I am really excited to be able to introduce this special edition of the Through Care newsletter for National Care Leavers' Week. Throughout the week events are taking place across the country to promote both the challenges care leavers face and their remarkable achievements. I am particularly proud that two of our care leavers are playing key roles in the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum celebration event. Shianne Kinchen has been shortlisted for the Young Person’s Benchmarking Forum Champion of the Year 2018 which is a massive achievement. In addition, Ella Dhillon has submitted a funding proposal for an innovative project to reduce the criminalisation of looked after children. She hopes that greater awareness in the police through partnership work can address some of the key issues faced by children in care and care leavers. This proposal has been shortlisted to the final four and a winner will be chosen during care leavers’ week. So good luck to both Shianne and Ella.

On Friday 26 October we have our annual care leavers’ conference which again gives us the opportunity to celebrate your achievements in all walks of life. It should be a fantastic and inspirational evening. It has been great to see the service improve and develop this year and a further development is that we are now a pilot authority for Leaving Well. This is a new way of working being funded by Social Finance UK and centres around a web based app which can be used for Pathway Planning and communicating with your worker. The aim is to get workers spending less time behind desks and more time out and about supporting young people. They will be at the conference demonstrating this so please have a look.

Once again I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who works so hard to ensure that our service to young people is constantly improving, this includes our partners, our staff, but most importantly each young person we work with. Your feedback is invaluable and we especially want to thank those of you who have given up your time to help improve Through Care. Please do get in contact with any ideas or suggestions you have.
My name is Natalie Mageza. I’m 20 from Coventry but Zimbabwean born. I was taken into care at 16 and I genuinely had no idea what to expect as I’d heard negative stuff before about the care system.

I stayed with my foster parents for 2 and a half years before I felt like I was ready to move out into the world and start my own journey. Firstly I moved into an assisted apartment. When I got my own place the first challenge I faced was moving in there as there was so much that needed to be done in a short space of time and also staying within the budget I had for furniture and finances.

My other challenge was coping with my education and break down of relationships with friends so I was lonely for most of the time and felt my health deteriorating.

I spoke to my foster parents and other people that had been through the same things and they advised me to go for counselling and I was prescribed medication. I found talking to people very therapeutic and taking part in more activities rather than enjoying life more up and I started feeling bottled keeping my things standing on my way is you!

Another thing I struggled with was finances and I was struggling to get work due to my lack of work experience previously, so I had to depend on income support to get me through. With that money I had to pay my bills, buy food and also try and maintain myself. It got to the stage where I got myself into debt and I was struggling but Coventry Social Care was there to support and help me. Despite all of this I’ve managed to achieve a lot on my own.

I have always been passionate about charity work and I got scouted for Miss Coventry and I was a finalist. I then got a chance to go and compete in Miss Bedfordshire and I’m proud to say I’m the current Miss Bedfordshire runner up and this earned me a place into the Miss England semi-finals. I’m also a Miss Coventry and Warwickshire finalist and Miss Staffordshire finalists.

This year I managed to secure an unconditional offer to the University of Bedfordshire which was a great achievement, despite me leaving school with really bad grades. I also managed to audition and dance at the Commonwealth Games handover which was televised to over 1 billion people live. My dreams were starting to come true!

Despite what people think and say, you can achieve a lot even if you’ve been through the care system and the only thing standing on your way is you!

Meet...
Natalie Mageza

Friday 26 October 2018
Care Leavers Conference 2018

We are really excited about this year’s Care Leavers Conference on Friday 26 October 2018 at the Butts Arena! As always, it comes during National Care Leavers week and is a celebration of all that you have achieved in the previous year. We’ve heard some inspiring stories about the things you’ve been doing – great success in exams, moments of bravery, and perseverance. We are really looking forward to sharing your accomplishments with the wider world.

