“I feel like sometimes it might be too late”: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Care Experienced Individuals’ Preparation for Adulthood.

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List of Abbreviations

CEI	Care Experienced Individuals
CiC	Children in Care
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
DoH	Department of Health
EET	Education, Employment or Training
EP	Educational Psychologist
FE	Further Education
GET	Group Experiential Theme
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LA	Local Authority
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
PA	Personal Advisor
PfA	Preparing for Adulthood from the Earliest Years
PET	Personal Experiential Theme
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND CoP	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UK	United Kingdom
VS	Virtual School
YP	Young People

Abstract

Care Experienced Individuals (CEI) are found to experience disadvantage in adulthood compared to the general population across a range of domains, including health, education, and employment. Research indicates that CEI often experience an accelerated transition to adulthood, characterised by abrupt endings to support, which has been defined as the *Care Cliff*. Interpretation of research from an ecological perspective illuminates the influence of variables which compound CEIs' transition to adulthood and highlights the importance of their meaningful participation in decision-making. Despite this, CEIs' views have been found to be sought tokenistically, indicating a role for Educational Psychologists (EP) for promoting CEIs' voice in line with the *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice 2014* (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015). A systematic literature review found there was a lack of consideration given to CEIs' experiences of *preparing* for adulthood, particularly that which pertains to EP practice. This research aims to address this gap, informed by the Lundy *Model of Participation* (2007) to explore how CEIs' voice can *influence* EP practice.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six CEI aged 19-22 years, recruited from two Local Authorities in England. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology was utilised to illuminate CEIs' voice and investigate shared meaning amongst experiences. Four Group Experiential Themes (GETs) were interpreted using IPA: '*The Journey to Adulthood*', '*Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes*', '*The Role of Supportive Networks*' and '*Developing Skills for Adulthood*'. These findings are largely supported by existing research and theory, whilst offering original interpretations around the influence of events within CEIs' chronosystem, such as the *cost-of-living crisis*, upon their preparation for adulthood. A methodological review is completed before highlighting implications for EP practice, such as promoting CEIs' voice through person-centred planning and understanding their subjective experiences to inform support for their preparation for adulthood.

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Chapter One
Introduction

1.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter will present background information to introduce the topic of the research. The chapter will begin with an exploration of terminology which will be used throughout the thesis. Subsequently, the national context for care experienced individuals' outcomes in adulthood will be presented to inform the research's contextual basis. My personal and professional interest in completing the research will be detailed, followed by an overview of the structure of the thesis.

1.2.Terminology

1.2.1. Care Experienced Individuals

The target population in the present study are young people (YP) with experience of the care system. Terminology used in social policy to define the experiences of children and young people (CYP) in care, such as *Looked After Child* and *Care Leaver* will be presented. The section will conclude with rationale for the term *Care Experienced Individuals* throughout this study.

The Children Act 1989 defines a child who has spent time in the care of the Local Authority (LA), accommodated under section 20, for a period of more than 24 hours, as a Looked After Child (LAC) (Department for Education; DfE, 2021). Children in the care of the LA are commonly referred to as LAC however, the *Language that Cares* initiative (TACT Fostering & Adoption, 2019) developed a glossary of terms informed by the views of care-experienced young people from 15 LAs and found that YP would like to "*take away LAC acronym completely"* (p.9). Furthermore, it was identified that the acronym LAC could be perceived as suggesting that the child or YP is "*lacking*" something (p.9). Consequently, the term Children in Care (CiC) will be used to define children in the care of the LA under the age of 16 years.

Regarding post-16 CiC, *The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2000) defines a YP who has spent time in the care of the LA for at least 13 weeks spanning their 16th birthday as a *Care Leaver*. However, the Care Leavers Association advocate this definition should incorporate "*any adult who has spent time in care as a child"* (The Care Leavers Association, 2014) to illuminate the long-term impact of being in care.

Therefore, the present study will use the term Care Experienced Individuals (CEI), as a broad term which incorporates all CYP who are or have experienced being in care at any stage in their life whilst upholding they are not a homogenous group, each with unique care experiences (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018).

1.2.2. Adulthood

The definition of adulthood varies across cultures and legal systems and typically encompasses a person's age (i.e., legal age of majority), legal rights, emotional and physical maturity, and responsibility (McCue, 2018). In the United Kingdom (UK), an individual legally becomes an adult when they reach the age of 18 years. This is in line with Article 1 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 1989) which defines a child as "*every human being under the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier*" (p.2). Moreover, the official leaving care age in England is 18 years (Legislation.gov.uk, 2000). Consequently, for the purpose of the present study, the term *adulthood* will refer to the life phase for CEI aged 18 years and older to reflect the legal definition of *adult* and leaving care age in England.

1.2.3. Preparing for Adulthood

The purpose of the present study is to provide implications for the practice of Educational Psychologists (EPs) in England. Consequently, statutory guidance which pertains to EP practice will be presented.

The term *Preparing for Adulthood* (PfA) in the present study is informed by the *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice 2014* (SEND CoP), (DfE & Department of Health (DoH), 2015). Reforms to the *Special Educational Needs (SEN) CoP (2001)* (DfE, 2001), introduced by the *Children and Families Act 2014* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2014a) extended the role of practitioners across education, health, and social care to support CYP with SEN from birth to 25 years. The reformed *SEND CoP 2014* emphasises the importance of LAs, education providers and their partners in having high aspirations for CYP with SEN and supporting them with '*Preparing for Adulthood from the Earliest Years'* (p.120) in the following four areas:

- "*Higher education and/or employment;*
- *Independent living;*
- *Participating in society;*
- *Being as healthy as possible in adult life*" (DfE & DoH, 2015, p.28).

Statutory guidance which pertains to the practice of social care professionals for supporting CEIs' preparation for adulthood will now be presented.

1.2.4. Pathway Plans

The term *Pathway Plan* refers to the statutory document that is completed with CEI by the LA to support their transition from care to independent life (DfE, 2022).

Volume 2 and *Volume 3* of the *Children Act 1989* (DfE, 2021; DfE, 2022) outline the statutory duty of LAs to support CEI with their transition to adulthood. *The Care Planning, Placement, and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2010a) sets out that LAs must complete an assessment of CEIs' readiness to leave care no more than three months after they have reached the age of 16 years. At the age of 16 years, CEI are allocated a Personal Adviser (PA) by the LA who has a responsibility to support with their transition to adulthood via the development of a Pathway Plan (DfE, 2022). A Pathway Plan outlines the support CEI will need from Children's Services to support with their transition to adulthood in the following areas:

- *"Health and Development;*
- *Education, Training and Employment;*
- *Emotional and Behavioural Development;*
- *Identity;*
- *Family and Social Relationships;*
- *Practical and Other Skills Necessary for Independent Living;*
- *Financial Arrangements;*
- *(Suitability of) Accommodation*". (DfE, 2022, p.21-23).

1.3.National Context

1.3.1. The Care Cliff

According to latest national statistics for the year ending 31st March 2023, approximately 15,500 CEI in England aged 16-18 years left care (DfE, 2024). Data indicates that the majority of CEI who leave care return home to live with their birth family (DfE, 2024), whilst some leave care through other permanence routes such as adoption or Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) (Harrison et al., 2023). Additionally, some CEI are supported to transition into independent living, though research has found that this is often before they feel ready (Ofsted, 2022).

At present, *Staying Put* arrangements in England allow CEI to stay with their former foster carer/s following their 18th birthday up to the age of 21 (DfE, Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs, HMRC; & Department for Work & Pensions, DWP, 2013). This was introduced to allow CEI time to develop skills to support their preparedness for adulthood, akin to their peers who grow up in parental care (DfE, HMRC & DWP, 2013). However, this arrangement is only available for CEI in foster care and consequently, for CEI living in other care settings, their 18th birthday signifies a time whereby they must transition to independence when they do not feel ready, which has been defined as the *Care Cliff* (Become Charity, 2022). For some CEI, this transition can take place as early as aged 16 years, whereby they can move into supported accommodation under regulations introduced in July 2022 (DfE, 2023a). The age at which CEI leave care often coincides with key educational milestones, such as GCSE options and exams (Harrison et al., 2023). This can contribute to disadvantage in outcomes in adulthood (Sanders, 2021), which are explored below.

1.3.2. Outcomes for CEI in Adulthood

Longitudinal studies have illuminated the disadvantage experienced by CEI in adulthood in comparison to their peers who grew up in parental care across a range of domains, including health, education, employment, living arrangements, and relationships (e.g., Sacker et al., 2021). As the present study aims to provide implications for the practice of EPs, CEIs' outcomes in adulthood across the following PfA areas (DfE & DoH, 2015) will be presented: *higher education and/or employment*, *independent living*, *health*, and *participating in society.*

Higher Education and/or Employment. National Statistics for the year ending 31st March 2023, indicate that 38% of CEI aged 19-21 years were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in comparison to 13% of all YP aged 19-21(DfE, 2024). Further, it has been

found that by the age of 27 years, only 22% of CEI are in employment, compared to 57% of individuals who have not had experience of care (House of Commons Education Committee, 2022). CEI are also under-represented in higher education, with the latest available data indicating that 14% of CEI progressed to higher education by aged 19 years compared to 47% of the general population (DfE, 2023b).

Independent Living. CEI are more likely to move into independent living at a younger age in comparison to YP who have not been in care (Baker, 2017). Moreover, CEI are over-represented in the homeless population, with 25% estimated to have been in care (Fortune & Smith, 2021). Data published in the *Statutory Homelessness in England: January to March 2023* report (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2023), illustrated a 33% increase in the number of CEI aged 18-20 years facing homelessness, highlighting the importance of LAs supporting CEI with their preparation for adulthood to mitigate risks associated with the Care Cliff (Become Charity, 2022).

Health and Wellbeing. Findings from UK evidence reports indicate CEI experience inequalities in health and wellbeing outcomes in adulthood compared to the general population (e.g., Evans et al., 2023; Sacker et al., 2021). For example, CEI are more likely to experience mental health difficulties in adulthood compared to the population who do not have care experience (Butterworth et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2023; Sacker et al., 2021), with risk for mental health difficulties being elevated during the transitional period for leaving care (Butterworth et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2023); further highlighting a need for support in this area.

Participating in Society. CEI in the UK experience inequalities in social outcomes in comparison to the population who have not been in care (Sacker et al., 2021). For example, CEI are over-represented in the criminal justice system, with census data indicating that 52% of CEI received a criminal conviction before the age of 24 compared to 13% of their peers who had not been in care (Office for National Statistics; ONS, 2022). Some CEI also experience challenge connecting to their communities after leaving care, associated with moving away from a geographical area which is meaningful to them, and stigma associated with CEI status in some communities (Taylor, 2021).

1.4. Personal and Professional Interest

My personal interest in exploring CEIs' preparation for adulthood is informed by my own care experience. As I approached leaving care age, I was allocated a (PA) who helped me develop a Pathway Plan, with a focus on essential skills that would prepare me for adulthood. I found that discussions with my PA, accompanied by the additional 'buffer' offered by my Staying Put arrangement (DfE, HMRC & DWP, 2013), allowed me to transition to adult life when I felt ready. However, this is often not the picture illustrated for CEI due to their complex transitions into adulthood (Harrison et al., 2023). Consequently, I would like to utilise my positioning as a care-experienced researcher to illuminate CEIs' voice to inform professional practice for supporting their preparation for adulthood, to help mitigate the impact of the Care Cliff (Become Charity, 2022).

My professional interest in the research has been informed by my previous role as an Assistant Educational Psychologist (AEP) working with the Virtual School (VS). My role involved working closely with foster carers and multi-agency professionals to prepare Year 11 CEIs for their GCSEs and explore their aspirations for post-16 education, employment, or training (EET). However, it was identified that CEI required intervention at an earlier stage to ensure they had sufficient time and support available to develop skills to prepare them for post-16 pathways. This piqued my interest in exploring the role of EPs in supporting CYP's preparation for adulthood, with a particular interest in supporting CEI given the complex challenges they experience.

1.5. Overview of Thesis

This thesis comprises five chapters, including this introductory chapter, which are outlined below:

- *Chapter Two* presents an overview of theoretical frameworks to understand CEIs' transition to adulthood. A systematic literature review (SLR) is undertaken to identify what is known about CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood to identify the gap for Educational Psychology. This informs the research question: '*How do CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood?*'.
- *Chapter Three* details the critical realist ontology and phenomenological epistemology which has informed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022) methodology. A thorough account of how the study was conducted is presented, including the data analysis process.

- *Chapter Four* presents findings of the IPA, including an in-depth exploration of the Group Experiential Themes (GETs) which were interpreted.
- *Chapter Five* interprets the study's findings in relation to existing research and theory. An evaluation of the study's methodological approach is completed, followed by implications for professional practice and future research.

Chapter Two
Literature Review

2.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to explore what is known regarding CEIs' transition to adulthood to inform the focus of the present study. The chapter will begin with an overview of theoretical perspectives which are regularly cited within the literature to understand CEIs' transition to adulthood. A narrative literature review will then be presented, using an ecological perspective to support interpretation of research findings. Lundy's *Model of Participation* (2007) is presented as a framework to support participation of CEI during their transition to adulthood, followed by an exploration of the role of EPs. A systematic literature review exploring CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood is conducted to inform the rationale and research question for the present study.

2.2. Theoretical Perspectives

There is a growing body of international research which has focused upon CEI who leave care, contributing to our understanding of the needs of this group (Pinkerton, 2021). However, within leaving care research, it has been argued that there is a "*poverty of theory*" (Stein, 2006a, p.422) for making sense of empirical findings. Subsequently, the following theoretical perspectives which have been applied within the literature to understand CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood will be presented: *Emerging Adulthood* (Arnett, 2000), *Resilience Theory* (Masten, 2001), and the *Bioecological Model of Human Development* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Collectively, these perspectives can inform a holistic understanding of CEIs' transition to adulthood, which will be explored considering existing literature and published research in section 2.3.

2.2.1. Emerging Adulthood

In the UK, a growing proportion of YP continue to live with their parents into adulthood (Hill et al., 2021), with Census data indicating a 13.6% increase within the last decade (ONS, 2023a). Economic and social changes are thought to have influenced this increase, such as difficulties securing well-paid employment and affordable housing (McGhee & Deeley, 2022). However, CEI who leave care often do not have the safety-net offered by living with parents (Become Charity, 2022) and consequently experience an accelerated and abrupt transition into

adulthood (Palmer et al., 2022). Therefore, it has been suggested that developmental models, such as *Emerging Adulthood* (Arnett, 2000), are important for understanding CEIs' complex transition to adulthood in comparison to their peers who live in parental care (Mann-Feder, 2019; McGhee & Deeley, 2022).

Arnett (2000) proposes that emerging adulthood reflects a developmental phase between the ages of 18-25 years, whereby YP no longer experience dependencies associated with childhood, though do not have the normative responsibilities of adulthood. Consequently, Arnett posits that this offers the greatest opportunity for identity exploration, influenced by social and economic changes in industrialised societies, e.g., increased age in which individuals get married in comparison to previous generations. Thus, Arnett postulates that *Emerging Adulthood* is a culturally specific theory of development. However, critics argue that Arnett's (2000) theory marginalises those who are unable to take advantage of opportunities for identity development (e.g., through gap years/higher education), due to limited personal and family resources (Côté, 2014). Nevertheless, it can be suggested that understanding CEIs' transition to adulthood from an emerging adulthood perspective highlights the importance of extended care and ongoing relational support in place of current systems which accelerate CEIs' transition to adulthood (McGhee & Deeley, 2022).

2.2.2. Resilience Theory

Data presented in *Chapter One* and consideration of an emerging adulthood perspective (Arnett, 2000) highlights that CEI often experience a more complex and accelerated transition to adulthood in comparison to their peers. Despite this, some CEI experience success during their transition to adulthood, suggesting that *Resilience Theory* can support with identification of protective factors that promote successful transition to adulthood (Stein, 2008).

Resilience can be defined as the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging circumstances (Masten et al., 1990). Resilience theory originates from a variety of disciplines including psychology, psychiatry, and health (e.g., Garmezy, 1991; Masten, 1994; Rutter; 1985; Werner, 1984) and provides a conceptual framework from which to understand why some children grow up to be healthy adults despite early experience of adversity (Garmezy, 1991; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1992). Resilience can be understood in relation to the influence of positive variables (i.e., protective factors), to mitigate the risk of negative outcomes (i.e., risk factors) (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Early research on resilience focused upon the influence of a child's individual qualities (e.g., self-esteem and temperament) as protective factors against adversity (Werner & Smith, 1992). However, it is

argued that resilience does not develop in isolation (Howard et al., 1999) and consequently, within-child factors must be considered in relation to their interactions with systems in their environment (Masten, 2001). This reflects an ecological perspective of CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood, which will be explored further in the subsequent section.

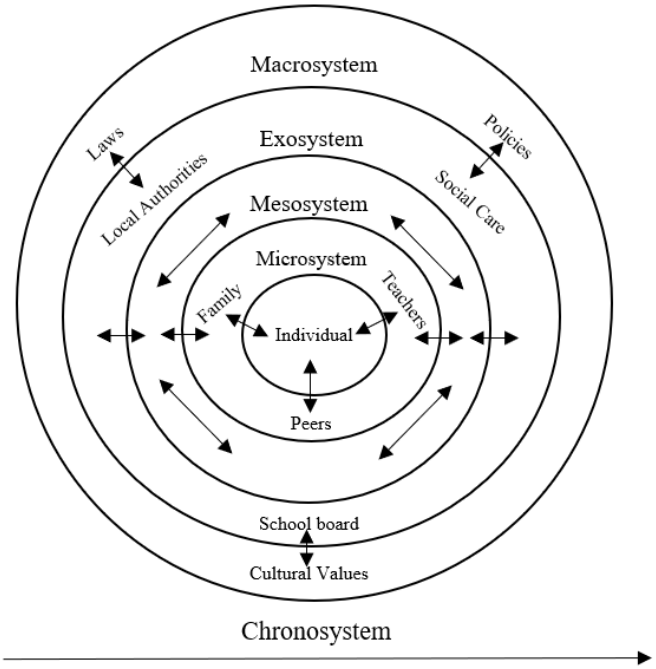
2.2.3. The Bioecological Model of Human Development

It is recognised within practice, policy, and research that CEI are not a homogenous group (Pinkerton, 2021), with unique experiences of leaving care. Consequently, there is variation in outcomes for CEI in adulthood (Sacker et al., 2021), which appear to be influenced by differences in variables within their social context (Collins, 2015; Pinkerton, 2021). Therefore, the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) can be used to support understanding of the influence of interacting systems within their environment which hinder and facilitate their transition to adulthood (Harder et al., 2020; Pinkerton, 2021).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bioecological Model of Human Development supports understanding of the influence of the dynamic and reciprocal interactions between a child and their environment upon their development. Bronfenbrenner defined the ecological environment as a "*nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next*" (1977, p. 514) including the following: *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, *macrosystem* and *chronosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Systems are arranged in relation to the proximity of influence they have on the child, which have been presented in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1.

The Bioecological Model of Human Development, adapted from Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006).



The *microsystem* refers to the individual's immediate environment and their interactions within it which have a direct impact on their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The *mesosystem* is defined as the relationships between *microsystems* in the individual's environment, i.e., "*a system of two or more microsystems*" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.817). The *exosystem* refers to external contexts which have an indirect influence on the developing person via interactions with structures within the *mesosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The *macrosystem* refers to the broader cultural context within which all systems are embedded, including laws, policies, and cultural values of the society in which the developing person belongs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The *chronosystem* acknowledges the changes in human ecology over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), including internal (e.g., physiological changes in the developing child over time) (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and external (e.g., school transitions) (O'Toole et al., 2014).

2.3.Narrative Literature Review

The purpose of the following section is to provide a detailed overview of published literature and research studies to explore what is known about CEIs' transition to adulthood. As it has been argued that there is a lack of theorising around CEIs' transition out of care (Glynn, 2021; Lee & Berrick, 2014; Stein, 2006a; van Breda, 2015), research findings will be

interpreted and organised using systems in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (1979) to inform a holistic understanding of the influence of interacting systems upon CEIs' transition to adulthood.

2.3.1. The Microsystem

The importance of trusting, emotionally supportive relationships, such as from peers, family, and mentors, is regularly cited within the literature as supporting CEIs' successful transition to adulthood (e.g., Baker, 2017; Gilligan, 2008; Marion et al., 2017; Sulimani-Aidan, 2014; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). In comparison to their peers who have not grown up in care, CEI usually have less or no parental support during their transition to adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). Consequently, the absence of supportive relationships in CEIs' lives are reported as a barrier to their successful transition to adulthood (Alderson et al., 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2014; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018), both in relation to emotional (Eastman, 2014; Marion & Paulson, 2019; Robson, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018) and financial support (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018).

Leaving care and the absence of social relationships has also been linked to feelings of isolation and loneliness for CEI (Barratt et al., 2020; Dutta, 2017; Hojer & Sjoblom, 2014; Stein, 2006b) which has also been found to be influenced by difficulties maintaining trusting relationships due to previous experience of relationships that have broken down (Driscoll, 2013; van Breda, 2015). This can also impact upon CEIs' receptiveness to support from others and a sense of self-reliance as a protective strategy (Barratt et al., 2020; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Driscoll, 2013). Consequently, professionals working with CEI need to establish secure relationships built on trust (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

2.3.2. The Mesosystem

The *mesosystem* involves collaboration between partners in education, health, and social care to inform support for CEIs' transition for adulthood (HM Government, 2016). Virtual Schools (VS) have a statutory responsibility under the *Children Act 1989* (Legislation.gov.uk, 1989) to liaise with care leaving teams during CEIs' transition to adulthood. Furthermore, *Promoting the Education of Looked-after Children and Previously Looked-after Children* (DfE, 2018a) outlines that LAs must liaise with further education (FE) and higher education (HE) settings to ensure that CEI access establishments that understand how to best support their needs. In their SLR which investigated innovations to support CEIs'

successful transition to adulthood, Alderson et al. (2023) found that collaborative relationships, whereby partners had a shared purpose, supported implementation of innovations which aimed to improve CEIs' accommodation stability and independent living skills (Dixon et al., 2020; Dixon & Ward, 2017; Mitchell-Smith et al., 2020; Neagu & Dixon, 2020a). The importance of collaborative, multi-agency relationships is further highlighted by Dixon and Baker (2016) to ensure interventions to support CEIs' transition to adulthood can be implemented successfully.

