provided.

QM holders rated 'enhanced' or 'exceptional' for their provision are able to offer priority access to, or choice in their accommodation.

Within the QM submissions there is a range of evidence of how students are welcomed to their accommodation and helped to settle in. Some institutions provide personal tours of their on-site accommodation prior to students joining their organisation.

Others offer flexible moving dates, recognising this can help from a number of perspectives.



Practical support

Some institutions offer assistance with the practical side of moving in, like using a pool car to help new students transport their belongings or arranging group trips to IKEA with vouchers for students to cover the costs of their items.

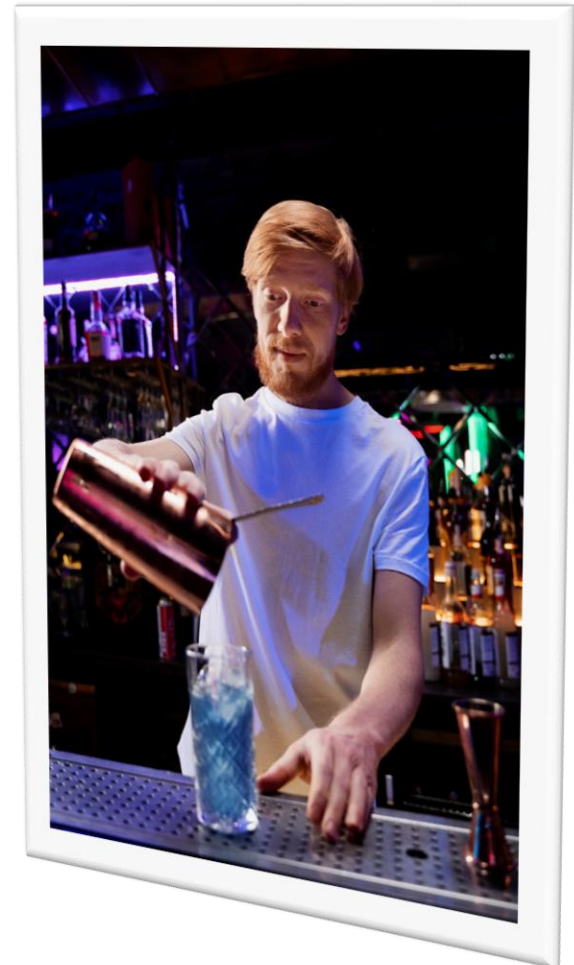
Within the QM submissions there is also an impressive range of welcome packs provided to care-experienced and estranged students. These include items from toiletries, household utensils and vouchers through to larger items such as bedding and cooking equipment.



Financial support

Institutions undertaking the QM view financial help as essential while balancing the number of students they can support over time and the depth of this -

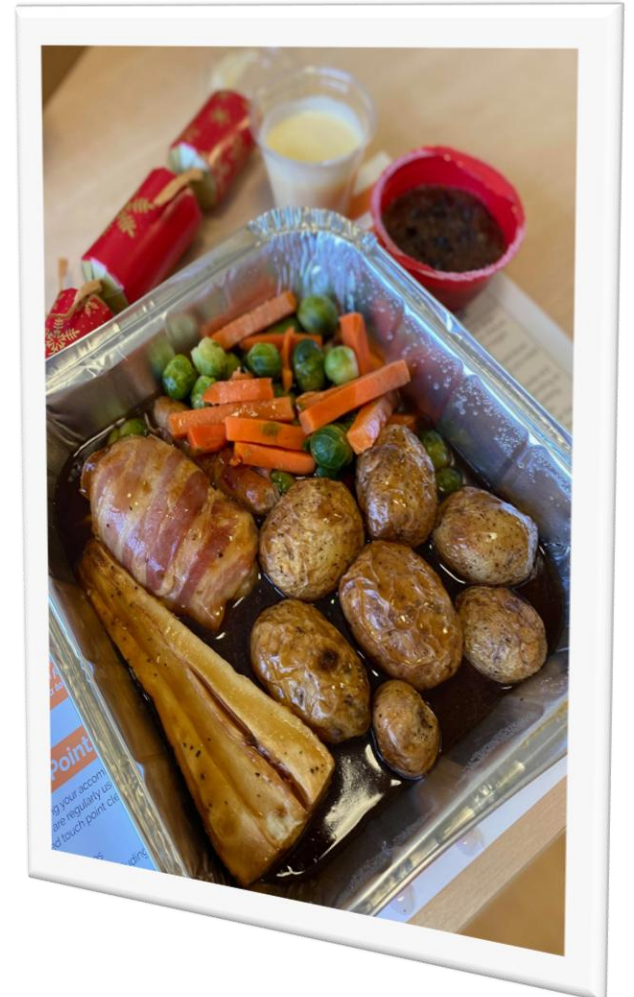
- Those with their own accommodation can discount fees, provide grants; one offers free accommodation; this is an exceptional case.
- Several institutions waive deposits or allow delayed fee payments. For students living in private accommodation, guarantors remain a major challenge, several QM institutions work with Housing Hand to provide guarantor support.
- Some institutions act as guarantors; others are developing an in-house guarantor scheme solution.
- Some institutions have secured agreements with private providers to remove guarantor requirements altogether by working region wide.