We will be celebrating achievements of our Care Leavers which fit in to the following categories:

- Fit For Life
- Safe & Sound
- You can do it
- Your views count
- Investing in your future
- Coventry cares about you

These categories are part of the Coventry Pledge which is a set of promises made to children and young people who are in the care of the Council, regardless of where you live. It is a commitment from the Council and our partner agencies to make sure that you can reach your full potential and enjoy the same opportunities in life as your friends.

And if the awards aren’t enough, we have the amazing Sophie Willan as our guest speaker. She is an award-winning comedian, writer and producer who bases her material on her time in care. She is passionate about making social change through creativity and runs projects that support and empower young people, such as her work as an ambassador for Homeless and Care Experienced Young People. Care-Leavers across Greater Manchester worked with Sophie to create the tremendously vibrant anthology, Tales of the Weird, the Wild and the Wonderful, inspired by their experiences and fired by their imaginations. And in 2015, Sophie secured funding of over £100k to create the dynamic multi-platform project, Stories of Care. For more information, please check out her website: www.sophiewillan.com

We are also hoping to showcase the talents of some of our current looked after children and care leavers – who knows, perhaps they can inspire you to overcome your fears and take those next steps. We have invited partners from across the city to come and show their support for you, as well as share what they can do to help you dream bigger and achieve more.

There will also be a buffet, popcorn machine, candy floss machine and, back by popular request, a magic mirror to take all those fun snap shots! If you would like any further information about the Care Leavers Conference please contact Through Care, otherwise we hope to see you there!
Spotlight on the people who work behind the scenes in Children’s Services.

John Gregg

What is your role and how do you make a difference?
I am the Director of Children’s Services, which means I am the senior person in the city for issues that affect young people. I am responsible for a range of services including family hubs and early help, social work and child protection, youth offending and of course the services that are provided for our looked after children such as children’s homes, fostering and adoption. I should not forget to mention our amazing Through Care service and the work done to support care leavers as well!

My job is really about influencing the wider system to support better outcomes for young people. Therefore I work closely with politicians and a range of partners such as schools, the local hospital and the police.

The difference I make… well that’s for you to decide and to hold me to account.

In my view Children’s Services is improving - we have a better workforce now that’s more stable and better trained and the options for children’s placements is improving.

I was pleased to be able to influence the decision made by our local politicians to exempt care leavers from paying Council Tax.

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Describe yourself in 3 words?
Competitive - I am awfully competitive when it comes to my job! I want us to be the best we can be so that we deliver the best services we can to our children.

Hard working - I find my job very rewarding albeit very challenging.

Fun - I think it is really important that we all make time to have some fun.

What do you do to relax?
I started my career working in the outdoors with young people and that is where my heart remains. It was a real privilege to spend my early career on the side of a hill or in a canoe creating memories and helping young people to have some fun!

These days I still try to get out whenever I can and enjoy hill walking and trips to the Lake District. Having recently bought a house with a very messy garden I am also spending a lot of time in the garden!

What project are you most excited about?
It is really difficult to limit it to one! I am very excited about our new Social Work Academy. This is a project to develop our next generation of social workers. I feel a great responsibility to ensure that they get the best start to their careers. I am also particularly excited about our Life Long Links project but also the work we are doing to strengthen and improve the fostering service. Both these projects are about ensuring that young people have a trusted adult at the centre of their world, as we know that this is what can make the most difference to a young person’s life.

What is the most important lesson you have learned from your job?
Be your own person…and dance to your own tune!! I remember when I was at school, being described as a bit of a rebel. I would say this was more about self-determination and not being prepared to be influenced by others. When I was at school smoking was all the rage but because everyone was doing it I would not be swayed, and stuck to my guns and did not follow the crowd. I did not want to be a sheep! Each young person reading this is ultimately in charge of themselves and has to take responsibility for the actions and decisions they make. The role of adults caring for young people is to support young people in preparing for the big wide world and the bright futures each young person can have. There is an inner diamond in all of us – everyone just needs an opportunity to shine.