However, despite enhanced focus in governmental policy upon effective multi-agency working to support CEIs' transition to adulthood (e.g., *Keep on Caring: Supporting Young People from Care to Independence,* HM Government, 2016), difficulties with communication and collaboration amongst multi-agency professionals can be a barrier to implementing support (Mollidor et al., 2020). For example, in their study exploring CEIs' transition into the labour market, Harrison et al. (2023) found that staff time, resources and communication were barriers to liaising with multi-agency professionals to inform support for CEI. Furthermore, professionals experienced challenge with multi-agency working where there was no formal requirement to do so. Since the publication of Harrison et al.'s (2023) research, the *Staying Close* programme (DfE, 2023c) was launched, increasing focus upon effective multi-agency working to provide emotional and practical support for CEI during their transition to adulthood; highlighting the influence of the *macrosystem* upon relationships within CEIs' *mesosystem.*

2.3.3. The Exosystem

Support for CEIs' transition to adulthood at the *exosystem* level includes, but is not limited to, the Local Offer which is published by each LA to outline support that is available (DfE, 2018b); training for foster carers from LAs (DfE, 2022); and training for professionals to support CEI with their preparation for adulthood (e.g., '*Caring for Care Leavers'*; Rees Foundation, n.d). Furthermore, Alderson et al. (2023) found that variables such as effective supervision practices, senior leadership support and innovation champions facilitated successful implementation of interventions to support CEI with securing accommodation (Dixon & Baker, 2016; Dixon & Ward, 2017; Woodcock & Gill, 2014). Co-production which facilitated CEIs' voice during decision-making processes was also identified as an important variable for informing appropriate support during their transition to adulthood (Dixon et al., 2020; Heyes et al., 2020; Neaugu & Dixon, 2020a; Neagu & Dixon, 2020b, Szifris et al., 2020). However, despite improvements in attempts for co-production, findings from research conducted by Dixon et al. (2015) indicated that CEI felt they had no choice over when they left

care, illuminating the importance of the *influence* of CEIs' voice in decision-making processes (Lundy, 2007).

Research findings indicate that CEI experience barriers within their *exosystem* during their transition to adulthood, such as lack of housing options and time associated with securing properties (Dixon et al., 2020; Mitchell-Smith et al., 2020; Neagu & Dixon, 2020a; The Centre for Social Justice, 2017), turnovers in management within LAs, (Dixon et al., 2020), and allocation of LA time and resources (Mollidor et al., 2020). In their study exploring the transition of CEI into the labour market, Harrison et al. (2023) found that enhanced focus upon supporting CEI with securing accommodation served as a barrier to support with exploring career pathways, illuminating the indirect influence of interacting variables within CEIs' *exosystem* upon their experiences of transitioning to adulthood.

2.3.4. The Macrosystem

There are several governmental policies and initiatives in the UK which aim to promote CEIs' successful transition to adulthood (e.g., *The Care Leaver Strategy,* HM Government 2013; *Care Leaver Covenant*, DfE, 2018c). Following the *Care Matters* White Paper published under the labour government (Department for Education & Skills; DfES, 2007) which aimed to improve outcomes for CEI, there was a significant focus upon supporting CEI with their preparation for adulthood. This introduced the Staying Put initiative (DfE, HMRC & DWP, 2013) allowing CEI to stay with their former foster families after aged 18 years to promote an extended period of stability for their preparation for adulthood. Furthermore, the *Children and Families Act 2014* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2014a) extended the role of partners in education, health, and social care for supporting CYP with SEN up to the age of 25 years, including PfA (DfE & DoH, 2015). This has implications for the practice of professionals within CEIs' *microsystem*, including EPs. However, there is currently no research which has explored how EPs can support CEIs' preparation for adulthood in line with the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015).

Despite ongoing funding and continuation of initiatives to support CEIs' transition to adulthood, there has been variability in the quality and funding of support (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2015). Alderson et al. (2023) identified that whilst funding was provided for set-up and implementation of innovations to support CEIs' transition to adulthood, there were insufficient resources to evaluate programmes, impacting upon their roll out due to their limited evidence base (Fitzsimmons & McCracken, 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that EPs can inform support at the *macrosystem* level for CEI by working collaboratively with

a range of stakeholders to inform policy and evaluation of interventions aimed to support CEIs' transition to adulthood, given EPs' distinctive contribution in relation to consultation, research and facilitating systemic change (Cameron, 2006).

2.3.5. The Chronosystem.

CEIs' transition to adulthood represents a significant life event within their *chronosystem,* influenced by historical change at the *macrosystem* level (e.g., historical influence on policy to support CEI) and biographical change at the *microsystem* level (Pinkerton, 2021). There are notable recent events within CEIs' *chronosystem* which have influenced barriers to their transition to adulthood, such as the coronavirus pandemic (Munro et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a; Roberts et al., 2021b) and cost-of-living crisis in the UK (Smith, 2023). In their study exploring the experiences of Welsh CEI during their transition to adulthood during the coronavirus pandemic, Roberts et al. (2021a) found that the pandemic compounded barriers already faced by CEI including feelings of isolation, access to emotional and financial support, and inappropriate accommodation. Similar challenges have been intensified by the current cost of living crisis however, it is argued that CEI experienced financial disadvantage long before the cost-of-living crisis in 2021 (Smith, 2023). Therefore, to inform support for CEIs' transition to adulthood, it is important to consider the influence of historical, contextual, and societal variables which interact with systems within their environment, as well as biographical changes which influence the way in which CEI interact with their environment over time.

2.4. The Voice of CEI during their Transition to Adulthood

Article 12 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) states the right of CYP to express their views in all matters that affect them. CEIs' involvement during the planning of their transition to adulthood is highlighted in *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* (General Assembly, 2009) whereby it states that "*Children leaving care should be encouraged to take part in the planning of aftercare life"* (p.19). Despite this, research has found that CEI felt they had no choice over when they left care (Dixon et al., 2015), and where CEIs' voice has been sought, this has been felt to be tokenistic rather than meaningful (Centrepoint, 2017; Križ & Skivenes, 2017). This is further emphasised in an evaluation of the *Right2BCared4 Project* (Munro et al., 2011), an initiative aimed to support CEIs' transition to independence, whereby it was found that although 71% of CEI felt encouraged to express their views during transition meetings, only 53% felt *listened* to.

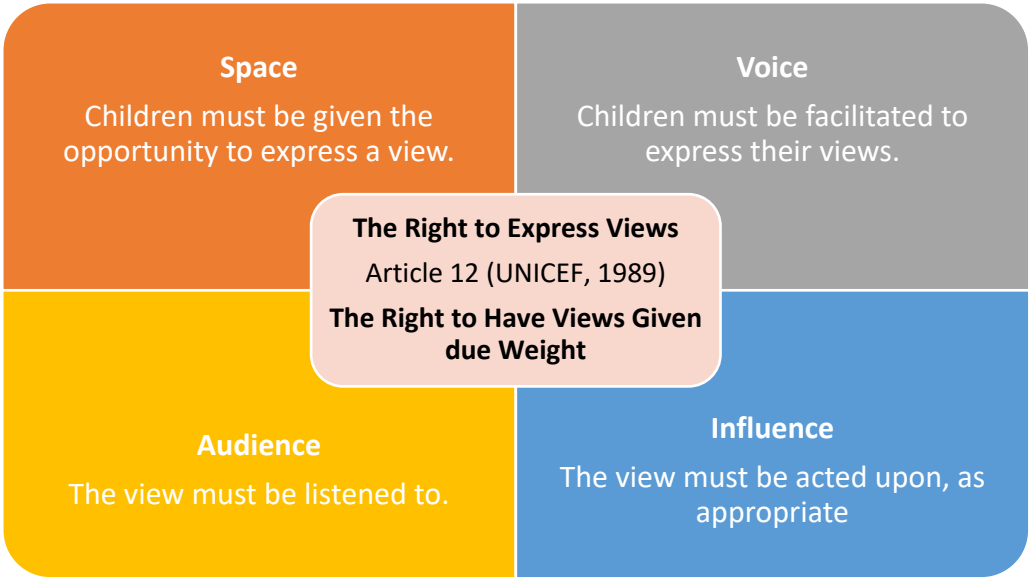
To mitigate the risk of tokenism, models of participation (e.g., *The Ladder of Participation,* Hart, 1992; *Lundy Model of Participation*, Lundy, 2007; *Pathways to Participation*, Shier, 2001) emphasise the importance of CYPs' voice having a direct *influence* on change. In line with this premise, Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) can be used as a person-centred framework to promote CEIs' meaningful participation during decision-making processes, which will now be presented.

2.4.1. The Lundy Model of Participation

Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) was developed to further conceptualise Article 12 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) following findings from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (Kilkelly et al., 2004) which indicated that children were only provided with tokenistic opportunities to engage with professionals, including in education. To support Article 12's successful implementation regarding CYP's involvement in educational decision making, Lundy (2007) proposed the following model, presented in Figure 2.2, with four key elements: *Space, Voice, Audience,* and *Influence*.

Figure 2.2

The Lundy Model of Participation (adapted from Lundy, 2007).



This has implications for EP practice, as the UNCRC has informed legislation such as the *Children and Families Act 2014* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2014a) and subsequent *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015). This indicates a role for EPs in supporting CEIs' meaningful participation in decision-making during their transition to adulthood, which will be explored in the subsequent section.

2.5. The Role of Educational Psychologists

In a review of the EP role in Scotland (i.e., *The Currie Report*) (Scottish Executive Education Department; SEED, 2002), the core functions of the EP role were defined as *consultation*, *assessment*, *intervention*, *training*, and *research*; operating at the individual (i.e., child or family), school/establishment and LA level. Though the core functions of the EP role are generally thought to remain constant (Farrell et al., 2006), Fallon et al. (2010) illuminate the importance of EPs adapting their practice in response to the changing socio-political context. For example, the extension of EPs' role to support YP up to the age of 25 years following the revised *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015) has required EPs to develop their practice in working with post-16 YP in a variety of contexts (Atkinson et al., 2015).

As corporate parents, EPs have a responsibility to ensure CEI receive support equivalent to that of a "*good parent*" (DfE, 2018d, p.8), including planning for transition to adulthood (DfE, 2022). Previous research that has investigated the role of EPs has highlighted their role in supporting CEIs' journey to university (Francis, 2020), offering training and support to residential care settings (Lightfoot, 2014), contributions during multi-agency meetings (Warwick, 2021) and working with foster carers (Osborne & Alfano, 2011). However, there is a dearth of research that has explored the EPs' role in supporting CEI with their preparation for adulthood.

Implications for EP practice for supporting CEIs' preparation for adulthood were identified in a study by Hyde and Atkinson (2019). Individual interviews were completed with 10 CEI across two LAs to explore their priorities during their transition to adulthood. CEIs' views were conceptualised using *Self-determination Theory* (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), whereby it was identified that '*relatedness*' was the most important domain for their preparation for adulthood, particularly in relation to consistent, authentic, and personalised relationships. Their findings provided important implications for the practice of EPs, including involvement in Pathway Plans, person-centred planning, and training with key adults. However, as the study was completed with a small sample of CEI across two LAs, it is important to consider the issue of transferability of findings across LAs in the UK, particularly

as some CEI were supported by teams that were rated Ofsted '*Outstanding'*. Consequently, their views may illustrate a positive experience of leaving care, which previous research has found to not be the case for many CEI across the UK (e.g., Baker, 2017; Fortune & Smith, 2021; Ofsted, 2022). Moreover, CEIs' views were not sought in association with the *PfA* outcomes outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015), suggesting further research is needed in this area to provide implications for EP practice.

2.6. Summary

This section of the literature review has provided an overview of key theoretical perspectives cited within the literature to support understanding of CEIs' transition to adulthood. Subsequently, these have been used to support interpretation of published research and literature to explore what is known about CEIs' transition to adulthood. Existing research has highlighted the influence of interacting systems within CEIs' environment upon their transition to adulthood. The literature has also illuminated the importance of exploring CEI voice in their transition to adulthood, which has informed a systematic review of research in this area.

2.7.Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

2.7.1. Rationale for SLR

There is a growing body of international literature on CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood, which is developing our understanding in this area (Pinkerton, 2021; Stein & Ward, 2021). Therefore, it is felt that an SLR is appropriate for synthesising research findings within the UK, the context of the present thesis, to identify where further knowledge can be developed. The SLR will synthesise research from within the qualitative paradigm due to its relevance for understanding individual experiences (Gray, 2014).

Parry and Weatherhead (2014) completed a systematic review of CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood and found there were a lack of qualitative studies conducted in the UK. Additionally, Atkinson and Hyde (2019) completed an SLR of qualitative findings within the UK to identify CEIs' perceived barriers and facilitators to successful transition to adulthood. This illuminated that CEI perceived that variables such as authentic and consistent relationships supported their transition to adulthood, whereas insufficient support networks were barriers. However, since their review was conducted, there have been several events within CEIs' *chronosystem* that have impacted upon their transition to adulthood, such as the coronavirus pandemic (Roberts et al., 2021a; Roberts et al., 2021b) and economic crisis (Furey

& Harris-Evans, 2021), which may exacerbate the challenges they face. Therefore, the present review aims to build upon findings from Atkinson and Hyde (2019) via an exploration of contemporary research around CEIs' transition to adulthood, particularly given the influence of ecological variables since their review was completed. Subsequently, the present review aims to answer the following question:

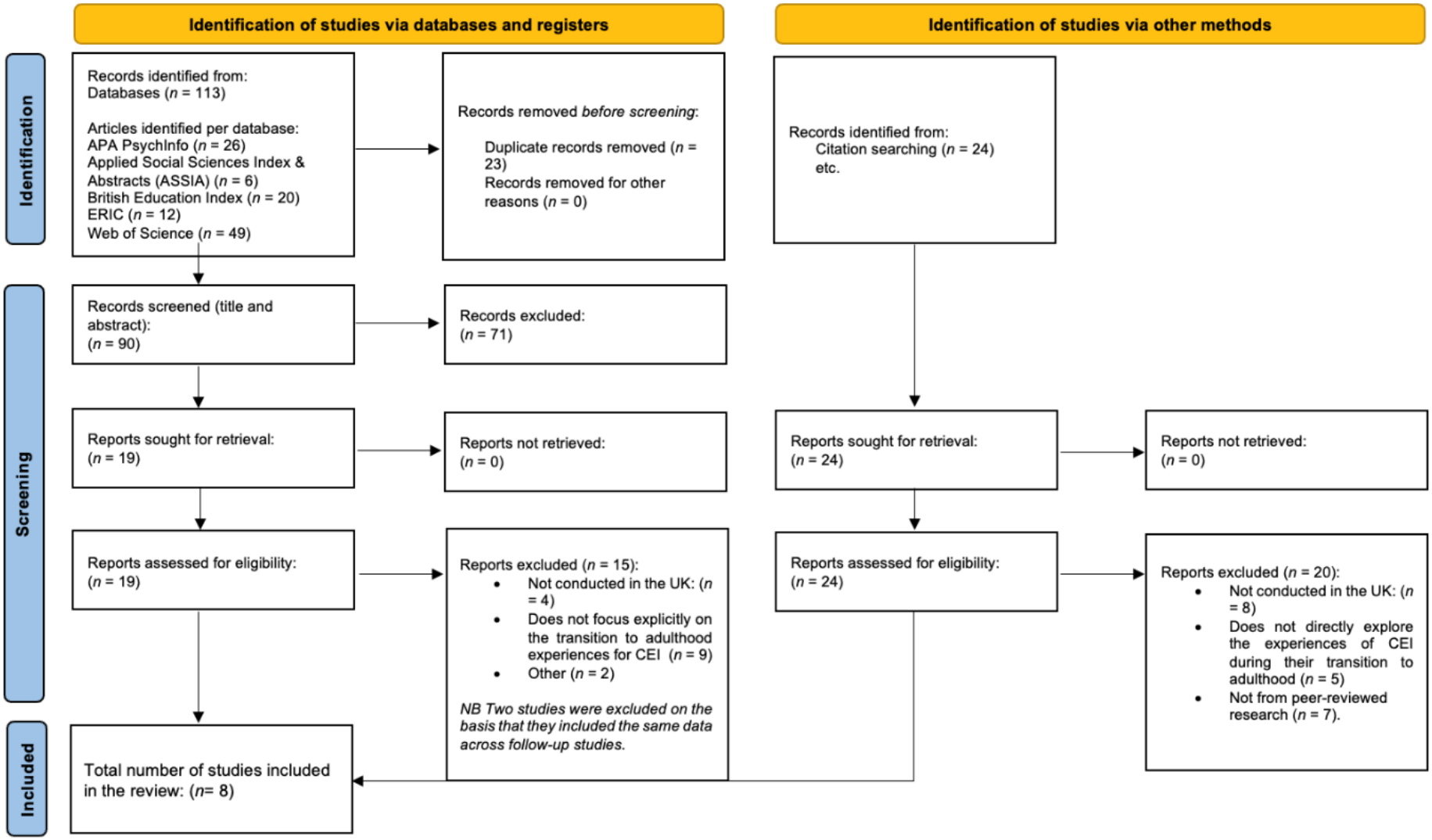
What is known about the experiences of CEI during their transition to adulthood in the UK?

2.7.2. SLR Method

The method for this review is based upon the framework devised by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021a). The search strategy is presented in Figure 2.3 below.

Figure 2.3.

PRISMA Flow Diagram for Systematic Literature Review Search Strategy.



Search Strategy. To identify search terms for the SLR, a preliminary search was carried out using the University of Nottingham database, 'Nusearch', to explore commonly used terms to describe the phenomena being investigated. Key words were defined in relation to *Population, Interest* and *Context* (PICo) (Stern et al., 2014) with Boolean operators which are presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

A Table to Illustrate Search Terms Defined using PICo (Stern et al., 2014)

PICo	Search Terms using Boolean Operators
Population	("care experienced" OR "care leavers" OR "child* in care" OR "child* looked after" OR "looked after child*" OR "child* welfare" OR "out of home care")
Interest	AND ("views" OR "experiences" OR "understanding" OR "perceptions") AND ("transition" OR "preparation") AND ("adulthood" OR "emerging adulthood" OR "leaving care" OR "aging out of care")
Context	AND ("United Kingdom" OR "UK")

An initial search using the terms presented in Table 2.1 yielded 9,983 studies, the majority of which were not relevant for the present review question, predominantly because they represented the views of CEI from non-UK contexts such as South Africa, Ghana, and Israel (e.g., Bond, 2020; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). This reflects the increased focus on supporting CEI with their transition to adulthood internationally (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Subsequently, limiters were used within the search to yield research conducted within the UK. A further limit included studies conducted between 2018-2024, the rationale for which will be presented in *Eligibility Criteria.*

Screening and Selection. The following databases were systematically searched between May 2023 and January 2024 to yield research appropriate for the review question: American Psychological Association PsychInfo (APA PsychInfo), Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Applied Social Science Index & Abstracts (ASSIA), British Education Index, and Web of Science. 'EndNote' was used as a tool to manage records during the search.

A total of 113 records were identified from database searching with 23 records removed for duplicates. A further 24 records were found via the snowballing method (Creswell, 2003) of citation searches. 90 records were screened via their title and abstract to ascertain their relevance, of which 71 were excluded.

Eligibility Criteria. A total of 43 studies were screened against eligibility criteria. This was to ensure that studies included in the review were relevant to the review question, whilst mitigating against selection bias and facilitating reproducibility in the search strategy (Page et al., 2021b). The eligibility criteria for inclusion of studies within the review are presented in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2.

Eligibility Criteria for Studies in SLR.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Publication Type		
Empirical research from primary data sources from peer-reviewed journals.	Findings from secondary data sources, including grey literature and research summaries (e.g., SLRs).	To inform methodological quality and integrity (Kelly et al., 2014).
Research conducted between 2018-2024.	Research conducted outside of this timeframe.	To explore research published after the *Children and Social Work Act 2017* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2017) which saw the extension of support for care leavers up to the age of 25 years, which may influence their experience of support. To include research published after the enactment of the *Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017) from 1st September 2017 which introduced the requirement for aftercare support for CEI aged 16 years or older. To provide an exploration of contemporary research that had not been covered in previous SLRs on the topic to reflect changes that have occurred within CEIs' chronosystem

		(e.g., coronavirus pandemic, cost-of-living crisis).
Research Context		
Research conducted within the UK and Ireland.	Research conducted outside the UK and Ireland.	To reflect support offered to CEI during their transition to adulthood in line with the present research context.
Study Design		
Data collection methods within the qualitative paradigm including verbatim quotes from CEI.	Data collection methods within the quantitative paradigm, e.g., questionnaires, surveys.	The review aims to investigate individual experiences, which are answerable through qualitative data collection methods that inform rich exploration and interpretation of human experience (Gray, 2014).
Research Focus		
Explores the individual experiences of CEI which are reflected in verbatim quotes.	Research that has explored the experiences of adults that support CEI (e.g., foster carers, social workers, schools and/or other professionals).	Exploration of the experiences of supporting adults is not appropriate for the review question.
Explores the experiences of CEI who had undergone/were undergoing their transition to adulthood to support reflection upon their experiences in line with the following PfA domains: higher education and/or employment, independent living, participating in society, good health in adult life (including mental and physical health).	Research that has explored the experiences of CEI outside these domains.	To ensure that the data gathered is relevant to the practice of EPs in relation to the PfA domains outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015).

One study identified from citation searching (Schofield et al., 2017) has been included within the review despite being conducted outside of the 2018-2024 range on the basis that it adopted a narrative approach to exploring the lives of CEI from birth families through to adulthood, which was considered pertinent to the review question being explored.

Following assessment of their eligibility to the review question being explored, a total of 8 studies were included within the review. The process for the appraisal of the quality of the studies will now be presented.

2.7.3. Quality Appraisal

A quality appraisal of the included studies was completed using Gough's *Weight of Evidence* (WoE) *Framework* (2007). Mays and Pope's (2000) criteria were used to consider the methodological quality (WoE A) of the studies. Studies were awarded 1 point per criterion for full alignment, 0.5 for partial alignment and 0 for no alignment.

The criteria for the methodological appropriateness for exploring the experiences of CEI (WoE B) was informed by research by Boswell et al. (2021), which identified factors that were important to CYP when exploring their views. The appropriateness of the focus of the studies (WoE C) were considered in relation to the review question. Full criteria considered for quality appraisal with accompanying scores can be found in Appendix A.

A total Weight of Evidence (WoE D) was calculated via the total of WoE A, B and C for each study. The total maximum score for WoE D was 21 and subsequently, all studies were considered to be of high methodological quality as they had a total WoE D score of 17 or higher (i.e., $\geq$ 80%). Therefore, all studies will be included within the synthesis of findings.

2.7.4. *Included Studies*

Overview of Included Studies. A descriptive overview of the included studies is presented in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3.

Descriptive Summary of Studies included within the SLR.