Support within accommodation

QM submissions highlight wide-ranging support –

- Trained Residential Advisers or Support Co-Ordinators monitor wellbeing and help students settle in.
- Staff organise social activities and events (e.g., Christmas dinner) to foster community. Institutions recognise the importance of building a sense of belonging both in accommodation and on campus.
- QM holders actively encourage students to participate in these community activities.



Institutions without housing

While institutions with their own accommodation can design tailored concessions, staff at institutions without accommodation often provide an equally impressive range of support activities.

Student support teams help students apply for local authority housing, gather paperwork, accompany them to appointments, and sometimes conduct home visits to assess suitability and provide ongoing support.

When housing breaks down, these staff often work with social workers and other professionals to safeguard students and prevent homelessness.



Support beyond study

QM submissions show, while universities and colleges focus on students' study periods, they also support care-experienced and estranged students with housing needs beyond graduation.

A few institutions provide short-term accommodation post-graduation, and others are exploring ways to offer this support.

Other 'above and beyond' offers of support include the provision of secure storage of students' belongings and opening accommodation during holidays for students returning to an area from other institutions.



Emergency Accommodation

Care-experienced and estranged students are over-represented in homelessness and may need emergency accommodation; some QM holders provide short-term support while arranging alternative accommodation.

Institutions without accommodation collaborate with local partners and emergency housing providers to respond effectively to crises.

Case studies particularly show how FE staff play a crucial role in securing emergency accommodation, often going well beyond their formal duties.

FE and HE staff often take on a vital frontline role in safeguarding housing for care-experienced and estranged learners.



Commuting Students

The Social Market Foundation report in 2024 noted care-experienced and estranged students are more likely to live away from campus and commute to their studies than their peers. This is reflected in some of the QM submissions who discuss how they support students who commute.

Institutions described how they organise timetables with commuting in mind whilst others help with cost of commuting where possible, this can be via a bursary or even a free city loop bus. A few institutions reported working with external agencies to support commuting students with their housing needs too.



Collaborative Activity

NNECL views **proactive collaboration** as key to improving outcomes for our students.

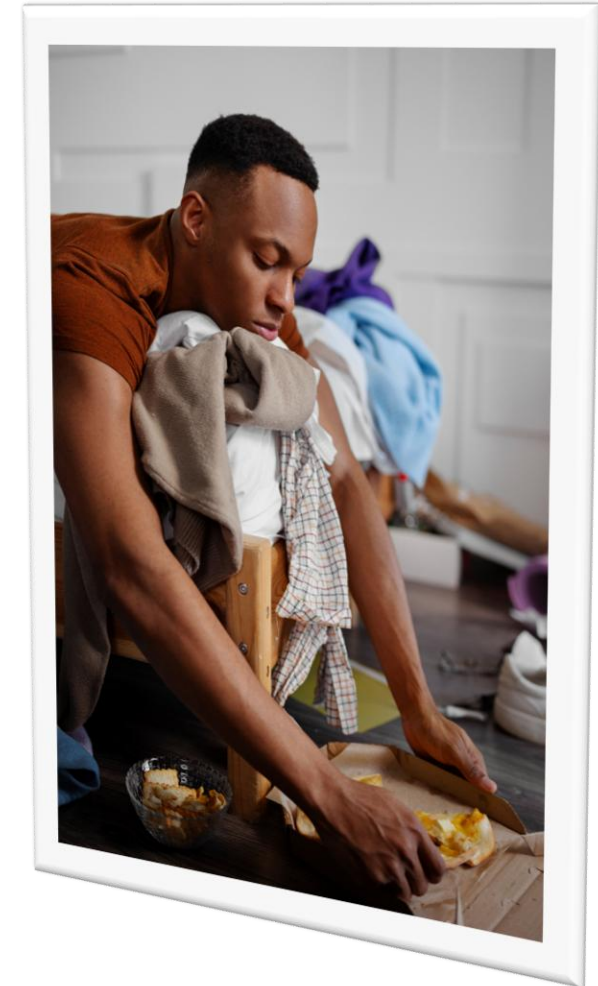
- QM holding institutions invest significant time/resources in local partnerships to improve emergency accommodation and other housing support.
- Solutions vary depending on local community, available housing, and financial resources, often supported by alumni contributions.
- Collaborations enable institutions without their own housing to access lodgings from other providers and collectively negotiate with independent accommodation providers.
- Submissions showcase various successful partnership approaches, highlighting a potential to scale effective practice.