Summer Cooking Sessions
As the summer came to an end, so did our weekly cookery sessions with Ground Works. For 6 weeks through the summer holidays young care leavers were able to try their hand at a range of healthy dishes from salad wraps, to chick pea curry, lemon cheese cake to hob-nob biscuits.

Each person that came enjoyed the sessions and got involved with cutting and chopping and eating. It was great to hear that the recipes had been tried at home. James and Luke who ran the sessions were able to discuss cooking on a budget as well as share advice on shopping well on a budget.

We look forward to more sessions next year and don’t forget to share your food creations with us!

Send us a picture and we’ll put it in our email newsletter Through Care: Connect… maybe we could run a competition?

BBQ at Coombe Abbey Park
On a lovely warm day in early September Through Care invited young people and their Support Workers and Foster Carers to join us in Coombe Abbey Park for a BBQ and some games.

20 young people of various ages and workers came and enjoyed the food prepared by staff.

We then had a brief stop for our picnic lunch and moved on to play bowling.

As we had a bit of a wait for our lane the opportunity was taken to indulge in some very large ice creams! Bowling was great fun and enjoyed by everyone.

Even though it was raining outside the group really wanted to go down to the sea and the beach and I think the highlight of the day for all was splashing in the surf and just generally playing around.

To round off the day we had traditional fish and chips and then headed back to Coventry with 6 new friends having a good old sing song together.

Summer Seaside Trip
So in the midst of one of the hottest summers on record we managed to find the only dull damp day to head off early towards the coast.

The plan was to go to Mablethorpe but after much discussion, and child reminiscing amongst our group of 6 young people, we ended up taking a slight detour up the coast to Skegness.

Our first stop was at the Crazy Golf (Mini Golf is for old people!). A special well done must go to Steven who helped our novice players in understanding the game and assisted with fishing the balls out of the water.

The burgers and sausages went down very well and was followed by a games of frisbee, football and rounders.

It was great to see the young people enjoying themselves and getting along before most of them returned to school.

Cooking Session BBQ & the Seaside
Growing up as a kid in care I always felt at a disadvantage to other young people. I believed that I could never achieve all that they could, but that all changed when I started working for Coventry City Council. Leaving school and having to take on my own property at aged 17 left me feeling really unsure about where I wanted to go in life. I passed all my GCSE's and gained a BTEC Level 2 in Health and Social Care.

I started working in the care industry but never found a job I really wanted to stick with. Due to my mum becoming very ill a few months after gaining my first tenancy I felt I was left with little choice but to leave my property and job caring for people to go and care for my mum who lived in Kent. Thankfully my mum got better around a year later and I could return to Coventry. When I returned to Coventry, I knew it was time to make a change. With no home and no income I knew I had to do something I could enjoy.

I went to the Council to declare myself homeless and was placed in a homeless hostel which is where I finally decided I would like to go into Payroll. With no experience or knowledge in payroll I knew I would have to start from an apprentice level, the perfect way for people with no experience to get their foot in the door. After showing interest, through Care I was put in contact with an apprentice advisor at Coventry City Council who invited me to meet the manager of the Payroll Service Centre. I was made to feel at ease right away even though I had no experience of being in a professional environment before.

After that meeting, I was offered a two week work trial to see if it was something I truly wanted to do. I really enjoyed the trial and was over the moon to accept a placement offer as an apprentice, to start the following week! Securing my placement instantly made me feel proud and determined to progress. The support I have received - not only in my learning journey - but also in my personal life has been overwhelming. Nearly two years have passed and I have gained my Level 2 diploma in Payroll and Bookkeeping, and progressed from an apprentice to a trainee. I have since been awarded Care Leaver of the Year and will be attending the Queen's garden party this year.

I am now looking forward to the future and exploring the possibility of completing my foundation degree. If I have learnt anything from this experience, it's that I have always had the same chances and can achieve all the things I thought I couldn't. I am living proof that I can achieve anything. Any young person wanting to take that step should feel very confident that they will receive all the support and guidance they need along the way, not only from Through Care, but the excellent staff in the Apprentice Advisory team.