1st author, Year	Research Aim/Questions	PfA Domain	Participants *(Age, gender, location).*	Study Design/Data Collection Methods	Data Analysis	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Bayfield (2023)	To explore CEIs' experiences during their transition to higher education.	Higher education and/or employment.	22 CEI. Aged 12-35 years. 5 males; 7 females. Wales. Participants identified through charities, HE staff, foster carers, school staff and LAs.	Participatory. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups.	Thematically analysed using NVivo 12.	13	2	2	17 High
Furey (2021)	To explore variables in the social environment that can support and sustain CEIs' transition into work.	Higher education and/or employment.	6 CEI. Age, gender, location not specified. England. 7 work-based supervisors. Recruited through LA.	Case study. Semi structured interviews, focus groups.	Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	15	2	2	19 High

1st author, Year	Research Aim/Questions	PfA Domain	Participants *(Age, gender, location).*	Study Design/Data Collection Methods	Data Analysis	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Glynn (2019)	To examine CEIs' experiences at the point of leaving care to understand their perspectives on the leaving care process.	Broadly across all PfA domains.	16 CEI. 10 males; 6 females. Age not specified. Purposive sampling via liaison with aftercare workers from four LA offices in Ireland.	Qualitative longitudinal case study with 3 data collection points, 6 months apart. In-depth interviews.	Thematic Analysis (Bryman & Burgess, 1994).	15	3	2	20 High
Hyde (2019)	To explore care leavers' priorities regarding their preparation for adulthood using Self-determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000).	Broadly across all PfA domains.	10 CEI. 16 - 19 years. 7 females; 3 males. LAs in Northwest and Southwest of England. Purposive sampling through PAs and Social workers within the LAs.	Exploratory in-depth survey employing qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews.	Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	15	2.5	2	19.5 High

1st author, Year	Research Aim/Questions	PfA Domain	Participants *(Age, gender, location).*	Study Design/Data Collection Methods	Data Analysis	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Kelly (2021)	To explore the experiences of YP leaving care during the coronavirus pandemic.	Broadly across all PfA domains.	24 CEI. Aged 18-25 years. Northern Ireland.	Qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews carried out virtually/via telephone.	Thematic Analysis using NVivo (Braun & Clarke, 2013).	14	1.5	1.5	17 High
Palmer (2022)	To explore the views of care leavers who have transitioned to independent living.	Independent Living.	16 CEI. 19 - 25 years. 6 females; 10 males. Ireland. Recruited via Tusla aftercare workers.	Interpretative. Semi-structured interviews.	Computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis software (the MAXQDA package).	15	2	2	19 High

1st author, Year	Research Aim/Questions	PfA Domain	Participants *(Age, gender, location).*	Study Design/Data Collection Methods	Data Analysis	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Roberts (2021a).	To explore the experiences of young people leaving care during the COVID-19 pandemic to inform policy and practice.	Broadly across all PfA domains.	21 CEI. 17 years (*n* = 2) 18-24 (*n* = 19). 4 males; 17 females. Wales.	Qualitative mixed methods. Individual interviews with CEI. (*n* = 17) Focus group with CEI (*n* = 3). Written response from CEI (*n* = 1). Poetry from CEI (*n* = 2). Artwork from CEI (*n* = 2).	Inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).	14.5	3	2	19.5 High
Schofield (2017)	To explore the experiences of CEIs' pathways through birth families, care placements and transition into adulthood.	Broadly across all PfA domains.	20 CEI. 17-26 years. 13 males, 7 females. England.	Narrative inquiry. Semi-structured interviews.	Narrative analysis (Phoenix, 2008).	15	2	2	19 High

Study Designs. All eight studies included within the review utilised a research design within the qualitative paradigm including: participatory (Bayfield, 2023), case study (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021), qualitative longitudinal (Glynn & Mayock, 2019), exploratory in-depth survey (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019), semi-structured interviews (Kelly et al., 2021), interpretative (Palmer et al., 2022), qualitative mixed methods (Roberts et al., 2021a) and narrative inquiry (Schofield et al., 2017). All eight studies used semi-structured interviews to explore CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood, with three studies also using focus groups as a method of data collection (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Roberts 2021a). One article also gathered data via creative means, such as artwork, poetry, and a written response from CEI (Roberts et al., 2021a). It is important to note that as the review aims to explore the experiences of CEI, data from interviews completed with professionals in the study by Furey and Harris-Evans (2021) will not be included in the synthesis of findings.

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was used a method for data analysis in five of the included studies (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021a). Two studies utilised computer-assisted software to support with exploration of themes in the data (Bayfield, 2023; Palmer et al., 2022), with one study (Schofield et al., 2017) using narrative analysis (Phoenix, 2008).

Participants. The total sample of CEI participants in the included studies ranged from six to 24. Their age ranged from 12 to 35 years, though the age of participants was not specified in two studies (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019). Participants also had a range of care experience including foster-care, residential, non-kin foster and kinship care. However, the care experience of participants was not reported in all studies and consequently, it is possible that the review may have captured a broader range of care experiences.

Research Contexts. The included studies were conducted in a range of contexts including England (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Schofield et al., 2017), Wales (Bayfield, 2023; Roberts et al., 2021a) Northern Ireland (Kelly et al., 2021) and Ireland (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022). Consequently, the findings will represent a range of CEIs' experiences which may also be influenced by the education, health and care support that is available across nations. However, there were no studies conducted in Scotland that met the eligibility criteria for the purpose of this review and subsequently, experiences of Scottish CEI are absent from the review.

Preparing for Adulthood Domains. Some studies had a specific focus upon transition in relation to preparing for adulthood domains such as higher education (Bayfield, 2023), employment (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021), and independent living (Palmer et al., 2022) whilst the remaining studies focused upon transitioning out of care more broadly (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021a; Schofield et al., 2017). Moreover, all studies encapsulated the experiences of CEI during transitions in relation to the PfA outcomes as outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015).

2.7.5. Synthesis of Data

It is important to consider the researcher's epistemological position and purpose of the review when selecting an appropriate method for synthesis of data (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). I align with an interpretivist paradigm in that my aim is to understand the subjective experiences of CEI during their transition to adulthood. Consequently, thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) has been selected as a data synthesis approach due to its relevance for exploring and interpreting participants' experiences (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This was selected over alternative methods of qualitative data synthesis, such as meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988), as the aim of the review was to integrate the findings from qualitative studies, rather than generating new theory (Campbell et al., 2011).

Thematic Synthesis. The process of thematic synthesis, as outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008), was used as a guide to synthesise the data which included the following steps: coding text, developing descriptive themes, and generating analytical themes.

Step One and Two – Coding Text and Developing Descriptive Themes. NVivo 14 was used as a tool to support data management and analysis. After re-reading the studies to become immersed within the data, all studies were uploaded into NVivo 14 with relevant data coded line-by-line; this consisted of direct quotations from participants and data under the headings *'Results/Findings*'. I considered coding the data based upon the review question however, I decided that an inductive approach to coding would capture the richness of CEIs' experiences. Subsequently, a total of 129 initial codes were developed during this process, which are presented in Appendix B.

Similarities and differences between codes were identified to support with revising and refining the initial codes. Subsequently, the following descriptive themes were developed to capture the meaning of groups of codes, which remained close to the original findings of studies

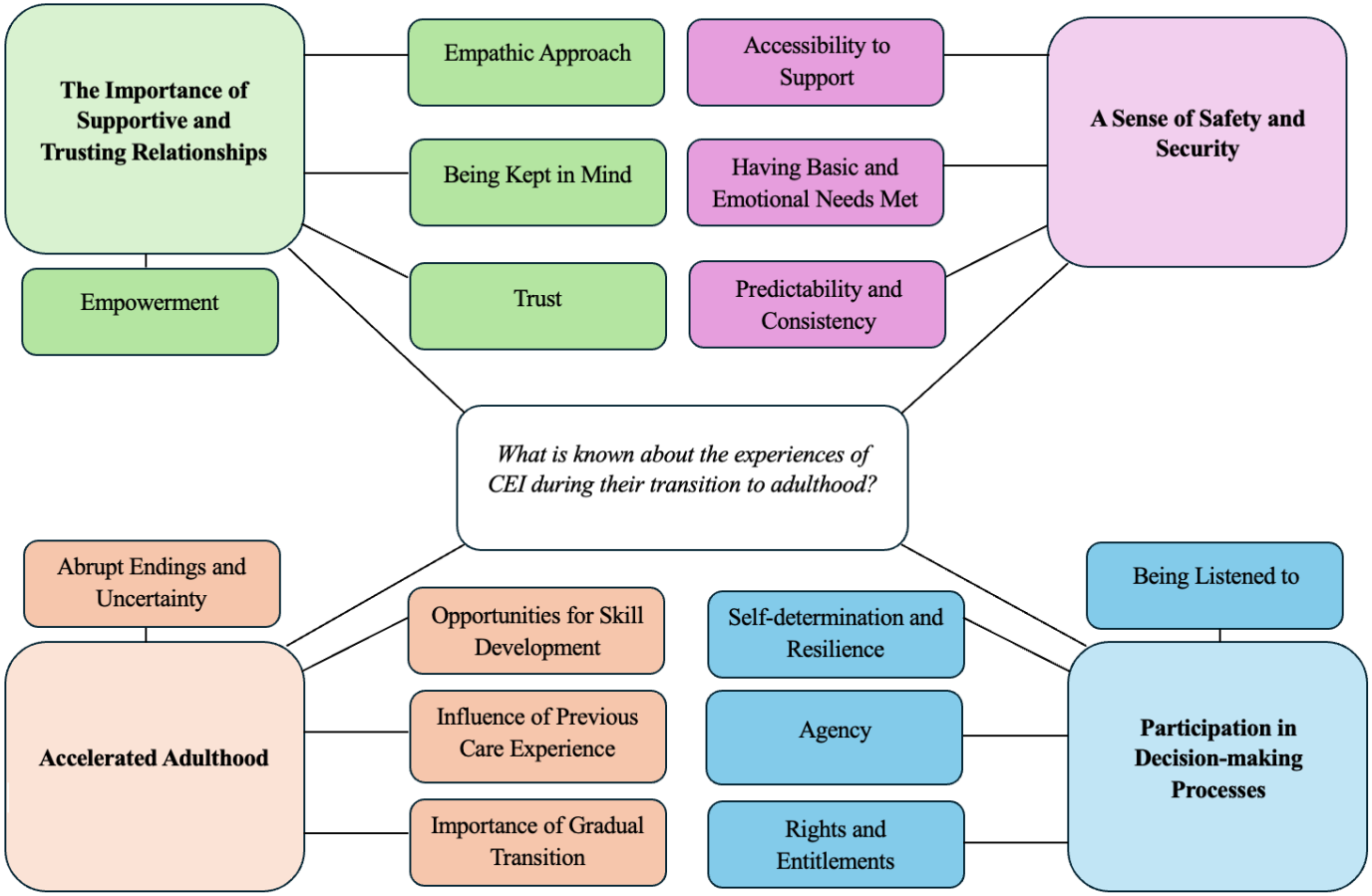
at this stage: '*Accessibility to Support'*, '*Having Basic and Emotional Needs Met'*, '*Predictability and Consistency'*, '*Empathic Approach'*, '*Being Kept in Mind'*, '*Trust'*, '*Empowerment*', *'Abrupt Endings and Uncertainty'*, '*Opportunities for Skill Development'*, '*Influence of Previous Care Experience'*, *'Importance of Gradual Transition'*, '*Self-determination and Resilience'*, '*Agency*', '*Rights and Entitlements'* and *'Being Listened to'*. A table illustrating prevalence of studies contributing to descriptive themes is presented in Appendix C.

Step Three – Developing Analytical Themes. The process of synthesis in the previous two steps had focused upon integrating findings across studies without analytical interpretation. Subsequently, the final step of analysis involved analysing findings within the descriptive themes for the purpose of answering the review question, with a focus upon interpreting and making sense of CEIs' experiences. Consequently, the following four analytical themes were developed: '*A Sense of Safety and Security'*, '*The Importance of Supportive and Trusting Relationships'*, '*Accelerated Adulthood'* and '*Participation in Decision-making Processes*'. A thematic map is presented in Figure 2.4 to illustrate the descriptive and analytical themes derived from the synthesis of data. The following section will present findings from the thematic synthesis to answer the review question:

What is known about the experiences of CEI during their transition to adulthood?

Figure 2.4.

A Thematic Map to illustrate the Analytical and Descriptive Themes from the Thematic Synthesis.

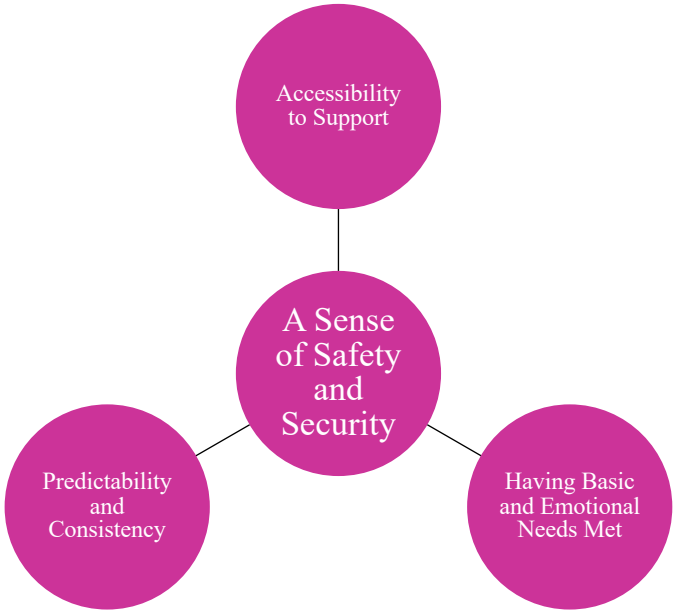


NB The analytical themes are grouped by colour with associated descriptive themes connected via solid lines.

Theme 1: A Sense of Safety and Security. This analytical theme, presented in Figure 2.5, comprises of the following descriptive themes to conceptualise CEIs' experience of safety and security: '*Accessibility to Support*', '*Having Basic and Emotional Needs Met'* and '*Predictability and Consistency'*.

Figure 2.5.

Thematic Map of the Analytical Theme, 'A Sense of Safety and Security', with associated Descriptive Themes.



Accessibility to Support. The importance of accessible support for CEI, including emotional, practical, and financial, was present in the findings of all studies included in the review. The availability of professionals was important to CEI when transitioning to adulthood, particularly when they experienced issues that required a fast resolution (e.g., with housing) (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022; Schofield, et al., 2017). Furthermore, it was important to CEI that there was transparency in knowing where to access support (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Schofield et al., 2017). However, some CEI shared the challenges they had experienced when trying to access support from professionals, such as difficulties getting in contact (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Roberts et al., 2021a) and promptness of response received (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021). Accessible support for CEI was further limited during the coronavirus pandemic due to their restricted access to technology and financial constraints (Kelly et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021).

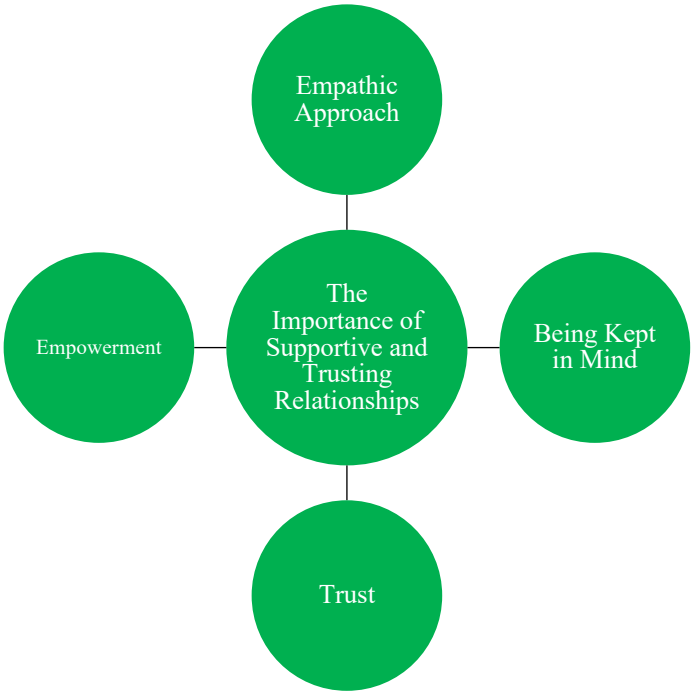
Having Basic and Emotional Needs Met. The importance of having basic and emotional needs met to support CEI with their transition to adulthood was reported in all studies. Basic needs, in relation to housing, food and finances were reported as important protective factors to support CEIs' transition to adulthood by providing a sense of safety and security (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019). A sense of security was also linked with support from CEIs' birth and foster families, which was conceptualised as providing CEI with a 'safety net' to fall back on (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022) to mitigate against consequences such as homelessness (Glynn & Mayock, 2019) during their transition to independent living (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019). CEI also described the need for a targeted approach from professionals to support their emotional needs (Bayfield, 2023; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022). Consequently, unmet emotional needs were associated with amotivation which impacted upon CEIs' college and medical appointments attendance (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019).

Predictability and Consistency. Predictability and consistency were reported as important variables to support CEIs' transition to adulthood in all eight studies. This included having regular contact with a named person, such as a PA or mentor, who CEI felt they could reach out to (Bayfield, 2023; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a). Furthermore, CEI valued support that was tailored to their individual needs as opposed to information that was generically available (Bayfield, 2023; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a). However, CEI also highlighted discrepancies in the support that was available across LAs (Bayfield, 2023; Glynn & Mayock, 2019) as well as professionals (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019), with one CEI describing the support that they received as being determined by "*a roll of a dice*" (Bayfield, 2023, p. 8).

Theme 2: The Importance of Supportive and Trusting Relationships. This analytical theme, presented in Figure 2.6, comprises the following descriptive themes to conceptualise the importance of supportive and trusting relationships in CEIs' transition to adulthood: '*Empathic Approach'*, *'Being Kept in Mind'*, '*Trust*' and '*Empowerment*'.

Figure 2.6.

Thematic Map of the Analytical Theme, 'The Importance of Supportive and Trusting Relationships', with associated Descriptive Themes.



Empathic Approach. The importance of an empathic approach adopted by professionals whilst supporting CEIs' transition to adulthood was reported in all eight studies. CEI valued professionals that understood the unique challenges they were facing with their individual living circumstances to inform support for their transition (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022) as well as being responsive to their emotional needs (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a; Schofield et al., 2017). Furthermore, CEI appreciated receiving support from professionals who adopted a calm and therapeutic approach (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022; Schofield et al., 2017) whilst demonstrating a genuine interest in them (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Roberts et al., 2021a). However, some CEI perceived the approach of professionals to be disingenuous and contractual (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019) which had a negative impact upon their receptiveness to their support.

Being Kept in Mind. The importance of CEI being 'kept in mind' by professionals during their transition to adulthood was identified in seven studies (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021;

Roberts et al., 2021a; Schofield et al., 2017). In two studies, this referred to the importance of professionals initiating contact with CEI (e.g., via email/telephone) to let them know they were thinking about them, and that support was available, should they need it (Bayfield, 2023; Roberts et al., 2021a). This was particularly important for CEI who had left care during the lockdowns that were imposed in response to the coronavirus pandemic, which exacerbated their feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kelly et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021a). During this time, contact with their social worker mitigated against feelings of seclusion as one CEI in Kelly et al.'s (2021) study shared, ""*I enjoyed seeing my social worker pull up in his car, and we would just have a good chat and stuff*" (p. 14).

Trust. The value of trust in relationships with professionals during CEIs' transition to adulthood was reported in five studies (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a). This appeared to be a pre-requisite for the development of positive relationships and subsequent engagement with professionals (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021a), as 'Aran' in Furey and Harris-Evan's (2021) study described, *"you cannot have anything else without trust. You cannot have respect without trust, you cannot have loyalty without trust, you cannot depend on each other without trust"* (p. 409). However, variables such as difficulties accessing support and communication issues between CEI and professionals influenced feelings of mistrust and subsequent disengagement, as 'Katie' shared "*I think I can sort of speak on behalf of all care leavers with this, that also comes from a complete lack of trust in the people that have said they're there to care for us*" (Bayfield, 2023, p. 10). Furthermore, trust also appeared to be linked with the perceived availability and consistency of support offered by professionals, which has been explored in the '*Sense of Safety and Security'* analytical theme.

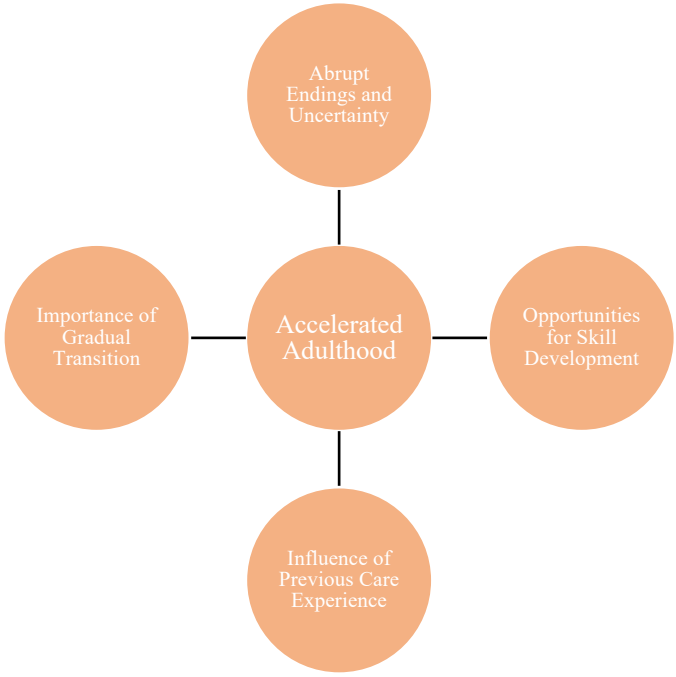
Empowerment. Receiving support from professionals who had high aspirations for CEI was reported to support their transition to adulthood in five studies (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Hayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Schofield et al., 2017). Professionals who had high aspirations for CEI appeared to be an important protective factor to facilitate CEIs' motivation to pursue educational, employment and independence goals, as well as identifying their own resources to facilitate positive change for themselves (Glynn & Mayock, 2019). Furthermore, in Schofield et al.'s (2017) study, CEI emphasised the importance of professionals "*not giving up*" on them (p. 786) after leaving care to promote their resilience. In contrast, in Bayfield's (2023) study, CEI shared their experience of professionals

having low aspirations for them, which had a negative impact upon their pursuit of higher education goals.

Theme 3: Accelerated Adulthood. This analytical theme, presented in Figure 2.7, comprises the following descriptive themes to conceptualise the experiences of CEI in relation to an 'accelerated' transition to adulthood: *'Abrupt Endings and Uncertainty'*, '*Opportunities for Skill Development'*, '*Influence of Previous Care Experience'* and *'Importance of Gradual Transition'*.

Figure 2.7.

Thematic Map of the Analytical Theme, 'Accelerated Adulthood', with associated Descriptive Themes.



Abrupt Endings and Uncertainty. CEIs' experience of abrupt endings and feelings of uncertainty about the future were reported in six studies (Bayfield, 2023; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a). For CEI participants in Bayfield's (2023) study, the prospect of losing financial support impacted upon their confidence in accessing higher education. Abrupt endings in funding were also associated with CEIs' age, which caused CEI to experience worry around their financial stability (Bayfield, 2023; Palmer et al., 2022). CEI in Palmer et al.'s (2022) study expressed worry regarding leaving care due to implications that it would have on their housing security and feared they would end up in emergency homeless accommodation. Abrupt endings for CEI were further

compounded by the coronavirus pandemic, whereby one CEI living in kinship care was asked to leave their home due to extended family member's concerns of the virus (Kelly et al., 2021), impacting upon their housing security. Furthermore, the pandemic impacted upon CEIs' transition planning, as university courses were halted (Roberts et al., 2021a), and consequently their futures appeared uncertain (Kelly et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021a).