Independent Student Housing

A variety of public and private companies specialise in student accommodation. For the most part these providers **do not** feature in QM submissions with institutions preferring to prioritise their own accommodation for care-experienced learners as they are able to implement better support.

- **Unite Students:** Largest provider, 65,000 places across the UK
- **UPP:** Supports 35,000+ students/year; UPP Foundation funds innovative projects and contributed to Quality Mark rollout
- **Campus Living Villages (CLV):** 14 university partners; 52-week contracts, summer stays, flexible payments, and ‘Protected Returner’ scheme for multi-year accommodation.



The Unite Foundation (UF) tackles the challenge of student accommodation through its national scheme. Since 2012, the charity has awarded 883 scholarships to care leavers and estranged students under 25. Each scholarship provides up to 3 years of rent-free accommodation (#HomeAtUniversity) across various student housing, including Unite Students–owned halls.

- Around 70 scholarships are awarded each year, supporting roughly 1% of the total of care-experienced and estranged students enrolled on undergraduate courses*, aged up to 25.
- The impact of the scholarship is positive for successful applicants in terms of **accommodation**.
- Around 25% of students who apply will receive a scholarship. There are 4 applications for each available award.

The scholarship featured in 3 QM submissions as part of the accommodation mix – awards are made by US, universities can signpost and recommend if available at their institution.

*Important to remember the scholarship is a response to an immediate need and system failure.

Unite Foundation Scholarship



Key observations

The work of organisations supporting students should be celebrated, staff in QM holding institutions go above and beyond in providing accommodation for our young people, yet important questions remain –

- How many care leavers live in private accommodation, who acts as their guarantor, and what has their experience been?
- Are care leavers relying on for the profit guarantor services intended for international students, so facing unfair costs?
- What is the impact on staff workload, especially during crises?
- As the number of care-experienced and estranged learners grow, how will internal Student Support teams receive additional support?



KU Cares team with Vice-Chancellor Professor Steven Spier and award presenter Andrew Disbury- University Alliance Awards

Emerging recommendations

Ensure sustainable support for staff - Institutions must recognise the pressure placed on internal Support Teams and explore ways to reduce workload through additional resourcing, training, and wellbeing support, particularly during crisis situations.

Gather data on care leavers in private accommodation - NNECL members support over 5,000 care-experienced and estranged learners, providing a strong foundation to understand student needs. NNECL should determine how many care leavers are living in private accommodation, explore their experiences, and identify who acts as their guarantor.

Strengthen coordination with independent accommodation providers - Further research and engagement with the growing number of private student accommodation providers could create more coordinated pathways for care-experienced and estranged students, ensuring continuity and quality of housing support across the sector.

Emerging recommendations

Promote and replicate collaborative models - Regional clusters across the NNECL network and beyond show the value of collaboration. Scaling up support must be evidence-based, extending proven approaches to more students without major additional costs.

Clarify statutory responsibilities - Local authorities must be held accountable for providing the statutory support they are funded to deliver.

Monitor and evaluate systemic impact - Ongoing data collection on care-experienced and estranged students is essential to ensure institutional support complements statutory responsibilities and accurately reflects the scale of need.



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www.nnecl.org

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