Opportunities for Skill Development. It was shared by CEI in six studies (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022) that opportunities for skill development across a range of domains would support a successful transition to adulthood. CEI expressed a need for practical support with the development of skills such as money management (Palmer et al., 2022), understanding correspondence (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019) cooking (Palmer et al., 2022) and university life (Bayfield, 2023), to support with successful transition to adulthood. Furthermore, CEI participants in Hyde and Atkinson's (2019) shared the value of adult modelling of skills via a graduated approach to increase their confidence in application of skills for independent living. Moreover, CEI in Palmer et al.'s (2022) study argued for a transitionary programme to support the development of practical skills for independent living. However, CEI also shared that there were limited opportunities available to develop such skills (Bayfield, 2023) and that opportunities that were available were not sufficient (Glynn & Mayock, 2019).

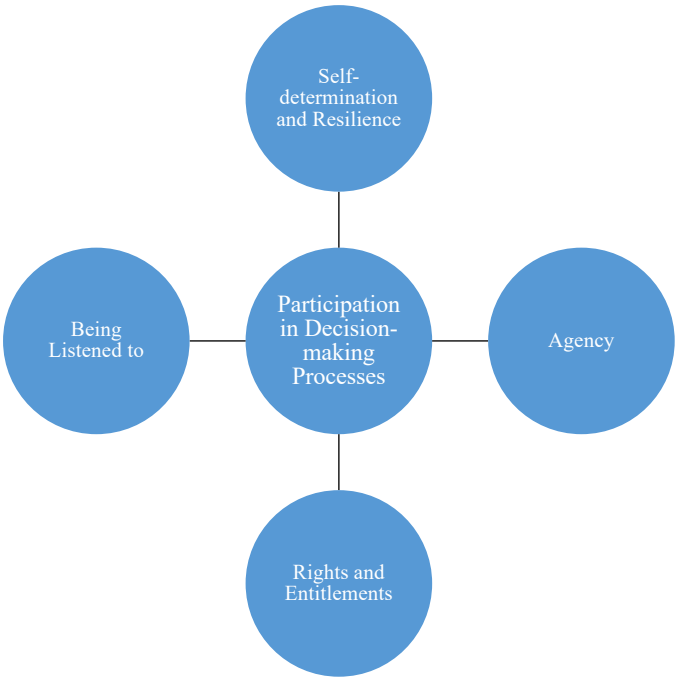
Influence of Previous Care Experience. CEIs' previous care experience was reported as a variable for influencing their transition to adulthood in six studies (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022; Schofield et al., 2017). For example, a CEI participant in Hyde and Atkinson's (2019) study shared the impact of her past experiences upon her perceived self-efficacy in relation to achieving employment goals, whilst participants' previous experience of multiple transitions in care had a negative impact upon trust in systems (Bayfield, 2023). Conversely, it was reported in Furey and Harris-Evan's (2021) study that CEI who had experienced placement stability were able to settle into work internships relatively quickly when compared to CEI who had experienced multiple transitions. However, in Glynn and Mayock's (2019) study, reflections upon care experience served as an important motivator to participate in decision-making processes for one CEI participant, though for some this discouraged their participation.

Importance of Gradual Transition. CEI expressed a need for more time to prepare for the transition to adulthood in four studies (Bayfield, 2023; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022). For example, 'Sophie' described the need for a '*bridge between school and uni, that's the bit that's sort of like missing … it's like the prep work*" (Bayfield, 2023, p.10), with CEI in Glynn and Mayock's (2019) study needing more time adjust to the idea of "*growing up*" (p.89). In Hyde and Atkinson's (2019) study, CEI voiced a preference for a gradual model of transition, which was also illuminated in Palmer et al.'s (2022) study whereby a CEI described transitioning to adulthood as "*overwhelming to take all that responsibility at once when I wasn't used to it*" (p. 755). Furthermore, uncertainty about the future in relation to variables such as housing (Glynn & Mayock, 2019) and clear post-16 pathways (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019) led CEI to avoid thinking about the future due to perceived stress around transitions (Glynn & Mayock, 2019), as well as making impetuous decisions due to limited time to reflect (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019).

Theme 4: Participation in Decision-making Processes. This analytical theme, presented in Figure 2.8, comprises the following descriptive themes to conceptualise experiences of CEI in relation to their participation in decision-making processes during their transition to adulthood: *'Self-determination and Resilience'*, '*Agency*', '*Rights and Entitlements'* and *'Being Listened to'*.

Figure 2.8.

Thematic Map of the Analytical Theme, 'Participation in Decision-making Processes', with associated Descriptive Themes.



Self-determination and Resilience. The role of CEIs' self-determination and resilience in supporting their transition to adulthood was reported in six studies (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Schofield et al., 2017). In Hyde and Atkinson's (2019) study, CEI participants reflected upon their successes when they had coped in the past to support their resilience when transitioning to adulthood, whilst resilience for CEI participants in Schofield et al.'s (2017) study was found to be linked with their sense of agency. Furthermore, it was shared in Fury and Harris-Evan's (2021) study that it is important that CEI are supported with recognising and utilising their own resources, such as resilience, to support transition to employment and independence. However, for participants in Schofield et al.'s (2017) study, it was also found that CEIs' self-determination to succeed during adulthood was for the purpose of ending the negative trajectory that is often associated with the outcomes for CEI in adulthood and proving people wrong.

Agency. A sense of agency during decision-making processes was regarded as important for CEI during their transition to adulthood in six studies (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Roberts et al., 2021a; Schofield et al., 2017). CEI expressed the value in exercising choice in decisions about their

lives, for example, in relation to living arrangements (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019), higher education, and participating in planning processes (Glynn & Mayock, 2019). This was also important for developing the resiliency of CEI to believe they had control to influence positive change in their lives (Schofield et al., 2017). However, where CEI did not experience a sense of safety and security, particularly in relation to housing and financial stability (Roberts et al., 2021a), this was found to have a negative impact upon their sense of agency (Glynn & Mayock, 2019).

Rights and Entitlements. The importance of understanding rights and entitlements to resources during decision-making processes was shared by CEI in four studies (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a). CEI felt it was important to be made aware of their entitlements during their transition to independent living whilst also receiving practical support to do so (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019). Furthermore, 'Jane' in Palmer et al.'s (2022) study shared that she "*know(s) my rights because of my aftercare worker*" (p. 756), which supported access to her higher education course. However, CEI also expressed the importance of professionals developing their understanding of their rights to support with making informed decisions, as 'Jenny' shared, "*Like if I was handed a tenancy today, I'd read it completely because now I understand. But back then it was a piece of paper I just signed so I could get my keys, so I had somewhere to live*" (Palmer et al., 2022, p. 754).

Being Listened To. The importance of having their voice heard during decision-making processes around their transition to adulthood was reported by CEI in three studies (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Schofield et al., 2017). In Glynn and Mayock's (2019) study, 'Darragh' shared their previous experience of not having their voice heard during previous meetings and reported, *"I made that a clear point that I would be at every meeting, and I would be saying something. Because I, I was never listened to before, so I thought it was extremely important that my voice was heard"* (p. 89). Furthermore, in Hyde and Atkinson's (2019) study, not being heard led to 'Phoebe's' sense of self-reliance as she shared, "*I find I have to deal with all the problems on my own [...] so they won't listen to me*" (p. 47). Moreover, when investigating the experiences of CEI during decision making processes in Glynn and Mayock's (2019) study, despite their views being explored, more than one third of participants felt their views did not have a direct influence upon decisions about their future.

2.7.6. Conclusions of SLR

To conclude, the findings from the SLR largely support findings from previous research in that CEI experience a complex and accelerated transition to adulthood (Sacker et al., 2021; Sanders, 2021) which requires a targeted approach that prioritises the voice of CEI in decision-making processes. The findings also support previous research that has conceptualised the transition to adulthood for CEI via the application of Resilience Theory (e.g., Rafaeli, 2017; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2022) to understand the influence of CEIs' interpersonal resources and previous care experience upon their transition to adulthood. Furthermore, the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) can be used to conceptualise the findings from the review in relation to CEIs' interaction with, and influence of interacting systems within their environment, upon their transition to adulthood (e.g., professionals within CEIs' *mesosystem*; and events with CEI's *chronosystem*, such as the coronavirus pandemic).

Limitations of the Review. The findings of this SLR must be considered in light of its limitations. For example, the included studies highlighted CEIs' transition to adulthood experiences in various LAs across the UK and Ireland, which appeared to influence their experiences due to the support available. Consequently, whilst this highlights the heterogeneity CEIs' experiences, the findings from the review may not be transferable across different contexts within the UK due to variations in support. Furthermore, the views of Scottish CEI have not been reflected, which may have provided further insights into discrepancies in support for CEI across nations.

It is also important to consider the influence of subjectivity during the SLR as it was carried out by a single researcher. Though I was reflexive during the process, there is a risk of bias as the process and analysis were not independently reviewed by an objective researcher due to time limitations. However, to mitigate the influence of bias, I used peer-reviewed frameworks, such as Gough's WoE Framework (2007) during appraisal of studies to promote objectivity.

Finally, a large-scale review was beyond the scope of the study due to time limitations. Consequently, it is possible that the SLR included a narrow selection of studies. This may impact upon the transferability of findings to a wide range of contexts, as well as richness of synthesis.

Implications for the practice of EPs. The findings from the review provide implications for EP practice for providing support for CEI at the *microsystem* level, as well as

liaising with professionals within their *mesosystem*, e.g., PAs, social workers, carers. The findings also provide insight into professional practice skills that are important to CEI when liaising with professionals, such as accessibility, consistency, and predictability, to develop their sense of safety and security. Findings also highlight the 'helping' skills (i.e., Egan, 1982) of professionals that are valued by CEI, such as listening, empathy and emotional containment; skills which underpin the practice of EPs when working with CYP, families, school, and multi-agency professionals (Cameron, 2006). Such skills could also support to facilitate the meaningful involvement of CEI during decision making processes during their transition to adulthood, in line with guidance that informs EP practice such as the *Children and Families Act 2014* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2014a) and *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015).

2.8.Rationale for Research

Contextual information presented in *Chapter One* has highlighted the challenges that CEI experience in adulthood in comparison to their peers who have not been in care including under-representation in higher education (DfE, 2023b), housing insecurity (Fortune & Smith, 2021), mental health difficulties (Butterworth et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2023; Sacker et al., 2021) and over-representation in the criminal justice system (ONS, 2022). Furthermore, the narrative literature review has illuminated the complex nature of the transition to adulthood for CEI and the importance of their meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Despite this, research has indicated that CEI perceive their involvement in decision-making processes to be tokenistic (Centrepoint, 2017; Driscoll, 2013; Ofsted, 2022), and that their voices are not heard (Munro et al., 2011). Therefore, it can be argued that EPs are well placed to support CEI during their transition to adulthood due to their role in advocating for the voice of CYP in decision making processes that directly affect them (Harding & Atkinson, 2009).

Findings from the SLR indicate that CEI experience an accelerated transition to adulthood, with some CEI requiring more time to adjust to "*growing up"* (Glynn & Mayock, 2019, p.89)*,* and a gradual transition to independence. Despite this, there is a gap in the literature regarding CEIs' experiences of *preparing* for adulthood which could provide important insights for professional practice to support CEI prior to their transition. It can be argued that legislation that pertains to the practice of EPs, such as the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015, p. 120), is appropriate for informing their role in supporting CEI with preparing for adulthood in line with PfA domains. However, review of the literature has highlighted that whilst there is a multitude of research that provides implications for social care professionals, there is a gap regarding the exploration of CEIs' experiences in line with '*Preparing for*

Adulthood from the Earliest Years' (DfE & DoH, 2015, p.120) to provide implications for EP practice.

Consequently, the present study aims to contribute to the knowledge base via exploring CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood to inform the practice of EPs in line with PfA in the *SEND CoP 2014*. Furthermore, the study aims to provide an original contribution via exploring CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood via a phenomenological perspective using IPA (Smith et al., 2022), to understand how CEI make sense of their experiences to inform EP practice. Moreover, it is hoped that my positioning as both a care-experienced researcher and Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) can offer an original double hermeneutic to provide implications for the practice of EPs whilst engaging in reflexivity throughout the research process.

Therefore, the present study aims to answer the following research question:

How do care experienced individuals make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood?

Chapter Three
Methodology

3.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter will outline the methodological approach to answer the research question. The chapter will begin with an exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of the study which have informed a flexible research design. Qualitative research approaches will then be explored, informing the rationale for the IPA methodology. The method for the study is then presented, including sampling, data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations are discussed in detail. The chapter will conclude with criteria to evaluate quality in the present study.

3.2. Research Aims

As outlined in section *2.8. Rationale for Research* in *Chapter Two*, this research aims to contribute to EPs' understanding of how CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood to inform their practice. In doing so, it aims to inform social change for CEI and contribute to positive outcomes in adulthood to mitigate the impact of the Care Cliff.

The methodology for the present study is informed by the following research question to meet the research aims: *How do care experienced individuals make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood?*

3.3. Philosophical Underpinnings of Research

3.3.1. Research Paradigms

In scientific research, a researcher's methodological decisions are informed by their philosophical worldview; "*a basic set of beliefs that guide action*" (Guba, 1990, p. 17). The concept of paradigm was introduced by American philosopher, Thomas Kuhn (1962), to incorporate a common framework of beliefs and methodologies within a community of researchers. This encompasses a researcher's beliefs around the nature of reality (i.e., ontology) and ways of enquiring into the nature of reality (i.e., epistemology) (Cohen et al., 2017). A researcher's ontological and epistemological positioning influences their methodological decisions, including data collection and analysis (Cohen et al., 2017). To ensure a robust research design, it is important for researchers to make the philosophical ideas they espouse

explicit to demonstrate how their worldview shaped their research approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Within educational research, there are two contending views of social science: the positivist and the interpretivist paradigms (Cohen et al., 2017). Positivism adheres to the belief there is an objective reality that exists separately from the researcher which can be known through empirical testing of hypotheses (Beck, 1979). However, methodology informed by the positivist paradigm would not be appropriate for exploring CEIs' individual experiences due to its rejection of subjective experiences and values of both the participants and researcher in the creation of knowledge (Willig, 2013). Therefore, the present study adheres to the interpretivist paradigm to understand how CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood whilst acknowledging my influence in the research process through reflexivity.

My ontological and epistemological positioning associated with this worldview will now be presented.

3.3.2. Ontology

Ontology refers to a researcher's beliefs about the nature of existence and what constitutes reality (Gray, 2014). Ontological positions can be conceptualised along a continuum, ranging from realist to relativist (Willig, 2013). A realist ontological position adopts the belief that there is one true objective reality that exists separately from the researcher (Gray, 2014). Conversely, a relativist ontology believes there are multiple, socially constructed realities (Gergen, 2015) which can be known through interpretation and reflexivity of the researcher (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Moreover, a critical realist ontology posits that an objective reality exists which is shaped by causal mechanisms such as social, political, and cultural influences (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2010). Furthermore, individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and interpretations contribute to their understanding of reality (Gray, 2014).

The present study aligns with a critical realist ontology in that causal mechanisms, such as education and LA systems, have a direct influence upon CEIs' experiences during their preparation for adulthood (e.g., *Children and Social Work Act 2017*; Legislation.gov.uk, 2017). These mechanisms influence CEIs' constructions of reality, which can be known imperfectly via interpretation of the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.3.3. Epistemology

Epistemology is associated with exploring how knowledge can be acquired, and the relationship between the "*knower*" and the "*known*" (Mertens, 2019, p. 11). Epistemological

positions can also be conceptualised along a continuum ranging between objective and subjective (Willig, 2013). An objectivist epistemology seeks to discover an objective truth through observation and the empirical testing of hypotheses (Beck, 1979) using deductive reasoning (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Conversely, subjectivist epistemology posits that knowledge is influenced by social and contextual factors (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) and socially constructed via the interaction between the researcher and participants (Mertens, 2019). Similar to a subjectivist epistemology, phenomenology seeks to understand subjective experiences whilst also considering the structures of reality within which experiences are situated (Gray, 2014). In doing so, researchers must 'bracket' their preconceived understanding of phenomena to interpret how participants ascribe meanings to their experience, using inductive reasoning and qualitative methods (Gray, 2014).

A phenomenological position has been adopted as it aligns with the aim of the present study to investigate how CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood, whilst also acknowledging their experiences are influenced by contextual variables. This position also acknowledges my role in making sense of CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood, which is made transparent through reflexivity. This is particularly pertinent given my own care experience whereby I may be considered an 'insider' to the research, which will be explored further in section 3.8. *Reflexivity and Positionality.*

3.4. Qualitative Research Approaches

The methodology in the present study is informed by a critical realist ontology and phenomenological epistemology. A fixed research design was rejected due to its use of objective measures which do not capture how participants ascribe meaning to their experiences (Patton, 2002). Consequently, a flexible design employing qualitative data collection is appropriate for the aim of the present study to understand how CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood, as it will allow for a nuanced exploration of individual experiences which are context specific (Gray, 2014). It is important to note that a flexible design that combined qualitative approaches (i.e., two-phase qualitative sequential) was considered to investigate how CEIs' experiences could inform EP practice (e.g., individual interviews with CEI followed by focus group with EPs) however, this was beyond the scope of the present study due to recruitment difficulties and subsequent time implications.

The following section will outline the qualitative approaches that were considered, before presenting the rationale for the chosen qualitative approach for this study, IPA (Smith et al., 2022).

3.4.1. Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) is an inductive qualitative research approach whereby the aim is to generate or discover a theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This involves a systematic approach to sampling and data collection (Chun Tie et al., 2019), placing emphasis upon the role of the researcher in interpreting and discovering theory from the data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). This approach aligns with the subjective nature of phenomenology which acknowledges the researcher's influence in generating meaning from the data, made explicit through reflexivity (Charmaz, 2014). However, a GT approach does not align with the aim of the present study as it would generate a theoretical-level account of CEIs' experience as opposed to understanding individual, subjective experiences.

3.4.2. Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis (DA) is a qualitative approach that focuses upon studying language in its social context (Johnstone & Andrus, 2024). This includes examination of written or spoken language (Fairclough, 2003), which can illuminate how language shapes individual realities (Padgett, 2016), as well as power dynamics and social processes across contexts (Willig, 2013). This aligns with both the critical realist ontology and phenomenological epistemology in the present study in that there are social, political, and cultural influences upon CEIs' experiences (e.g. *Children and Social Work Act 2017*; Legislation.gov.uk, 2017), which can be understood through interpretations of their constructions of their reality shared through language (Willig, 2013). However, as the purpose of DA is to investigate functions of language in social contexts (Willig, 2013), it was considered this did not align with the present research question which focuses upon interpretation of experiences and influence of the researcher.

3.4.3. Narrative Analysis

Narrative Analysis (NA) is a qualitative approach that is informed by the premise that individuals understand and interpret their experiences through narrative or stories, organising and connecting events with a beginning, middle and end (Lyons & Coyle, 2021). Similarly, to DA, it posits that verbal and written expression are forms of meaning making (Frank, 2010), focusing upon the way in which individuals construct their individual narratives to make sense of their experiences (Mischler, 1995). However, as NA focuses upon participants' construction of stories, this does not align with the focus of the present study for investigating individual meaning making.

3.4.4. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is an approach to TA which emphasises the researcher's reflexivity in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The purpose of RTA is to develop, analyse and interpret patterns across a dataset to illuminate shared meanings that address the research question/s (Braun & Clarke, 2021). RTA is described as a "*theoretically flexible*" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 157) qualitative approach which can be used to answer a broad range of research questions. Therefore, it can be argued that RTA is an appropriate qualitative approach to investigate CEIs' experiences as it aligns with the theoretical positioning of the present study, whilst illuminating researcher influence on interpretation of the data through reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, as the present study's aim is to investigate *individual* lived experience, RTA was not selected as it provides a broad understanding of experience across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.4.5. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is a qualitative, experiential approach to research which investigates individuals' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). It posits that humans are sense-making beings, whose accounts reflect their interpretations and sense-making of their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Following recruitment of a small, homogenous sample, it aims to provide a detailed account of personal experience to understand how participants ascribe meaning to their experiences in a particular context (Smith, 1996; Larkin et al., 2006), typically using individual, semi-structured interviews (Smith et al., 2022). However, whilst IPA aims to adopt an '*insider's perspective*' (Smith, 1996, p. 264) to the experience under investigation, it recognises interpretation as a dynamic process whereby the researcher attempts to make sense of a participant's sense-making of their experience; described as a '*double hermeneutic*' (Smith et al., 2022, p.3). Therefore, IPA aligns with the critical realist ontology and phenomenological epistemology of the present study in that participants' experiences are influenced by contextual variables (Bhaskar, 2008), which can be understood through interpretation and reflexivity of the researcher (Willig, 2013).

Rationale for Choosing IPA. This section will outline the rationale for selecting IPA as a qualitative approach for exploring CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood.

Firstly, IPA aligns with the study's critical realist ontological position which posits that there is an external reality that exists for CEI participants which is influenced by social,

political, and cultural variables (Scott, 2005), which can be known through interpretation of subjective experiences. The hermeneutic underpinnings of IPA align with the study's phenomenological epistemology which aims to understand CEIs' subjective experiences through interpreting how they ascribe meaning to their experience.

Secondly, as IPA is informed by phenomenology, the study of human experience, it was felt that this was an appropriate qualitative research approach due to the aim of the present study in understanding the individual, lived experiences of CEIs' preparation for adulthood. This aligns with the research question which aims to fill a gap in the literature via exploring CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood using a phenomenological perspective.

Thirdly, it was important to select a research approach which illuminated my reflexivity in the research process as I can be considered an insider to the research population. Therefore, IPA was selected as an approach due to its emphasis on researcher reflexivity and consideration of the '*double hermeneutic'* that occurs when researchers interpret participants' sense-making of experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

Finally, as CEI are not a homogenous group (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018), it was important to select an approach which illuminated the voice of individual participants using an idiographic approach. This also aligns with Lundy's Model of Participation (2007); a person-centred framework which has informed the methodology of this study (section 3.8.1).

3.5. Philosophical and Theoretical Underpinnings of IPA

IPA is informed by the following theoretical and philosophical perspectives: *phenomenology*, *hermeneutics* and *idiography* (Smith et al., 2022). These will now be presented to illuminate the philosophical basis for the methodology in the present study.

3.5.1. Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach which focuses upon the study of subjective human experience (Smith et al., 2022). It was first conceptualised by philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1931), who argued that experience must be examined in its own terms as opposed to pre-defined systems (Smith et al., 2022). This is known as transcendental phenomenology which focuses upon examination of essential core structures of experiences through a process of "*bracketing*" (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, p.102). This includes setting aside pre-conceived beliefs and assumptions to understand experience and minimise bias through reflexivity; a key principle in IPA (Smith et al., 2022).

Husserl's work was further developed by phenomenologists Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre which focused upon understanding lived experience in relation to an individual's engagement with the world; influenced by relationships, language, and culture (Smith et al., 2022). This shifted focus from a transcendental (i.e., descriptive) understanding of individual experience to an interpretative perspective, which will now be discussed.

3.5.2. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation, informed by the work of theorists such as Heidegger, Schleiermacher and Gadamer (Smith et al., 2022). In opposition to Husserl's transcendental (i.e., descriptive) phenomenology, Heidegger argued for a hermeneutic (i.e., interpretative) phenomenology whereby we can understand an individual's relationship to the world through the meanings they make of their experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2011).

Researchers gain access to an individual's experience of the world through interpretation of accounts that are shared with them (Smith et al., 2022). This is defined as a '*double hermeneutic'*, whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's sense-making (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The '*hermeneutic circle*' refers to the circular process of understanding the parts to understand the whole, and vice versa; reflecting the dynamic and iterative process of interpreting experience (Smith et al., 2022). This provides implications for the method of analysis in IPA, whereby the researcher engages in an iterative process of analysis, as opposed to completing steps sequentially (Smith et al., 2022).

3.5.3. Idiography

IPA is also influenced by idiography which refers to a focus upon the '*particular*' (Smith et al., 2022). This links with IPA's hermeneutic phenomenology whereby researchers focus upon interpreting individual experience as opposed to the general (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). This contrasts with nomothetic inquiry in psychology whereby the aim is to generalise findings at the group or population level, which conceals findings from individual cases (Smith et al., 2022).

3.5.4. Limitations of IPA

The limitations of IPA as the selected qualitative approach will now be presented.

IPA research investigates individual lived experience following analysis of language used by participants e.g., using qualitative data collection such as semi-structured interviews, diaries, descriptive accounts (Willig, 2013). However, it has been criticised for presuming that

language provides participants with the tools to capture their experiences (Noon, 2018; Willig, 2013). IPA studies also require participants to provide rich accounts of their experiences to inform a nuanced analysis, which may disadvantage individuals who experience difficulty articulating their thoughts, feelings and perceptions using language (Willig, 2013). Consequently, whilst the present study required participants to have communication skills which enabled them to express their views in a semi-structured interview, they were not excluded on the basis of their language skills to advocate the opportunity for their experiences to be listened to and understood (Lundy, 2007; Tuffour, 2017).

Phenomenological inquiry is interested in the exploration of experience in its own terms (Husserl, 2001) however, it has been argued that analysis of language does not provide researchers with direct access to participants' experiences (Willig, 2013). This is contended on the basis that participants' use of language is a construction of their experience as opposed to a description of it (Willig, 2013). Furthermore, it is argued that analysis of participants' language illuminates the way in which they talk about an experience rather than providing insight on the phenomenon under investigation (Willig, 2013). It is important to note that the present study aims to understand how CEI make sense of their preparation for adulthood experiences, which can only be known through their own constructions and interpretations; pertaining to the critical realist ontology and phenomenological epistemology of the present study.

A final limitation of IPA that was considered is the issue of transferability of findings due to small sample sizes (Noon, 2018). However, IPA is an idiographic approach to qualitative research and consequently, a small sample size of three to six participants is sufficient to allow detailed interpretation of experiences of a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, IPA aims to illuminate the experiences of a particular group, in contrast to nomothetic approaches frequently applied within psychology to inform generalisations across groups (Smith et al., 2022). Moreover, Smith et al. (2022) argue for 'theoretical generalisability' and consequently, it is important to consider findings of the present study in relation to evidence from theory and wider research literature.

3.6. Reflexivity and Positionality

In contrast to quantitative approaches which seek to reveal an objective reality that is free from researcher bias (Gray, 2014), qualitative approaches depend upon the researcher's subjectivity in the generation of knowledge (Silverman, 2021). Within qualitative inquiry, reflexivity is increasingly recognised as a fundamental strategy to consider the influence of

researchers' own experiences, interests, and beliefs upon the research process (Berger, 2015). A researcher's positioning may also influence participants' willingness to share experiences (De Tona, 2006), the type of information shared, and the questions posed to participants (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006). Therefore, it is important that qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity to acknowledge their influence upon the research process to enhance the credibility of findings (Cutcliffe, 2003).

IPA is a qualitative research approach informed by phenomenology and hermeneutics which illuminate the role of the researcher in interpreting participants' experiences and constructing meanings through a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, reflexivity (i.e., *'bracketing'*) is a fundamental aspect of IPA research to ensure researchers set aside pre-conceived beliefs and assumptions which may bias their interpretation of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2022). However, despite engagement in reflexivity to minimise bias, it is not possible to objectively describe reality (Dubois, 2015). To illuminate my reflexivity in the present study, extracts from my reflective diary are presented in the Appendices to illustrate how my experiences and beliefs may have influenced the collection and interpretation of data. Following guidance set out by Langdridge (2007), I will now present my positioning in the research to acknowledge how this may impact upon knowledge that is created.

I will first consider my personal positioning within the research. I am a 27-year-old, white female with previous care experience. At aged 16 years, I engaged in Pathway Planning discussions with my PA with a focus on developing skills to support my preparation for adulthood. Therefore, I consider myself to be an 'insider' to the research population being studied due to our shared care experience and engagement in Pathway Planning. My shared experience influences the way that I empathise with participants and their experiences and consequently, the way I interpret their experiences (Langdridge, 2007). However, whilst I share some characteristics with the research population, CEI are not a homogenous group (Evans et al., 2024). Consequently, I also consider that I have an 'outsider' positioning. Therefore, it is important that I engage in continuous self-evaluation of my thoughts, feelings, and bias through reflexivity during the research process, which will be illustrated through excerpts of my reflective diary.

Following careful consideration with my academic tutor, I took the decision to share my care experience with participants. It was felt that sharing my experience would support with establishing rapport and developing a trusting relationship, variables which I felt were important due to the sensitive nature of experiences being explored. However, the risks of

sharing such experience were acknowledged, such as my influence upon CEIs' decision to take part, and the information shared by participants as they may not wish to share perspectives which they perceive may differ to mine (Holmes, 2020). This prompted reflections around perceived power imbalances, and I endeavoured to empower CEI participants to tell their own story, regardless of my own care experience. Therefore, I engaged in continuous reflexivity to mitigate the bias associated with my own beliefs and assumptions during the research process. This is particularly important to acknowledge as being an insider to the researcher population does not automatically imply shared understandings of experiences (Holmes, 2020).

As illustrated in *Chapter 1*, my motivation to complete the research has been informed by my previous role as an AEP, and my current role as a TEP. Following review of literature and discussions with EP colleagues, I found that the EP's role in supporting CEI with their preparation for adulthood was difficult to conceptualise, influencing my interest in this area.

Therefore, it is important to collectively consider the influence of my personal and professional motivation to complete the research upon the research process.

3.7. Method

This section will first discuss Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) as the methodology's person-centred framework. Subsequently, the contexts in which the research took place will be outlined, followed by the recruitment process, data collection and analysis, and ethical and quality considerations. References to my reflective diary in the appendices will be made throughout to highlight my reflexivity during the research process.

3.7.1. Methodology Person-centred Framework

The Lundy Model of Participation. As discussed in *Chapter Two*, Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) is a person-centred framework that was developed to guide educational practitioners' understanding of how to implement children's rights to participation meaningfully and effectively in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC (Kennan et al., 2019). The steps of the model and associated principles encompassed in Article 12 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) are presented in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1

The Lundy Model of Participation (2007) and associated Principles in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989).

Steps outlined in Lundy's *Model of Participation* (2007).	Associated Principles in Article 12 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989).
1. Space Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.	"*assure to the child*" (p.5).
2. Voice Children must be facilitated to express their views.	"*the right to express a view freely*" (p.5).
3. Audience The view must be listened to.	"*the views of the child being given due weight*" (p.5).
4. Influence The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.	"*due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child*" (p.5).

Lundy's Model of Participation aligns with my critical realist ontological stance in recognising the agency of CYP during decision-making processes (Scott, 2005), as well as the influence of causal mechanisms which may hinder their participation (DeForge & Shaw, 2012). Furthermore, it was felt that the model supported the aims of the present study with regard to exploring individual voice to *influence* EP practice.

Explicit links will be made throughout the thesis to illuminate how Lundy's Model of Participation has informed the research process.

3.7.2. Research Context

The purpose of IPA is to investigate how participants make sense of their social world (Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, the research context will now be presented to situate participants' experiences within their specific contexts to support with transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Research Setting. Participants were recruited from two LAs in England. Within the first LA (Local Authority A) whereby one participant was recruited, the latest data available for the year 2022/23 (ONS, 2023b) indicates that there was a total of 287 CEI aged 17-21 years.

174 (61%) were reported to be in education, employment, or training (EET), with 103 NEET (36%). Information was not known for 10 (3%) of CEI in relation to education outcomes. Within this LA, 91% of CEI aged 19-21 years were reported to be in suitable accommodation, which is 2% higher than the average for all English metropolitan boroughs (89%) (Local Government Inform (LGA), 2024). Moreover, the FE setting from which the participant was recruited had a team of coordinators to offer support for CEI across a broad range of areas, including learning, careers advice, financial and travel support, which may influence the participant's experience shared during their individual interview.

Within the second LA (Local Authority B) whereby five participants were recruited, the latest data available for the year 2022/23 (ONS, 2023b) indicates that there was a total of 261 CEI aged 17-21 years. 156 (59%) were reported to be in EET, with 90 (35%) NEET. Education outcomes were not known for 15 (6%) of CEI. Furthermore, 89% of CEI aged 19-21 years were reported to be in suitable accommodation, which is in line with the English average for metropolitan boroughs (89%) (LGA, 2024). The service from which the participants were recruited comprised of PAs to support CEI with exploring routes into EET. CEI also had access to workshops to support their preparation for adulthood, including cooking lessons, housing and job searching, which may also influence the experiences they shared.

Working with a Vulnerable Population. CEI are recognised as a vulnerable group within governmental policy and research (e.g., *Care Leaver Strategy*, HM Government, 2013; *SEND CoP 2014*, DfE & DoH, 2015) and are argued to be one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society (Brown et al., 2019; Hunter et al., 2020). This is reflected in governmental statistics and literature presented in *Chapter One* and *Two* which illuminated the significant challenges CEI experience across educational, social, emotional and health outcomes in comparison to the general population. In July 2023, the *Children's Commissioner* (Children & Young People Now, 2023) opened a consultation to explore whether care experience should be a protected characteristic in line with the *Equality Act 2010* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2010b). Such protection under the Equality Act 2010 would legally protect CEI from discrimination in the workplace and society however, it is argued that more needs to be done to eradicate disadvantage experienced by CEI in comparison to the general population (The Care Leaders, 2023). Furthermore, decisions to make 'care experience' a protected characteristic are driven at the local level, which may lead to further variations in support and disadvantage experienced by CEI (Children & Young People Now, 2023).

It is important to note that Local Authority B, whereby five participants were recruited, had made care experience a protected characteristic. However, at the time of data collection, Local Authority A had not. This is important to consider in relation to transferability of findings, as this may have implications for support received by CEI and their constructions of preparing for adulthood experiences.

Further ethical and practical considerations to protect the wellbeing and welfare of CEI participants during the research will be discussed throughout the following sections.

3.7.3. Participants

Sample Selection. The purpose of IPA is to complete a detailed case-by-case analysis of the experiences of a particular group (Smith et al., 2022). It is recommended that for a novice researcher, a sample of 3-6 participants is sufficient for detailed individual analysis and comparisons across cases (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Aligning with IPA's idiographic focus, participants were recruited via purposive sampling to identify a relatively homogenous group for whom the research question would be significant (Smith & Osborn, 2003) using the following inclusion criteria:

- CEI aged 16-25 years who were in the care/had left the care of the LA;
- Have engaged in Pathway Planning and therefore outcomes in relation to PfA*;*
- Have communication skills which enable them to express their views and participate in a semi-structured interview.

Discussions were held with gatekeepers to identify CEI who were not experiencing difficult personal circumstances, such as instability or emotional needs which were being referred to/supported by outside agencies. The purpose of this was to mitigate risk of emotional harm which may have been caused by exploration of personal experiences during the interview.

The originally proposed study aimed to recruit CEI aged 16-18 years, as it was felt their current/recent involvement in Pathway Planning would support their reflections during the interview. However, due to recruitment difficulties and to reflect the post-16 age range of YP that EPs work with (DfE & DoH, 2015), ethical approval was obtained to extend the participant age range to 25 years.

CEIs' involvement in Pathway Planning was paramount to ensure they could reflect on their experiences of preparing for adulthood and the support they had received. Furthermore,

whilst the study aimed to recruit participants who had the communication skills to participate in an individual interview, they were not excluded based on their language skills in line with their right to express their views (Lundy, 2007).

Recruitment Process. Following ethical approval (Appendix D) received for the study in May 2023, I liaised with the Senior EP (SEP) for CiC in the LA where I am currently on placement as a TEP. Subsequently, a FE setting was identified to recruit post-16 CEI participants due to their links with the VS and recognition for support for CEI. In June 2023, I presented my research proposal to gatekeepers within the FE setting to obtain approval to recruit CEI participants; demonstrating their ethical oversight and commitment to protecting the wellbeing of CEIs (Williams et al., 2023). Gatekeepers agreed to support recruitment by sharing the research information sheet with CEI who met the inclusion criteria during their initial meetings in the Autumn Term 2023.

This process identified four prospective CEI participants who met the inclusion criteria. Consequently, I liaised with a gatekeeper within the FE setting to arrange initial meetings with the prospective participants to explain the research process, answer queries and establish trust and rapport. This was paramount given the vulnerability of CEI participants to promote their sense of agency and support with providing informed consent (British Psychological Society; BPS, 2021a). Following the initial meetings, one CEI participant shared it was not the right time to participate to protect their emotional mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, two prospective participants were unable to proceed with the initial meetings due to changes in their personal circumstances which impacted upon their suitability to participate. Consequently, one CEI participant was recruited via this recruitment method.

With an aim to recruit a total of 3-6 participants in line with guidance from Smith et al. (2022), an email was sent to the VS and Head of Service for CEI in the LA where I am currently on placement however, this method of recruitment was unsuccessful. Consequently, recruitment was extended to VSs outside of the LA where I am currently on placement.

Following an email to a VS in England, I was directed to professionals within the team who had a role in supporting CEI into EET. Subsequently, I was invited to present my research during a team meeting in the Spring Term 2024 with PAs who would discuss the research with CEI who met the inclusion criteria. Approval was also sought and granted from the Service Manager to complete the research with CEI; illuminating the role of gatekeepers in safeguarding and protecting the wellbeing of vulnerable participants such as CEI (Miller et al., 2022).

In line with my previous approach to recruitment, initial meetings were arranged with prospective CEI participants at a community building within the LA to discuss the research and answer any queries to ensure informed consent (BPS, 2021a). Subsequently, five CEI participants agreed to participate in the research, contributing to a final sample of six participants.

My reflexivity during the recruitment process is presented in Appendix E.

Final Sample. A total of six CEI took part in the study. Whilst CEI are not a homogenous group, a degree of homogeneity is required for IPA (Smith et al., 2022). The participant group were homogenous in that they were all in EET. Furthermore, they had all begun to have conversations around preparing for adulthood at aged 16 years, except for one participant who begun to have discussions at aged 19 years. Demographic information collected and defined by participants is presented in Table 3.2. Please note that participant information is not presented alongside their pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Table 3.2.

Demographic Information for Participants included in the Study.

	Number
Gender	
Female	2
Male	3
Non-binary	1
Age	
19	1
20	3
22	2
Ethnicity	
White British	4
White Mixed	1
Nigerian	1
Age of entry into care	
9	1
11	1
13	3
16	1
Current education, employment, or training	
Employment	2
Further education (college)	2
Apprenticeship	2
Current living arrangement	
Independent Living	4
Living with birth family	2
Age at which PfA discussions started	
16	5
19	1

3.7.4. Ethical considerations

To uphold the ethical integrity of the research, the *BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct* (BPS, 2021b) and *BPS Code of Human Research Ethics* (BPS, 2021a) were consulted to consider the study's ethical risks. Following identification of actions to mitigate against ethical risks, approval was obtained from the *University of Nottingham Ethics Committee* in May 2023 (Appendix D). Subsequent approval was obtained in November 2023 (Appendix F) to extend the participant age range to 16-25 years. Further approval was received to offer virtual interviews for CEI participants to support with recruitment (Appendix G); though CEI participants expressed preference for face-to-face interviews and consequently, this method of data collection was not required.

Ethical considerations in relation to *informed consent*, *confidentiality*, *reducing harm* and *right to withdraw*, will now be presented.

Informed Consent. Strict adherence to guidance outlined in the BPS *Code of Ethics and Conduct,* BPS *Code of Human Research Ethics* and *Best Practice for Educational Psychologists in Gaining Consent* (Association of Educational Psychologists; AEP, 2022) was followed to obtain full and informed consent of CEI participants.

Across both LAs, I presented my research to gatekeepers who agreed to discuss the research with prospective CEI participants who met the inclusion criteria. This allowed CEI to discuss the research with a trusted adult, which is particularly important when recruiting participants from vulnerable populations (Andrews & Davies, 2022). Subsequently, I distributed the *Participant Information Sheet* (Appendix H), *Data Privacy Notice* (Appendix I) and *Researcher One-page Profile* (Appendix J) to support gatekeepers' discussions with CEI. Initial meetings were scheduled with prospective CEI participants to discuss the purpose of the research, what participation would involve and how the findings would be used, to support with providing their full and informed consent. Consent was obtained verbally and in written form using the *Participant Consent Form* (Appendix K). A script was read at the beginning of the interview which re-introduced the purpose and process of the interview, their right to withdraw/request a break, safeguarding, and clarification of questions regarding the research (Appendix L). Consent was regularly reviewed throughout the research process to ensure informed consent (Davies, 2022).

Confidentiality. During the initial meetings and beginning of interviews with participants, they were reminded all information gathered would remain confidential and be

stored in line with the *Data Protection Act* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2018). A *Data Privacy Notice* (Appendix I), was shared with participants to outline how their data would be collected, processed, and stored. This included storing the audio recordings in an encrypted folder in my University OneDrive and immediately deleting the recordings following transcription. Participants were reminded at the beginning of the interview that all information collected would remain confidential, except for the duty to protect them from harm (BPS, 2021a).

To protect participants' anonymity, all identifying information was anonymised or removed during transcription. Participants were also asked to select a pseudonym for their transcript, to which five shared they would like to use their real first name. This appeared to be important for fostering a sense of agency and empowerment, as CEI often feel as though their voice has not been heard whilst in the care system (Williams et al., 2023). This had significant ethical implications, as whilst the BPS *Code of Human Research Ethics* (BPS, 2021a) posits that "*where a participant wishes to have their voice heard and their identity linked with this, researchers will endeavour to respect such a wish*" (p. 7), it could not be guaranteed that their information could not be traced back by other parties (e.g., CEI and professionals who support them). This was explained to and understood by participants, who then selected pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality.

Reducing Harm. CEI are considered a vulnerable population **(**e.g., *Care Leaver Strategy*, HM Government, 2013; *SEND CoP 2014*, DfE & DoH, 2015) and consequently, it was identified there was a possible risk of emotional harm associated with recall of personal memories. Liaison with gatekeepers was paramount to ensure participants' personal circumstances would not cause them to experience emotional distress by participating in the interview. The interview schedule was shared with gatekeepers to assess the risk of emotional harm to participants. Actions to mitigate the risk of emotional harm were outlined in the application for ethical approval and risk assessment. This included reminding participants that the purpose of the interview was to explore their experiences of preparing for adulthood, and they would not be asked questions associated with their care experience. It was shared with participants they did not have to answer questions they felt uncomfortable with, and they could take a break or stop at any time. Debriefs were completed with participants to mitigate risk of emotional harm, including signposting to support services (Appendix M). Gatekeepers and/or familiar adults were immediately available following the interviews to support with debriefing and liaison with PAs ensured that CEIs' had access to emotional support via subsequent check-ins if required.

Right to Withdraw. The *Participant Information Sheet* (Appendix H) outlined the voluntary nature of participants' involvement in the research, and their right to withdraw without providing reason. This included their involvement prior to, during, and within six weeks of completing the individual interview. This was reiterated to participants at the beginning and during the debrief of the interview, following which their data would have been removed and destroyed.

3.7.5. Safeguarding

Participants consisted of CEI aged 19-22 years and consequently, adherence to safeguarding policy, such as *The Care Act 2014* (Legislation.gov.uk, 2014b), was paramount to protect their wellbeing and welfare. I familiarised myself with the safeguarding policies, including Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) contacts, within the contexts in which the research took place. Exception to confidentiality in line with safeguarding procedures was discussed with participants at the beginning of interviews if I felt they or others were at risk of harm.

During one interview, information was shared by a participant which indicated that they were at risk of harm. Consequently, the interview was stopped immediately, and I listened to and validated how they were feeling. Limits of confidentiality were discussed, including the need to notify the DSL within the setting. A debrief was completed and the gatekeeper was immediately available following the interview to offer emotional support. Further check-ins were completed with the participant by the gatekeeper. I also followed up the concern with the DSL who notified me that specific information could not be shared to maintain the participant's confidentiality, though assured me that they were being supported.

3.7.6. Data Collection

Semi-structured Interviews. The purpose of IPA is to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experience through exploration of rich, first-person accounts (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were selected for the data collection method as they can facilitate rich exploration of a participant's experience in line with IPA's idiographic focus (Smith et al., 2022). The semi-structured nature of questions allows participants to speak freely and reflectively, which may not be possible within the constraints of structured interview schedules (Smith et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were selected over alternative

methods of data collection, such as focus groups, as it was considered participants may not feel comfortable sharing their personal stories in the presence of others.

Developing the Interview Schedule. The semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix L) was devised following guidance by Smith et al. (2022). Open questions were developed which aimed to allow participants to provide rich accounts of their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Questions relating to PfA areas in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015) were developed to elicit responses which could answer the research question. Questions were also devised which linked to review of literature and theory including *Emerging Adulthood* (Arnett, 2000), supportive relationships (e.g., Glynn & Mayock, 2019) and agency (e.g., Bayfield, 2023).

Opening questions were structured to elicit participants' descriptions of experiences before moving onto analytical questions to understand how participants made sense of their experiences. Whilst the semi-structured interview schedule facilitated discussion around a broad range of areas, this was used flexibly and further prompts supported rich exploration of participants' experiences, whilst remaining appropriate for the research question (Smith et al., 2022).

Carrying out the Interviews. Data collection took place between November 2023 and February 2024. Interviews ranged from 42 minutes to 89 minutes, with a mean duration of 66 minutes. Therefore, it was felt the interviews reflected the rich, in-depth interviews that are required for IPA (Smith et al., 2022).

Interviews took place on an individual basis in a quiet room provided by the FE setting/LA. Gatekeepers were available at the beginning and immediately following the interview to provide emotional support if required. At the beginning of the interviews, I engaged in general discussion to build rapport and help participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Participants' consent was revisited at the beginning of the interview, and they were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point during and within six weeks following the interview. Participants were reminded they did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable with to minimise risk of emotional harm. Prior to completing the interview, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix N) to support with transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

A debrief was completed at the end of the interviews whereby participants' consent was revisited, and they were reminded of their right to withdraw within six weeks. A debrief sheet

(Appendix M) was shared and given to participants with signposting to support services if required. A follow-up email was distributed to participants via gatekeepers to thank them for their participation in the interview, and to update them during the research process.

3.7.7. Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to create a full semantic record (Smith et al., 2022). As IPA's purpose is to interpret meaning associated with the content of participants' accounts, only information that would be used for analysis was transcribed (O'Connell & Kowal, 1995) e.g., excluding noise heard outside the room. The transcript included notes of pauses, laughter, and hesitation to further support with interpretation of the data (Smith et al., 2022).

IPA is driven by its analytic focus to support making sense of participants' experiences, consequently, there is no prescribed method for analysis (Smith et al., 2022). The steps outlined by Smith et al. (2022) were used flexibly to guide analysis of data through an iterative and inductive cycle. Due to IPA's idiographic nature, the analysis focused on one case at a time, starting with the first interview conducted.

The steps used for data analysis as outlined by Smith et al. (2022) will now be presented. Excerpts of my reflective diary to demonstrate my reflexivity during data analysis are presented in Appendix O.

Step One: Reading and Re-reading. The first step of data analysis involved immersing myself in the original data via listening to the audio recording whilst reading the transcript and re-reading the data. This was to ensure that the participant was placed at the centre, supporting a "*more complete analysis*" (Smith et al., 2022, p.79). Whilst immersing myself in the data, I recorded my initial recollections of the interview in a separate notebook which I could revisit to allow my focus to remain on the data at this stage.

Step Two: Exploratory Noting. The second step of analysis involved examination of the semantic content on an exploratory level to begin to understand how participants spoke about and made sense of their experiences. Exploratory notes were recorded in a column on the right-hand side of the transcript, comprising the following levels of interpretation: *descriptive*, *linguistic*, and *conceptual* (Smith et al., 2022).

Descriptive notes were colour coded in blue and focused upon what the participant had said, including key words, phrases, and summaries of their explanations (Smith et al., 2022).

This reflected a surface level analysis whereby the purpose was to identify key objects and events which structured the participant's thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

Linguistic notes were colour coded in red and focused upon the participant's use of language to ascribe meaning to their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). This included a focus upon linguistic features such as use of metaphor, change of tone, and functional aspects of language to further understand how they contributed to my understanding of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

Conceptual notes were colour coded in green and involved interrogation of the data to inform a deeper level of interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). This involved questioning semantic content to understand its meaning for participants, involving my personal reflection. Reflexivity during this stage remained paramount to ensure that interpretations reflected a detailed focus upon the participant's own words and meanings (Smith et al., 2022).

Step Three: Constructing Experiential Statements. This step focused upon consolidating my thoughts so far via explicit focus upon the exploratory notes within the transcript (Smith et al., 2022). Experiential statements relate directly to participants' experiences and sense-making of experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, I developed experiential statements following review of my exploratory notes to reflect my interpretation of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Experiential statements were recorded in the left margin of the transcript. This aimed to reduce volume of detail whilst maintaining the complexity of interpretation noted throughout the transcript (Smith et al., 2022). Please see Appendix P for an example of steps 1-3.

Step Four: Searching for Connections across Experiential Statements. This step involved exploring connections between experiential statements that had been established from the exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2022). The purpose was to develop a structure which illuminated the most important aspects of the participant's account (Smith et al., 2022). Using a manual method to search for connections, I cut up the experiential statements and spread them randomly on a table to facilitate conceptual ordering (Smith et al., 2022). Each statement was treated with equal significance, and I maintained an open and adaptable approach to establishing connections between them (Smith et al., 2022). Experiential statements were organised into groupings based on their connections, which were revisited to ensure they

remained close to the original data (Smith et al., 2022). Please see Appendix Q for an example of this process.

Step Five: Naming and Organising the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs). Clusters of experiential statements became known as the participant's Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) which were given titles to describe their characteristics (Smith et al., 2022). PETs reflect the highest level of analytic organisation, which are divided into subthemes informed by the experiential statements (Smith et al., 2022). An example PET table is presented in Appendix R.

Step Six: Continuing the Individual Analysis of Other Cases. This involved repeating the analytic process for remaining transcripts within the data set. During subsequent analysis of transcripts, it was important to treat each case on its own terms, in line with IPA's idiographic focus (Smith et al., 2022). It was important that I remained reflexive to identify how my interpretations may have been influenced by analysis of previous transcripts to maintain rigour in the analysis process (Smith et al., 2022).

Step Seven: Developing Group Experiential Themes Across Cases. This final step included a dynamic process of identifying patterns of similarity and differences across PETs to develop a set of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) (Appendix S). I also drew upon subthemes and experiential statements for each case, to confirm that GETs related back to the original exploratory notes and wider transcript (Smith et al., 2022). This ensured that IPA's idiographic focus was honoured, whilst illustrating understanding of experience at the group level (Smith et al., 2022). The table of GETs developed from this process is presented in Appendix T.

3.8. Evaluating Quality in the Current Study

Yardley (2000) developed the following four broad criteria to evaluate quality in qualitative research: *sensitivity to context*, *commitment and rigour*, *transparency and coherence*, and *impact and importance.* These have been selected to evaluate the study's quality due to their relevance for IPA's underpinnings (Smith et al., 2022) and are presented in Table 3.3 below.

Table 3.3.

A Table to Illustrate Actions taken to Uphold Quality in the Current Study using Yardley's (2000) Quality Principles.

Yardley's (2000) Quality Principles	**Actions Taken**
Sensitivity to Context	• Research into support available for CEI during their preparation for adulthood was undertaken to understand how this may influence their experiences. • Interviews were conducted in settings that were familiar and comfortable for participants to support with establishing rapport and trust. This aimed to facilitate open discussion, whilst also developing my understanding of the contexts within which their experiences were situated. • In line with IPA's inductive and interpretative approach, pre-conceived categories were not imposed onto individual meaning making. • IPA's idiographic approach ensured that participants' views remained central to the research, grounded in original data. • In line with the study's critical realist ontology, participants' experiences were interpreted considering the broader social and political context.
Commitment and Rigour	• IPA guidelines by Smith et al. (2022) were closely followed throughout the research process, including recruitment, data collection, and analysis. • Purposive sampling allowed a relatively homogenous group of participants to be recruited. • Interview schedules were developed and used reflexively in accordance with response from participants. • Reflexivity and bracketing acknowledged the influence of my own bias and preconceptions upon interpretation of the data. Interpretations and themes were also discussed with a fellow IPA researcher.

Transparency and Coherence	• Methodological decisions are informed by the philosophical underpinnings of the study. • Rationale for methodological decisions, including tools for data collection and method of analysis, are presented throughout the thesis. • My positionality, including personal and professional interest, is presented to acknowledge the influence it may have on creation of knowledge. • Examples of annotated transcripts are presented in the appendices to demonstrate how PETs and GETs have been developed, linking back to the original data.
Impact and Importance	• Findings aim to address a gap in knowledge and inform EP practice for supporting CEI prepare for adulthood in line with the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015). • Findings will be shared within the LAs where the research took place to ensure CEIs' views have a direct *influence* on practice, in line with Lundy's *Model of Participation* (2007).

Chapter Four
Findings

4.1. Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present the IPA findings to understand how CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood. In line with the study's phenomenological epistemology, findings reflect my interpretation of CEIs' experiences through a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2022). Aligning with critical realist ontology, CEIs' experiences have been interpreted considering the influence of their individual contexts; presented in *Chapter Three*.

The chapter will begin with an overview of GETs that were interpreted to illuminate shared areas of experience. Subsequently, these will be discussed in detail, including exploration of subthemes which highlight the nuances and variations in experiences. An analytic commentary is presented for each GET, including verbatim quotes to stay close to participants' experiences.

Aligning with the study's person-centred framework, this chapter corresponds with the following stage in Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) to present CEIs' voice regarding their experiences of preparing for adulthood:

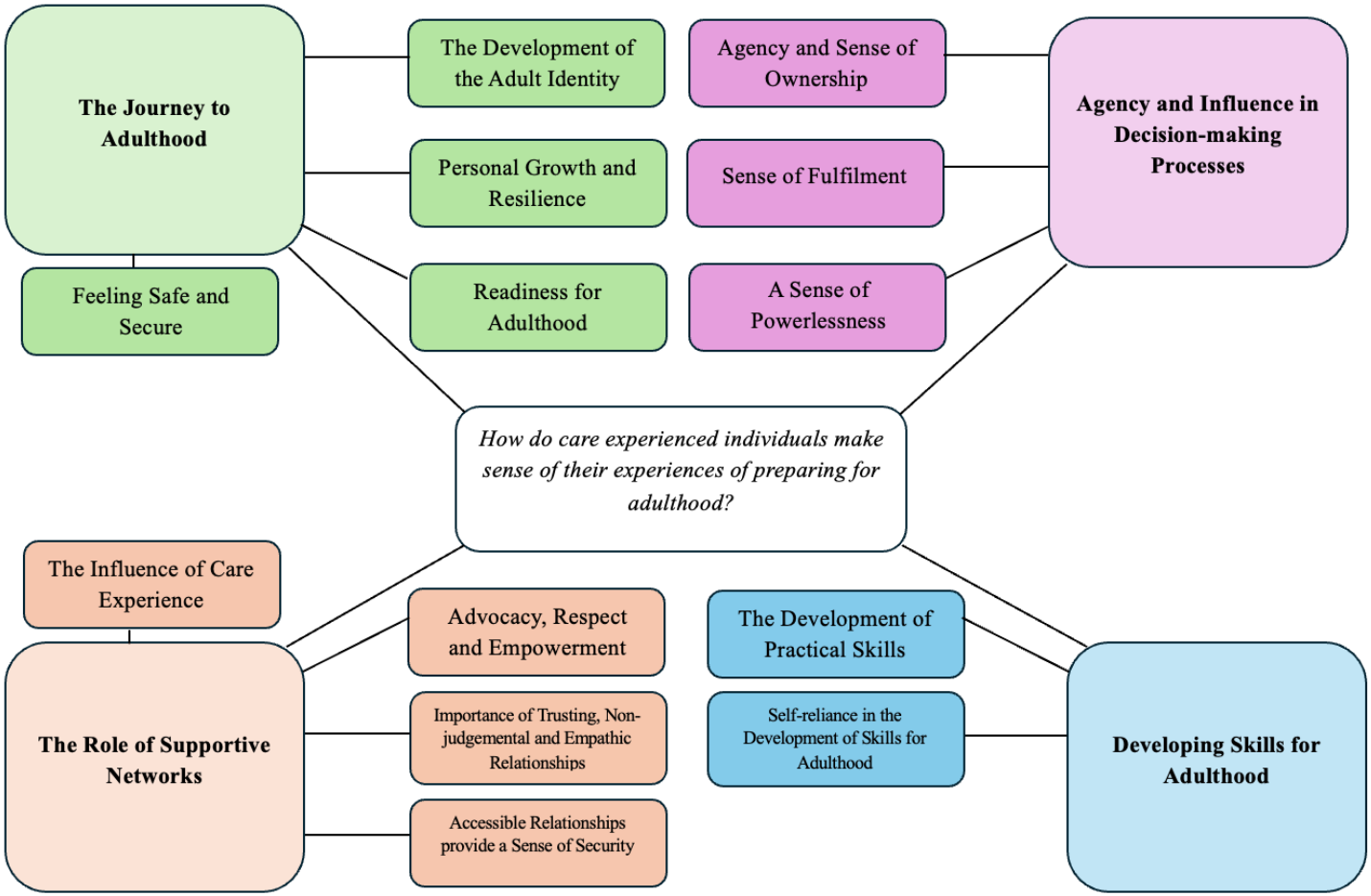
3. Audience The view must be listened to.	"*the views of the child being given due weight*" (p.5).

4.2. Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

During the analysis described in *Chapter Three*, four GETs were interpreted following the cross-case analysis of participants' accounts: '*The Journey to Adulthood'*, '*Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes'*, '*The Role of Supportive Networks*' and '*Developing Skills for Adulthood*'. GETs and associated subthemes are presented in Figure 4.1. Table 4.1 highlights the prevalence of GETs and subthemes across participants' accounts.

Figure 4.1

Graphic to Illustrate Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and Associated Subthemes.



NB The Group Experiential Themes (GETs) are grouped by colour with subthemes connected via solid lines.

Table 4.1

A Table to show the Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and Subthemes developed from Participants' Accounts.

Group Experiential Theme	Subthemes	Participants[1]
The Journey to Adulthood.	The Development of the Adult Identity.	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka, Phoenix, Ryan.
	Personal Growth and Resilience.	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka, Phoenix, Ryan.
	Timing of Discussions and Readiness for Adulthood.	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka, Phoenix, Ryan.
	Feeling Safe and Secure.	Anthony, Bella, Luka, Phoenix, Ryan.
Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes.	Agency and Sense of Ownership.	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka, Phoenix, Ryan.
	Sense of Fulfilment.	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Ryan, Phoenix.
	Sense of Powerlessness.	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka, Ryan.
The Role of Supportive Networks.	Advocacy, Respect and Empowerment.	Anthony, Chloe, Luka, Ryan.
	Importance of Trusting, Non-judgemental and Empathic Relationships.	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka, Phoenix, Ryan.
	Accessible Relationships provide a Sense of Security	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka, Phoenix, Ryan.
	The Influence of Care Experience	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka.
Developing Skills for Adulthood	The Development of Practical Skills	Anthony, Bella, Chloe, Luka, Phoenix.
	Self-reliance in the Development of Skills for Adulthood.	Anthony, Bella, Luka, Ryan.

[1]All participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

4.2.1. The Journey to Adulthood.

The journey to adulthood was interpreted as a significant theme across data sets. Participants' experiences of adulthood were interpreted via their constructions of what 'adulthood' meant to them. I interpreted that participants' journey to adulthood involved a process of self-discovery and resilience including reflections upon their perceived readiness for adulthood, which are captured within the following subthemes: *'The Development of the Adult Identity', 'Personal Growth and Resilience', 'Timing of Discussions and Readiness for Adulthood'* and *'Sense of Safety and Security'.*

The Development of the Adult Identity. The development of the adult identity was a prominent subtheme across the accounts of all participants. This was interpreted to reflect a shift in understanding from adolescence to adulthood, with increased responsibilities associated with the adult identity. For Chloe, the adult identity was characterised by turning 18 years old; the age at which young people are legally considered an adult in the UK:

> *"So, turning 18 when you're an adult, learning to drive, moving out, living independently. Uhm, just like not relying on others for support as much as you would when you're a child and working and stuff like that".* (Chloe, p. 3).

Here, Chloe refers to activities interpreted to be associated with increased independence, such as "*learning to drive*" and "*living independently",* marked by the milestone of "*turning 18*". I also interpreted that Chloe perceives adulthood to be associated with increased self-reliance when compared to childhood, symbolising a transition from *dependence* to *independence.*

Similarly, whilst Bella also identified turning 18 years old as a marker of adulthood, this appeared to have implications for how they were perceived by professionals:

> *"It's really weird. It's like, the second you turn* 18*, they see you as a different person who apparently should magically know everything. It's quite strange the way their brain just flicks over the second you hit your 18th birthday. Like, well, why don't you know how to do this? Because I've never been taught how".* (Bella, p.58).

Bella's use of words such as "*weird*" and "*strange*" highlight a sense of disbelief at expectations placed upon them when they turned 18. Bella also appeared to perceive an immediate change in how they were perceived by professionals when they turned 18, as they

shared, "*it's quite strange the way their brain just flicks over the second you hit your* 18*th birthday"*. This appeared to have implications for support Bella received to develop skills for adulthood as they were expected to "*magically know everything*", indicating that they perceive that turning 18 is associated with assumed knowledge for adulthood.

Across accounts, participants appeared to make a clear demarcation in the development of understanding and perspectives from adolescence to adulthood. For Ryan, financial stability appeared to symbolise development of the adult identity from childhood, evidenced via his use of the phrase, "*childhood brain*":

"You have to be financially stable to be prepared for adulthood. Because if you don't, then you're still living in your childhood brain ". (Ryan, p.5)

Similarly, Anthony seemed to describe a developmental process of gaining knowledge through experiences as an adult:

"When you become an adult, you realise certain things that you don't realise when you're a kid, which is normal. Like you have to pay bills, you have to pay for a TV license and stuff like those things. You don't know that when you're young". (Anthony, p.6).

There is a sense of validation in Anthony's account, as he described the process of developing understanding during the transition to adulthood as "*normal*". I interpreted that Anthony perceived this developmental process as important for shielding children from the realities of adulthood, to protect against perceived stressors, such as paying bills.

Similarly, a sense of protecting oneself from the realities of adulthood was conveyed in Luka's account, whereby she shared her experience of language used by family which appeared to maintain her adolescent identity:

"Unless you're my family and you'll say 21-teen, so you still feel like a teenager. To keep that child-like self in (laughs)". (Luka, p.12).

For all participants, the development of the adult identity appeared to be a significant marker in their journey to adulthood which influenced how they perceived their development, and how they were perceived by others. Their journey to adulthood was further conceptualised

via their experiences of personal growth and overcoming challenge during their transition to adulthood, which will be explored further in the subsequent subtheme.

Personal Growth and Resilience. Linking with the development of their adult identity, all participants shared experiences which were interpreted to reflect their personal growth and resilience during their transition to adulthood.

For Ryan, the journey to adulthood was interpreted as a dynamic process of growth, self-discovery, and resilience:

> *"So, it's all about how you figure yourself out in kind of like streams, like a tree shape you just have to see where you grow out to. You grow out to one part and then if that f*cks up, you need to know how to get back to that part in the centre".* (Ryan, p.9).

I interpreted that Ryan's use of metaphors such as "*streams*" and a "*tree shape*" illustrate the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the transition to adulthood, characterised by a process of self-discovery and "*see(ing) where you grow out to*". Ryan's account indicates the importance of resilience in response to challenges during the journey to adulthood, whereby he needs to "*get back to that part to the centre*", which I interpreted to reflect a central foundation for his journey.

Anthony also appeared to reflect upon an experience of personal growth, characterised by the transformation from adolescence to adulthood and staying true to self:

> *"Because that's the mindset you wanna have when you're younger, you're not really being yourself. You're trying to be someone else for other people to see. But that's not the case when you get older, you realise that those things don't matter".* (Anthony, p. 58).

Within this excerpt, Anthony appears to share a journey of personal growth toward self-realisation and acceptance in adulthood, evidenced via comparison of his "*mindset*" in adolescence which appeared to be associated with receiving external validation from others at the detriment of his authenticity. Anthony's shift in mindset seemed influenced by his evolving understanding of budgeting in adulthood, prioritising meeting his basic needs:

"*Don't buy those trainers. You don't get food like, don't starve yourself just to get materialistic things, because what you realise is that those things really mean nothing*". (Anthony, p. 58).

For all participants, personal growth during the journey to adulthood appeared to be influenced by events they had experienced and realisation of their strengths and resources. For Phoenix, this realisation was interpreted to promote a sense of optimism for his future:

"*If this is what I'm capable of, just think about like what my future could hold as well*" (Phoenix, p. 24).

For Chloe, her experience of personal growth during the journey to adulthood appeared to be influenced by her experience of becoming a mother:

"*You're not going to school and stuff anymore, so you don't like sort of feel like a kid anymore when you turn 18, I say, I had my kids when I was 18 so (laughs). Like massive shock to my system, but I honestly wouldn't change it for the world. It's made me grow up a lot, yeah".* (Chloe, p. 4).

Chloe's experience of becoming a mother at 18 appeared to have had a transformative impact upon her identity as an adult, suggested via the use of the phrases, "*massive shock to my system*" and "*it's made me grow up a lot*". This suggests that Chloe experienced an accelerated transition to adulthood characterised by the increased responsibilities associated with becoming a mother. This was interpreted as a significant experience of personal growth as she shared, "*I honestly wouldn't change it for the world*".

Timing of Discussions and Readiness for Adulthood. The importance of appropriate timing and perceived readiness for discussions to support preparation for adulthood was paramount across all participants' accounts.

For Chloe and Anthony, it was interpreted that early discussions were important for shaping understanding and attitudes towards adulthood to facilitate feelings of preparedness:

"But yeah, it's just like a really big responsibility isn't it and it's nice to know that like from a young age you're being told that you need to do this this this, then it's starting to get engraved in your brain from an early age. Then it's always gonna be in the back of your head". (Chloe, p. 39).

"So those, so then those times when they will talk to you about like things you need to do budgeting. But I feel like sometimes it might be too late". (Anthony, p. 11).

Such discussions appeared to invoke mixed feelings of apprehension and excitement. For example, Chloe and Ryan shared:

"Yeah, maybe like a bit exciting to think about the thought of maybe doing it, but then a bit of anxiety as well. Like, would I be able to do this?". (Chloe, p. 10).

"*Like I said it's like, overwhelming and like anxiety just kicks straight in, you think, am I even gonna be able to look after myself whilst I'm there, like can I even, prepare myself to do that?*". (Ryan, p. 11).

The excerpts from Chloe and Ryan's experiences suggest an impact of self-doubt upon perceived readiness for adulthood, evidenced by phrases such as, "*would I be able to do this*" and "*can I even prepare myself to do that?".*

Feelings of self-doubt were further echoed by Anthony, whereby realisation of challenges associated with adulthood appeared to impact upon his initial feelings of excitement and determination to live independently:

"It just showed me how much I wasn't ready, because at first everyone was like, I'm ready to move out, I'm gonna take my own food. You're so eager for that adulthood that when it does come, it's like, oh, that's not what I expected". (Anthony, p. 14).

For Anthony, it was interpreted that there was a shared sense of excitement and build-up around adulthood, which became overshadowed with a sense of disappointment. I understood this to be informed by societal expectations around the desirability of adulthood, further influenced by excitement shared by peers, which appeared to obscure challenges

associated with adulthood. Anthony's account indicates a discrepancy in expectations and reality of adulthood, appearing to impact upon his perceived readiness and self-efficacy.

For Luka, Chloe and Phoenix, perceived readiness was also interpreted as being an important variable for informing timings of discussions around adulthood. For Luka, this appeared to involve timing discussions in line with developmental understanding:

"But when it came to like, the bills and stuff that didn't come about until I was old enough to understand". (Luka, p. 76).

Moreover, for Phoenix, perceived readiness for adulthood was interpreted as being influenced by a state of emotional security:

"So, at the at the time my mind was a bit in chaos but, when everything settled down, I knew what I wanted and I thought for a while, that I wanted to be independent. I wanted to have my adulthood, that I was ready for it". (Phoenix, p. 4).

Phoenix described his experience of the abrupt ending of his foster care placement and transition to living with his birth sibling. He described his mind as being "*in chaos*" during this time, indicating a sense of turmoil whilst managing several competing emotional challenges, including his GCSEs. It was interpreted that a sense of emotional security was important to inform Phoenix's readiness for adulthood as he shared, "*when everything settled down, I knew what I wanted*". Furthermore, his repetition of the phrase, "*I wanted*" indicates a sense of self-determination and motivation for adulthood, which appeared to be facilitated through a sense of emotional security.

Feeling Safe and Secure. The final subtheme interpreted within this GET was participants' need to feel safe and secure in adulthood. This included determination to provide a sense of stability for themselves and their future families, which appeared to be influenced by their previous experiences of instability.

For Bella and Phoenix, it was interpreted that a sense of stability comprised a need for both emotional and financial security:

"I think they are the main two things like. But also having that stability in your life of, like, not just of mentally and physically, but also financially as well". (Phoenix, p.3).

"Well, there's obviously like finances as well, like a lot of people, especially like with the current financial situation of society, a lot of people can't afford to just move out even if they're emotionally ready and things like that". (Bella, p.20).

Within Bella's excerpt, they appear to allude to the influence of the broader economic context upon financial stability and subsequent readiness for independent living, despite having emotional security. This was also echoed by Luka, who shared her reflections around the cost-of-living crisis and the impact this had upon her sense of financial security:

"Cause the cost-of-living crisis has, it has been a lot. Especially like I think my rent has gone up twice since being in my property". (Luka, p. 24).

For some participants, a sense of safety and security appeared to be influenced by motivation to provide stability for themselves which they had not experienced during their childhood. For example, Anthony shared:

"So, it was just like, yeah, I want to get my own place. And like, that's why I'm always at my own, I'm always at my house because, like, it's the one stable place. I know it's there. So, it's like, I never want to leave it". (Anthony, p. 25)

Throughout the interview, Anthony appeared determined to provide himself with a sense of stability in adulthood that he had not experienced in childhood. This was further emphasised when Anthony shared, "*it's the one stable place. I know it's there*", suggesting that his early experiences have been informed by periods of uncertainty and instability. Anthony's reliance upon his own home for stability indicates a sense of empowerment and self-reliance, demonstrated via his desire to spend time there.

Motivation for stability and security in adulthood was also echoed in the accounts of Chloe, Ryan, and Phoenix, whereby this extended to providing security for their own families in the future:

"I wanna be driving and stuff as well. Have my own car and stuff like that. I have my driving lessons and stuff done and then I'll just feel like my life is completed. Then I'll be earning good money. I can provide for my kids. I'll be living on my own. That's the plan, yeah". (Chloe, p. 46).

"My whole point of getting my own flat is to make sure me, is stable enough to look after me and my little brother". (Ryan, p.12).

"Yeah, for the future as well. Like, if you have your own family and stuff, this is what you can provide for them as well". (Phoenix, p. 24).

Participants' motivation to provide a sense of security and stability for themselves highlight the connection with their sense of agency and empowerment in decision-making processes, which will be discussed in the subsequent GET.

4.2.2. Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes.

All participants were asked about their role during decision-making processes to understand how they made sense of this experience during their preparation for adulthood. A sense of agency and influence during decision-making processes appeared important to participants, whilst ensuring that future outcomes aligned with their interests and aspirations. However, participants also reflected upon perceived threats to their sense of agency during decision-making processes, such as a sense of powerlessness associated with systemic barriers and perceived power imbalances. These experiences are captured within the following subthemes: '*Agency and Sense of Ownership in Decision-making Processes*', '*Sense of Fulfilment*' and '*Sense of Powerlessness*'.

Agency and Sense of Ownership in Decision-making Processes. There was a strong sense of agency during decision-making processes across all participants' accounts. This included a sense of ownership and control over decisions made about their lives. However, whilst participants appeared to value a sense of agency, it also appeared important that they were supported with making informed decisions.

For Luka, agency in decision-making appeared to promote a sense of empowerment and intrinsic motivation during discussions around independent living:

"It was my choice. So, if it were, if someone else chose for me, I'd have to say, well, no, I don't appreciate this. I'd like to do this and this, and this". (Luka, p. 95).

Luka's account appears to reflect a strong sense of agency and autonomy during decision-making processes, suggested via use of phrases such as "*my choice*" and "*I'd like to do this*". She contrasts this sense of autonomy with a situation whereby her control over decisions may be compromised, which was interpreted to have a negative impact upon her intrinsic motivation, evidenced by use of the phrase, "*I'd have to say, well, no*". Moreover, there was an assertive tone to Luka's dialogue, which I interpreted to reflect the value she places upon control she has over decision-making.

An appreciation for sense of ownership over decisions was also echoed in Chloe's account:

"So, I've always felt like I can make my own decisions and that my voice is heard. I've never felt like I've had to do anything I didn't want to do, and everything had sort of been led by me and what I've always wanted" (Chloe, p. 44).

Chloe's repetition of the word "*always*" suggests a positive experience of her role in decision-making whereby she consistently felt in control. There is also a sense that her agency is respected by professionals, as she describes feeling as though her "*voice is heard*"; indicating that her decisions are acted upon. This will be further explored in the subtheme '*Advocacy, Respect and Empowerment'* in the GET, '*The Role of Supportive Networks'*.

Moreover, whilst a sense of ownership and control in decision-making was interpreted to be important for all participants, Bella and Phoenix appeared to highlight the importance of receiving support to make informed decisions:

"But, to have absolutely no support in making the decisions that you have control over is, possibly the worst thing that could happen because they just put two things in front of you and say, pick one. You don't know what either of them means, but they will change your life". (Bella, p. 73).

"I would say my decision making at, at first it was a bit rocky, like at times I didn't know what decisions to make for myself, like I didn't know what I should be spending my money on and the differences between needs and wants". (Phoenix, p. 33).

Bella's account appears to reflect the perceived detrimental impact of not receiving support for making informed decisions, which they described as being "*the worst thing that could happen*". Bella also appeared to refer to a situation whereby they were asked to make decisions without further explanation or guidance (e.g., "*they just put two things in front of you and say, pick one*"). I interpreted this as a metaphor for a gameshow whereby contestants are required to make life-changing decisions under pressure without adequate information; illuminating the importance of meaningful support to facilitate agency in adulthood.

Sense of Fulfilment. A sense of fulfilment was interpreted as important for five participants when considering decisions about their future. This included decision-making which was in line with their interests and aspirations and planning life trajectories which reflected their preferred future. A sense of fulfilment was also interpreted as being associated with an aspiration to support others based upon participants' own experiences of adversity.

For Anthony, it appeared important that decisions around his FE setting were linked to his interest in basketball:

"He would call me out of class and was *like, I've got another college here, but they don't have a* basketball *team and I'm like I don't wanna go because like, I'm really good at sports, and I don't want to, force myself in doing something I'm not good at and fail".*
(Anthony, p.23).

Here, I interpreted that it was important to Anthony that he had the opportunity to join a basketball team in college to promote a sense of success and fulfilment. For example, he recognised his strengths in basketball and perceived that he would "*fail*" if he had to engage in activities that did not align with his strengths. I interpreted this as reflecting Anthony's determination to succeed in FE, which also had implications for his agency in decision-making as he advocated that he did not want to "*force*" himself into decisions.

Similarly, a sense of fulfilment appeared important to Ryan when considering future employment options:

"Some people don't even realise that like, you wanna enjoy yourself at work, you don't wanna be sat there looking at a machine going, meh". (Ryan, p.6).

For Chloe, a sense of fulfilment was interpreted to be associated with planning milestones to be achieved in adulthood:

"It'll be like my next big step. So, I'm starting a new job. I'm gonna start doing my driving lessons soon and then I'll move out and then I'l be sorted then, and I'll literally have everything". (Chloe, p. 43).

Here, Chloe describes starting a new job as her "*next big step*", suggesting that a sense of fulfilment in adulthood is promoted through achievement of successive milestones. Her use of the phrase "*and then*" indicates that Chloe intends to focus on goals one at a time, which can be suggested to ensure that milestones feel achievable. I interpreted that Chloe's goals were associated with achieving a full sense of independence which she described as being "*everything*", indicating that it is an important aspiration for her in adulthood.

Moreover, for Bella, a sense of fulfilment in adulthood appeared to be associated with an aspiration to advocate for others based upon their own experiences of adversity:

"Well after this year of college, I'm gonna go to university to do social work and become a social worker in their looked after children's team, where there are specifically children with a disability. Because I think that their voices need to be heard a lot more than they are, and their problems and things that happen to them are brushed under the carpet a lot more because they're seen as like too difficult to deal with". (Bella, p.74).

Here, it can be interpreted that Bella's aspiration to become a social worker for looked after children with a disability is informed by their motivation to support CYP who have experienced disadvantage. Their use of the phrase, "*their voices need to be heard a lot more than they are*", reflects their values associated with advocacy, as well as the importance of a non-judgemental, empathetic approach from professionals; this interpretation will be explored further in the subtheme, '*Importance of Trusting, Non-judgmental and Empathic Relationships'*.

A Sense of Powerlessness. A sense of powerlessness in decision-making processes was interpreted within four participants' accounts. This appeared to be influenced by variables

such as systemic factors and perceived power imbalances between participants and professionals. For Chloe, a sense of powerlessness was interpreted to be associated with challenges experienced with the housing system:

"I'm going to speak to them in the next couple of weeks if I've still not moved forward, I might ask if [they] can send another e-mail questioning the lack of houses because it's, it's just ridiculous. I've been trying to move out for nearly a year now". (Chloe, p. 34).

Throughout the interview, Chloe expressed a desire to move out, however, she experienced challenge with finding a suitable council property. This was interpreted to reflect a sense of powerlessness, as barriers within the housing system were preventing her from moving into independent living. Chloe described the situation as "*ridiculous*", indicating a sense of frustration towards the housing process. She also referred to seeking support from a professional (i.e., "*I might ask if [they] can send another email*"), which can be interpreted to suggest that she does not perceive herself to have influence over the process, indicating a perceived power imbalance impacting upon her sense of agency.

A perceived power imbalance was also interpreted in Bella's account, which appeared to threaten their sense of agency:

"Cause, I wouldn't give them full control over my bank accounts and finances. I went I just need you to help me budget for one month I don't want you to control my bank account, go away". (Bella, p. 72).

Here, Bella refers to an experience whereby they were requested to give control of their finances to their financial advisor, indicating a perceived threat to their agency and autonomy. I interpreted Bella's use of the phrase "*full control*" to reflect perceived power imbalances from which they had to protect themselves, evidenced via use of the phrase, "*I don't want you to control my bank account, go away*".

Similarly, Ryan appeared to experience a lack of control as he reflected upon his role with professionals during decision-making processes:

"We are literally just the puppets. We don't know what's gonna happen, we leave all that to them lot because they're meant to be the [professionals] who like help you out and get everything sorted out for you". (Ryan, p. 7)

Here, Ryan described himself and other CEI as "*puppets*", which I interpreted to reflect a sense of powerlessness and a passive role in decision-making processes. Ryan's use of the words "*literally just*" to describe himself and other CEI indicates a sense of insignificance in comparison to professionals, suggesting a perceived power imbalance. Ryan also expressed expectation to receive support from professionals who "*get everything sorted out for you*", indicating a sense of dependency upon their support. This also appeared to influence a sense of decreased agency and uncertainty, as he shared, "*we don't know what's going to happen*".

4.2.3. The Role of Supportive Networks

The role of supportive networks was interpreted to be a prominent theme across all participants' accounts. Participants shared their experiences of support received from personal and professional networks, including approaches which they valued in support they received. Participants also reflected upon variables which influenced their access to support networks, such as their own care experience. The following subthemes capture participants' experiences of supportive networks during their preparation for adulthood: '*Advocacy, Respect and Empowerment'*, '*Importance of Trusting, Non-judgmental and Empathic Relationships*', '*Accessible Relationships provide a Sense of Security*' and '*The Influence of Care Experience*'.

Advocacy, Respect and Empowerment. It was interpreted that four participants perceived that advocacy, respect and empowerment from supportive networks was important during their preparation for adulthood. This included support from professionals who held high aspirations for them and respected their agency and autonomy, linking with the GET, '*Agency and Influence in Decision-making*'.

For example, Ryan shared his experience of support received from a professional which was interpreted to reflect a sense of empowerment and respect for his personal agency:

> *"Sometimes [they] do that, but most of the time [they] tell me to do my own thing [they] just go, there you go, the world's your oyster you've got a blank canvas here mate. You build what you wanna build, you do what you wanna do."* (Ryan, p. 29).

Ryan's use of the metaphor "*the world's your oyster*" reflects a sense of freedom and opportunity, indicating that he perceives support from the professional to encourage him to

pursue his aspirations. Additionally, Ryan's metaphor "*blank canvas*" can be interpreted to reflect a new beginning; supported by high aspirations held by the professional.

The importance of professionals holding high aspirations was also reflected in Anthony's account, whereby this was interpreted to promote a sense of empowerment and support his motivation in education:

"I know that people actually want me to do something good with my life, like it's really, it was really positive. I was really, I'm really grateful for it because if I didn't have those helps and I didn't have those conversations, those meetings, those PEP meetings, I wouldn't be where I am now, I'd have probably just said yeah, I don't really care about nothing, just not take education seriously (Anthony, p. 27).

Moreover, for Luka, it was interpreted that there was a sense of togetherness in her experience of support received from a professional which empowered her to apply for a range of employment opportunities:

"[They] were like, OK, we will sit down, we'll fill out the application and we'll do it together. And [they] were like, it's gonna be great for you and I'm like I hope so". (Luka, p. 38).

However, for Anthony, despite recognition of the value of professionals holding high aspirations for him, this also appeared to have an adverse effect as perceived high expectations lead to feelings of increased pressure and worries around letting people down:

"Those are kind of fears that I have like or I'm not trying to let no one down, because the expectation, the expectations are, expectation is very high for me". (Anthony, p. 17).

Anthony's use of the word "*fear*" indicates a significant worry about letting people down, associated with the high expectations others have for him. This indicates a contrast between professionals' high aspirations for Anthony and their impact on his sense of autonomy, as his actions appear driven to meet others' expectations.

Importance of Trusting, Non-judgmental and Empathic Relationships. The importance of support from trusting, non-judgmental and empathic relationships during

preparation for adulthood emerged as a prominent theme across all participants' accounts. This included support from personal and professional networks whereby challenges associated were understood and validated.

For Anthony, Chloe and Luka, the development of trusting relationships was interpreted to inform open and honest discussions about adulthood to develop their sense of preparedness:

"She'll let me know, she won't just tell me, just sugarcoat it for me because nah, I feel like a lot of young people need to hear things the harsh way for them to take it in and understand that it's a serious situation". (Anthony, p. 49).

"My sister's a big help, she's 10 years older than me. So, like she looked after me a lot when we was growing up. So like, she always tells me what's what". (Chloe, p. 40).

"With my foster parents it was quite uhm, what's the word without making them sound like horrible people? They weren't horrible like, the strict side of things. Like, the reality of what it's like to live by yourself". (Luka, p. 20).

In the above excerpts, there is a sense that the development of trusting relationships was important for facilitating open discussions around adulthood to understand the "*reality*" and "*serious situation*", despite them being perceived as "*strict*" and "*harsh*". Chloe described the close relationship with her older sister which can be interpreted to reflect a nurturing relationship which facilitates open and honest discussions (i.e., "*she always tells me what's what*").

Luka contrasts support received from her foster parents with that of a local project, which can be interpreted to highlight the influence of trusting relationships upon the nature of discussions around preparation for adulthood:

"*The [local project] kind of taught me like the nicer side of things, like the budgeting and the cooking and the cleaning*". (Luka, p. 18).

It was also interpreted that participants valued support from trusting networks who recognised challenges associated with adulthood and validated their experiences. For example,

Ryan shared his experience of support received from a professional whereby his concerns were validated, which appeared to promote a sense of reassurance:

"And if I mess up then, he's not gonna go "aw you've messed up, that's the biggest mess up in your life", he's gonna be like "look, it's only a mess up, you've learnt what you've done wrong, put it over your head and off and carry on doing what you're doing bro. You don't need to worry about that, it's a minor thing" (Ryan, p.30).

Here, it was interpreted that Ryan contrasted what he perceived would have been an invalidating approach from professionals (i.e., "*that's the biggest mess up in your life*"), to an approach which validated his experience and promoted a sense of reassurance (i.e., "*you don't need to worry about that, it's a minor thing*"). This was also interpreted to suggest that Ryan perceived the professional to have a non-judgemental approach which respected his experience and empowered him to make his own decisions and choices.

Conversely, Bella shared their experience whereby there appeared to be perceived judgement from a professional in response to challenge attending medical appointments:

"Instead of being like ok well, why don't I drive you to an appointment or why don't I text you a reminder before or something, they'd just, they'd just be really awful instead and be like well why haven't you done it, you're an adult, you need to do it now, you need to actually get a grip and do it". (Bella, p.44)

Bella's use of the phrases "*why haven't you done it*?" and "*get a grip and do it"* indicates a perceived sense of judgement from the professional in response to their experience of challenge. This appeared to be an invalidating experience for Bella, whereby their concerns and feelings were not understood or acknowledged. Similarly to Ryan, Bella appears to contrast their response received from the professional with a preferred response, further highlighting the importance of non-judgmental and empathic relationships during participants' preparation for adulthood.

Accessible Relationships provide a Sense of Security. Participants' support received from personal and professional networks during their preparation for adulthood was interpreted to provide them with a sense of security. This appeared to reflect a sense of both emotional and physical security which supported their preparation for adulthood. A sense of emotional

security appeared to be articulated through perceived access to support networks, whilst physical security referred to a safe and secure space to develop skills prior to transition to adulthood.

For example, Phoenix and Chloe reflected upon the perceived availability of supportive networks which seemed to promote a sense of emotional security whilst navigating challenges associated with adulthood:

"But in adulthood as well, it can be quite challenging at times. But as long as you've got that support, what you need, that it is very important, and I believe that anyone who has the right mindset can achieve adulthood". (Phoenix, p. 3).

"And like knowing that, there is support there and you're never really. You're never on your own". (Chloe, p. 24).

For Phoenix, it appeared that perceived access to a support network provided a sense of emotional security and promoted resilience in adulthood, as he shared that "*anyone who has the right mindset can achieve adulthood*", which appears to be mediated by supportive networks. This is also echoed in Chloe's excerpt, whereby perceived access to support appeared to provide emotional security through a sense of togetherness (i.e., "*you're never on your own*").

Participants also referred to support they had received from their birth families to provide a sense of emotional and physical security whilst preparing for adulthood. For example, Phoenix shared his experience of support from his birth sister which appeared instrumental in supporting his transition to independent living:

"At the time, I was a bit, I was a bit nervous. But like I knew, given the support I had with the preparations I could have from, the support from my sister, and me currently staying at my sisters for about 9 months until I moved into my own flat, I knew that she would help me prepare for it". (Phoenix, p. 6).

Phoenix describes his experience of staying with his birth sister to support his transition to independent living. This appeared to provide him with a sense of physical and emotional security via a safe and secure space to develop skills for adulthood until he was emotionally and physically ready to transition to independent living.

Conversely, whilst receipt of support from personal and professional networks appeared to provide participants with a sense of security, there seemed to be a threat to sense of security when support was not easily accessible. This included challenges in identifying who to contact for support and requesting support due to perceived judgement.

For example, Bella shared their experience of challenge when trying to access professional support, which appeared to have a negative impact upon their sense of security:

"But if 101 is a random police officer, you have nothing to do with it, you know? Then I would have literally been like completely stuffed because I, it's just literally anything that can go wrong, like on a day-to-day basis or anything that you could not understand, they will not be there for you. There will be absolutely no support. Unless you manage to have some kind of third party, if you're lucky". (Bella, p.63).

Bella describes their experience of calling 101 in the absence of support received from their PA. Their dialogue reflects a sense of disbelief at the lack of support received and contrasts this with support received from the police offer who "*has nothing to do with it*". I further interpreted this as impacting upon Bella's sense of security via a lack of confidence in support received from professionals and reliance upon alternative networks.

Moreover, it was interpreted that participants experienced a threat to sense of security when support was removed. This seemed to be associated with the time-limited nature of support and development of skills to a level of proficiency which meant support was no longer required. This has links to the subsequent subtheme, '*The Influence of Care Experience',* where this interpretation will be explored in more detail.

The Influence of Care Experience. The influence of care experience on access to support networks during their preparation for adulthood was interpreted as a theme within five participants' accounts. This seemed to be linked with professional support provided to YP in or leaving care, which participants compared to support in parental care.

It was also interpreted that participants' care experience influenced support they received from other networks, such as the care leaver community:

"So, I'm part of the care community. We support each other no matter what we are, who we are, what we've done, where we've been". (Luka, p. 52).

"Like we're a big community here when all the care leavers come to drop in it's a safe space.". (Chloe, p. 23).

Both Luka and Chloe describe a network of care leavers as a "*community*" which I interpreted to reflect a sense of unconditional acceptance and sense of belonging. For Luka, there is a sense of solidarity in belonging to the care community, which appears to be associated with non-judgemental support and encouragement. Chloe also describes the care leaver community space as "*safe*", which I interpreted as promoting a sense of emotional and physical security.

For Anthony and Chloe, their care experience also appeared to have a positive impact upon the level of support they received during their preparation for adulthood:

"I feel like when you're in care, there's a lot of people you can seek help from and I really enjoy it because, like, I'm in care everyone's like, okay, cool. You have this worker, or you have this worker, just for you". (Anthony, p.27).

"If I need help with something, I've got someone that I can turn to that can help me with it and I feel like it's just really nice. Because let's say that I was never in care. I wouldn't have that sort of thing. And I feel like they can give me better advice and guidance and what like my mum would per se, because they understand the situation and stuff better". (Chloe, p. 41).

Anthony and Chloe appear to reflect upon the perceived positive impact of care experience upon allocation of support during their preparation for adulthood. This includes access to a wide range of personalised support, which I interpreted as promoting a sense of significance and empowerment (e.g., "*you have this worker, just for you*"). I also interpreted that Chloe perceived being in care to be associated with an enhanced level of support in comparison to that received in parental care due to knowledge and skills of professionals (i.e., "*because they understand the situation and stuff better"*).

Conversely, it was interpreted that Bella perceives care experience to be associated with disadvantage in their support networks, illuminating divergence in how participants make sense of the influence of their care experience:

"I think coming straight out of care, especially because care leavers, get like a lot less support than normal, for lack of a better word, people would when they're moving out because like, they can go to their mum's house and be like, mum, something went wrong, but nine times out of ten I'd say care leavers don't have that kind of support network to fall back on, we've got, each other as friends and then we've got our PAs and that's about it". (Bella, p. 38).

Here, Bella's use of the word "*normal*" suggests an expectation of support for all YP during their preparation for adulthood, indicating perceived disadvantage experienced by care leavers. I also interpreted there to be emphasis upon the perceived value of parental support in comparison to that received from social care, which may indicate a lack of trust and confidence in support received from the care system.

Moreover, for Anthony, it was interpreted that the time-limited nature of support for young people leaving care reflected an abrupt ending which appeared to impact upon his sense of security:

"Yeah, because I feel like that's what everyone always saying. Like when you become, when you turn 25, it just becomes like they're like bye, don't come back". (Anthony, p. 28).

4.2.4. Developing Skills for Adulthood.

The development of skills for adulthood was interpreted as a theme across all participants' accounts. Development of practical skills for adulthood appeared important to participants, facilitated by collaboration with professionals and personal networks, where skills were acquired through modelling and mediation. Moreover, participants' previous experiences and perceived absence of support appeared to influence a sense of self-reliance in the development of skills for adulthood. These experiences are captured within the following subthemes: '*Support for The Development of Skills'* and '*Self-reliance in the Development of Skills'*.

The Development of Practical Skills. Five participants shared their experiences of the development of practical skills during their preparation for adulthood. It was interpreted that participants perceived a need for support with the development of skills across a broad range of areas, including FE and employment, independent living, keeping healthy and inclusion in the community. For example, Bella shared:

"I could do like the basic self-care, like I could feed myself, I could do self-hygiene, I could like do the stuff that means you live in a house, but I didn't have any of the like house management skills". (Bella, p. 11).

Bella appears to contrast their perceived level of competency in personal care and household management skills, identifying a need for further support with the latter. I interpreted that Bella perceives a higher level of support is required for the development of household management skills in comparison to personal care needs; both of which they perceived to be essential for independent living.

Participants also appeared to value practical assistance for developing skills for adulthood. This included practicing tasks together which appeared to offer opportunities for participants to learn following modelling of skills by personal and professional networks. For example, Chloe shared her experience of collaborating with a professional to develop skills in a practical setting:

"Okay, so when I was in the training flat, we did a food shop together. They gave me money and showed me how to top up my gas and electric. I know I was only there for two days, but I cooked my own meals and stuff and they'd come and check on you to make sure you can". (Chloe, p. 35).

Here, Chloe discussed her training flat experience, where she developed independent living skills with professional support and modelling. This allowed her to practice in real-life situations, with the professional offering a balance of independence and support whereby the professional would "*check on you and make sure you can*".

Similarly, Phoenix shared his experience of being supported with developing practical skills for adulthood, which involved his older sister modelling these skills for him:

"Sometimes my sister would bring me into her into her kitchen and she would tell me the instructions like how to cook certain things. Cause she's a mother herself and she knows what it's like to live on your own and have kids and that". (Phoenix, p. 25).

Here, it can be interpreted that Phoenix perceives his sister to be an experienced role model for developing skills for adulthood, evidenced via phrases such as "*she's a mother herself*" and

"*she knows what it's like'*. This indicates that he trusts support offered by his sister due to knowledge developed through her own experience.

Moreover, it was interpreted that Anthony and Luka found that developing skills through experience was important for understanding the advice given by professionals for practical skills in adulthood:

"Yeah, so when you don't experience it's just like oh, she's just talking, or he's just talking, when you do, experience it it's like, oh, they're actually right". (Anthony, p.13).

"It was a good way (participation in independent living skills workshop) as again, I learn by practical skills". (Luka, p. 21).

It also appeared important to participants that information to support development of practical skills was shared in an individualised and meaningful way. This included information that was accessible and did not assume prior knowledge. For example, Bella shared:

"*Yeah, it was basically like they were just talking in jargon … And they were like oh well there's an option between these three and I was like yes but what do they mean, I can hear the words but what the hell is a smart meter, what does that do, compared to the other ones?*". (Bella, p. 16).

Self-reliance in the Development of Skills for Adulthood. Four participants' accounts reflected a sense of self-reliance in the development of skills for adulthood. Self-reliance was interpreted as dependence on oneself for skill development, which appeared to be influenced by perceived lack of support and self-sufficiency developed through past experiences. For example, Anthony shared:

"I was already living independently when I was in Year 9 by myself. Waking up early, making food for myself, catching the train. So, I was already doing that from a young age. So, it's kind of like I'm already over the whole parent situation". (Anthony, p. 25).

Here, Anthony reflects upon experience of responsibilities when he was in Year 9, indicating the development of independent living skills from a relatively young age. I interpreted that Anthony's experience influenced a sense of self-reliance and as he shared, "*I'm already over*

the whole parent situation", indicating that he perceives that YP who grow up in parental care may depend on their parents to support development of skills for adulthood. Furthermore, Anthony shared, '*if I was someone who's always just lived with their parents all their life, I would have probably failed*' (p. 44), indicating that he perceived his experience of self-reliance in the absence of parental support as promoting his development of skills for adulthood.

Bella shared a similar experience of developing skills for adulthood which appeared to be influenced by a sense of self-reliance and necessity:

"*Yeah, I could budget myself because my dad was rubbish at it, so I basically paid his bills for him. So, I could budget, I could feed myself, I could clean and stuff because his house was mank and he didn't cook anything because he's an [occupation], so he just had canteen food".* (Bella, p. 52)

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Bella describes their experience of developing skills whilst living with their father prior to transitioning to independent living. I interpreted this to reflect a sense of developing skills out of necessity, due to perceived challenges Bella's father was experiencing with house management skills. It appears that Bella felt as though they had to take on the parental role during this experience, which facilitated the development of their self-sufficiency and independence skills.

Moreover, it was interpreted that Ryan experienced a sense of self-reliance due to perceived absence of support from professionals:

"So, I don't know why they're thinking they can help me out. they're there to help you, but you need to teach yourself those skills, they can't teach you those skills". (Ryan, p. 46).

Here, Ryan refers to the development of skills for independent living, which he appears to perceive as skills that cannot be taught by professionals and therefore need to be self-taught. He further shared, "*they're not gonna be at your house twenty-four seven, ohh have you done this have you done that"* (p. 46), which I interpreted to indicate that Ryan does not perceive professionals to be able to offer the level of support required for independent living, which influenced a dependence on developing skills through self-reliance.

4.3. Summary of IPA Findings

The following four inter-connected GETs were identified following an interpretative phenomenological analysis of CEIs' preparation for adulthood: '*The Journey to Adulthood*', '*Agency and Influence in Decision-making*', '*The Role of Supportive Networks*' and '*Development of Skills for Adulthood*'. The analysis highlighted convergence in participants' accounts whereby there were similarities in how participants made sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood, e.g., experience of support from non-judgemental and empathic relationships. The analysis also identified divergence in participants' experiences, e.g., experience of invalidation, illuminating the importance of understanding nuances in CEIs' experiences to inform support for their preparation for adulthood. The findings will now be considered in relation to psychological theory and research literature in the *Discussion*.

Chapter Five
Discussion

5.1. Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the findings of the study in relation to existing theory and literature to answer the research question:

How do CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood?

The chapter will begin with a summary of the research. Following this, the IPA findings will be discussed concerning existing literature and psychological theory to understand how they contribute to the current knowledge base. A methodological review will then be completed to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of the study. Subsequently, implications for practice and future research will be presented. The chapter will close with conclusions of the research.

In line with the study's person-centred framework, this chapter corresponds with the following stage in Lundy's Model of Child Participation (2007) to explore CEIs' *influence* upon practice:

4. Influence The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.	"*due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child*" (p.5).

5.2. Summary of Research

This research aimed to explore CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood in relation to PfA areas outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015). In doing so, it sought to make an original contribution to the educational psychology knowledge base and inform the practice of EPs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using IPA methodology to investigate CEIs' experiences. Following cross-case analysis, four GETs were interpreted to understand how CEI made sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood: *'The Journey to Adulthood*', *'Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes*', *'The Role of Supportive Networks*', and *'Developing Skills for Adulthood*'. The findings illuminated shared experiences of CEI during their preparation for adulthood, whilst also highlighting divergence in accounts in line with IPA's idiographic focus (Smith et al., 2022).

5.3. Discussion of Findings

This study adopted a critical realist ontology and phenomenological epistemology to understand CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood. It considered that an objective reality exists which is shaped by social, political, and cultural influences (Scott, 2005), whilst accepting that this reality can only be known imperfectly through interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In the following section, the study's findings will be discussed in relation to existing literature and psychological theory to further understand and interpret CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood. An overview of each GET in relation to existing literature and theory will be presented, followed by further exploration of CEIs' experiences captured within the subthemes.

5.3.1. The Journey to Adulthood.

It is documented within the literature that CEI often experience a more complex and accelerated transition to adulthood than the general population (e.g., Palmer et al., 2022), characterised by abrupt endings to care placements and feelings of uncertainty (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a), and withdrawal of supports after leaving care, often referred to as the Care Cliff (Become Charity, 2022). Studies that have explored CEIs' transition to adulthood indicate that the journey represents a developmental process of identity (e.g., Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018), resilience (Schofield et al., 2017) and seeking a sense of stability and security (Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014). These findings are echoed within the following subthemes, which will now be explored: '*The Development of the Adult Identity'*, '*Personal Growth and Resilience*', '*Timing of Discussions and Readiness for Adulthood*' and '*Feeling Safe and Secure*'.

The Development of the Adult Identity. It was interpreted that participants considered variables such as increased responsibility, financial stability, and development in understanding from adolescence to adulthood as contributing to formation of an adult identity. This aligns with previous research by Arnett (1997; 1998) which found that YP identified criteria such as accepting responsibility for self, making independent decisions and financial independence as significant markers of adulthood. Arnett (2000) described these criteria as "*qualities of character*" (p.472), which were ranked of higher importance than demographic transitions such as finishing school, settling into a career and parenthood as indicators of

attaining adulthood. Interestingly, in the present study, it was interpreted that Chloe's experience of becoming a mother had a significant influence upon her conceptualisation of her adult identity, which I understood to be associated with the increased responsibilities of looking after her children. This aligns with Arnett's (1998) research which found that whilst YP did not consider parenthood as an essential criterion for attaining adulthood, individuals who have become parents often perceive parenthood as the most significant milestone in their personal transition to adulthood. This illuminates the importance of understanding CEIs' subjective experiences of transitioning to adulthood to ensure support for their preparation is tailored to individual need and circumstances.

Personal Growth and Resilience. For all participants, the journey to adulthood was interpreted to reflect a process of personal growth and resilience. This is in line with previous research which has illuminated the role of CEIs' resilience in supporting their transition to adulthood (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Schofield et al., 2017; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). In the present study, participants reflected upon resilience they had demonstrated during earlier experiences of adversity to support them with overcoming challenge in adulthood. This appeared to promote a sense of optimism regarding their ability to navigate challenges associated with adult life. This finding is in line with previous research by Pinkerton and Rooney (2014), whereby it was interpreted that CEI utilised their coping skills developed during challenging circumstances to facilitate their transition into adulthood. Therefore, it can be suggested that the findings of the present study indicate that CEI should be supported to recognise their personal strengths and coping strategies during their preparation for adulthood to develop confidence in their capability to overcome anticipated challenges.

Furthermore, CEIs' previous experiences of adversity appeared to be integral to their personal growth, which I understood to enhance their ability to cope in response to perceived challenges in adulthood. This finding can be interpreted through Resilience Theory (e.g., Masten, 2001), whereby participants reframed their experiences of adversity to recognise the positive impact upon their resilience and ability to cope during their preparation for adulthood. Participants' resilience also appeared to be fostered through support from trusted networks, such as birth family, foster carers, and professional relationships. Therefore, in line with findings from previous research (Baker, 2017; Gilligan, 2008; Marion et al., 2017; Sulimani-Aidan, 2014; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018), the present study adds to the knowledge base which emphasises the importance of meaningful relationships in promoting CEIs'

resilience during their transition to adulthood. The influence of relationships during CEIs' preparation for adulthood will be further explored in the GET, '*The Role of Supportive Networks*'.

Timing of Discussions and Readiness for Adulthood. It was interpreted that there was a reciprocal interaction between timings of discussions and participants' feelings of preparedness for adulthood. For example, for Anthony and Chloe, discussions around adulthood from the age of fifteen-years-old appeared to facilitate feelings of preparedness, particularly in relation to exploration of EET options and independent living arrangements. However, for Luka and Phoenix, it was interpreted that a sense of developmental and emotional readiness for adulthood was important for facilitating timings of discussions. These findings indicate a mutual relationship between discussion timings and CEIs' readiness for adulthood, whereby discussion timings influence CEIs' readiness for adulthood, and vice versa. This is in line with findings from Baker (2017), whereby some CEI emphasised the importance of early discussions to facilitate the development of practical skills and emotional preparation for adulthood, whereas others did not feel ready for such discussions. Therefore, it can be suggested that the findings from the present study illuminate the importance of tailoring discussions to support CEIs' preparation for adulthood in line with their perceived readiness. This also aligns with Lundy's Model of Participation (2007), whereby it states that CYPs' preference for decision-making should be respected, which for CEI may be informed by their perceived readiness for discussions around adulthood.

Feeling Safe and Secure. For the purpose of this subtheme, a sense of safety and security has been conceptualised as meeting basic needs. Trusting relationships also fostered CEIs' emotional security in adulthood, which will be further explored in the GET, '*The Role of Supportive Networks*'.

It appeared important to participants to experience a sense of safety and security in adulthood. A sense of security was conceptualised as comprising both financial and emotional security, which appeared to be inextricably linked. Participants also appeared to reflect upon the influence of ecological variables, such as the cost-of-living crisis, on their financial stability and subsequent sense of security in adulthood. This finding can be understood from an ecosystemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), whereby *chronosystem* events such as the cost-of-living crisis had an influence upon CEIs' preparation for adulthood at the *macrolevel*, due to impact upon variables such as affordable housing and food costs. This was also

interpreted to impact upon relationships at the *mesosytem* level due to increased stress in response to financial strain. Whilst previous research has explored the influence of events within the *chronosystem,* such as the coronavirus pandemic upon CEIs' transition to adulthood (Munro et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a; Roberts et al., 2021b), less is known about the influence of the current cost-of-living crisis upon CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood. Therefore, the study's findings add to the body of literature to illuminate the impact of *chronosystem* events, such as the cost-of-living crisis, upon CEIs' perceived threat to security during their preparation for adulthood.

Participants were also interpreted to prioritise a sense of safety in adulthood**;** conceptualised as a secure home and a sense of stability. This finding aligns with Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (1943), whereby CEI participants prioritised basic survival needs, such as safety and security, over subsequent needs outlined in the hierarchy, such as esteem and self-actualisation. Participants' previous experiences of instability appeared to foster their motivation to provide a sense of safety and stability for themselves in adulthood, which may have been associated with an increased sense of control over their life. Therefore, it can be suggested that the findings from the present study illuminate the importance of empowering CEI to make decisions to regain control over their lives, which will be explored in the following GET: '*Agency and Empowerment in Decision-making Processes'*.

5.3.2. Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes.

Participants were interpreted to value a sense of agency and influence in decision-making processes during their preparation for adulthood whereby they felt in control and that their voice was heard. This echoes previous research findings which has found that CEI perceive a sense of agency and choice across a broad range of areas during transition to adulthood as important (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Roberts et al., 2021a; Schofield et al., 2017). In the present study, it appeared important to participants that they worked towards goals in adulthood that were in line with their strengths and interests, which I interpreted to promote a sense of fulfilment. However, participants also appeared to experience a sense of powerlessness during decision-making processes which appeared to be influenced by systemic variables. These findings are captured within the following subthemes which will be discussed in relation to existing literature and theory: '*Agency and Sense of Ownership in Decision-making Processes*', '*Sense of Fulfilment*' and '*Sense of Powerlessness*'.

Agency and Sense of Ownership in Decision-making Processes. Participants appeared to value a sense of agency, ownership, and meaningful involvement in decision-making processes whereby they felt their voice was heard. This finding aligns with Lundy's Model of Participation (2007), which emphasises the importance of providing CYP with *space* to express their views to have *influence*. Moreover, it was interpreted that participants emphasised the importance of receiving appropriate information and support to make informed decisions. This finding also aligns with Lundy's Model of Participation which advocates that CYP must be supported with information and guidance to promote their meaningful participation; illuminating the importance of professionals providing CEI with accessible information to support informed decision-making during their preparation for adulthood.

Sense of Fulfilment. Participants were interpreted to perceive a sense of fulfilment as important when planning for their futures in adulthood. A sense of fulfilment was conceptualised as engaging in EET options that aligned with their strengths and interests and working towards meaningful and achievable goals. It was also interpreted that a sense of fulfilment was associated with participants' aspiration to be an advocate and positive role model for others, influenced by their previous experiences of adversity. These findings can be interpreted using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), whereby CEIs' engagement in meaningful goal setting and aspiration to support others appeared to be important for achieving a sense of fulfilment and self-actualisation in adulthood. This aligns with findings from Refaeli, et al. (2019), whereby CEIs' life-satisfaction in adulthood was found to be positively influenced by education and employment outcomes aligned with their goals and interests. CEI also reflected upon the role of personal and professional networks in empowering them to pursue goals aligned with their interests and aspirations, which will be explored further in the GET, '*The Role of Supportive Networks*'.

Sense of Powerlessness. Whilst participants appeared to value a sense of agency, they were also interpreted to experience a sense of powerlessness during their preparation for adulthood. This included systemic challenges, such as housing systems, which had a negative impact upon one participant's sense of agency due to lack of available housing. Furthermore, it was interpreted that participants experienced a sense of powerlessness due to perceived power imbalances between themselves and professionals, impacting negatively upon their

sense of agency. This is echoed in previous research which found that CEI experienced a sense of powerlessness during decision-making processes around their transition to adulthood whereby professionals were perceived to take a lead role (Baker, 2017; Butterworth et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2016). In the present study, participants appeared to value a sense of control during their preparation for adulthood which appeared to be threatened by professional intervention. In contrast, there also appeared to be a sense of dependence on their support. This finding can be understood through the notion of interdependence which encompasses a combination of self-sufficiency and dependence (Propp et al., 2003). Therefore, findings of the present study indicate that professionals should empower CEI in decision-making to promote their agency whilst offering support in line with their wishes, which also aligns with the model of interdependence proposed by Hyde and Atkinson (2019) to support CEIs' transition to adulthood.

5.3.3. The Role of Supportive Networks

The role of supportive networks during CEIs' preparation for adulthood was interpreted as a prominent theme across all participants' accounts. This included support from personal (e.g., foster carers, birth family, friends) and professional networks (e.g., PAs, social workers, family support workers). Aligning with previous research, participants appeared to value support from accessible networks who empowered them and adopted an empathic and non-judgemental approach (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a; Schofield et al., 2017). Participants' care experience was also interpreted to influence their access to supportive networks. These findings are captured within the following subthemes: '*Advocacy, Respect and Empowerment*', '*Importance of Trusting, Non-judgemental and Empathic Relationships*', '*Accessible Relationships provide a Sense of Security*' and '*Influence of Care Experience*'.

Advocacy, Respect and Empowerment. Participants appeared to value support from supportive networks whereby they felt advocated for and respected, reflecting their motivating role. For example, it was interpreted that the high aspirations held by supportive networks for CEI promoted a sense of empowerment and agency in decision-making processes, which is also reflected in previous research findings (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Hayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Schofield et al., 2017). Interestingly, in the present study, Anthony appeared to experience increased pressure in response to high aspirations from others. This finding can be interpreted considering research by Sulimani-

Aidan (2017), whereby it was found that CEI experienced difficulty pursuing their aspirations due to limited social support and personal capital (e.g., financial assets). Therefore, it can be suggested that findings of the present study illuminate the importance of supportive networks understanding CEIs' perceived challenges with achieving aspirations in adulthood to support them with identifying and building upon their existing strengths and resources.

Importance of Trusting, Non-judgemental and Empathic Relationships. Participants also appeared to value support from networks whereby perceived challenges with preparing for adulthood were understood and validated. This was interpreted as conceptualising the emotionally supportive role of relationships. The importance of supportive and empathic relationships in supporting CEIs' transition to adulthood is widely documented in the literature (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a; Schofield et al., 2017). In the present study, it was interpreted that trusted relationships within participants' supportive networks promoted open discussions during their preparation for adulthood. These relationships appeared to be characterised by a high level of empathy and guidance. This finding can be understood through *Attachment Theory* (Bowlby, 1969), whereby the development of secure and trusting relationships facilitated discussions around adulthood which could explore challenges whilst empathising with CEIs' worries. Moreover, the findings of the present study illuminate the importance of a non-judgemental approach taken by supportive networks when supporting CEI during their preparation for adulthood to provide a sense of safety and security, which will be explored further in the following subtheme.

Accessible Relationships provide a Sense of Security. Accessible support networks were interpreted to provide participants with a sense of safety and security when preparing for adulthood. This was conceptualised as comprising a sense of both emotional and physical security. Perceived access to support from personal and professional relationships was interpreted to provide participants with an emotional safety net during their preparation for adulthood which appeared to promote their resilience. Aligning with Resilience Theory (e.g., Masten, 2001), it can be suggested that accessible support networks are an important protective factor when supporting CEI with their preparation for adulthood. Accessible support from personal networks, such a birth family, was interpreted to provide participants with a sense of physical security to develop skills in preparation for adulthood, e.g., by providing a safe and secure home to develop practical skills before transitioning to independent living. This aligns

with previous research findings, whereby it has been found that perceived access to supportive networks was important for providing emotional, practical, and financial support during CEIs' transition to adulthood (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022; Schofield et al., 2017). The findings of the present study can also be interpreted through Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), whereby perceived access to secure and trusting relationships provided participants with a sense of safety and security during their preparation for adulthood. Conversely, participants' experience of inaccessible support was found to impact on their trust and threaten their sense of safety and security. Therefore, findings of the present study contribute to existing knowledge in that CEI need to experience a sense of emotional and physical safety and security via accessible networks during their preparation for adulthood so that they can successfully develop practical skills and manage emotional challenges.

The Influence of Care Experience. Participants appeared to perceive their care leaver status as influencing their access to supportive networks. This included access to professional support (i.e., their PAs), which some participants appeared to value due to the personalised nature of support. Interestingly, Chloe compared professional support to that which she might have received in parental care, appearing to perceive that professional support offered better advice due to knowledge of supporting CEI associated with their professional role. Conversely, Bella appeared to perceive that care experience was associated with disadvantage in support received during their preparation for adulthood when compared with YP in parental care, which appeared to be associated with a lack of trust in the social care system. This finding aligns with research by Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman (2018), whereby CEI identified limited support from families as a challenge during their transition to adulthood. Moreover, in Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman's study, professional support was identified as an asset, suggesting that findings from the present study indicate the importance of professionals developing trusting and secure relationships with CEI as an important protective factor to support their preparation for adulthood.

CEI also appeared to perceive their care experience to influence access to supportive networks, such as the care leaver community. This appeared to promote a sense of belonging characterised by unconditional support, acceptance and understanding. This aligns with previous research findings which has illuminated the importance of CEI experiencing a sense of belonging during their transition to adulthood (e.g., Schofield et al., 2017; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman., 2018; van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019). I also interpreted that shared experience

with CEI who were also preparing for adulthood promoted a sense of connection and belonging which promoted CEIs' resilience. Therefore, it can be suggested that findings from the present study contribute to the knowledge base by illuminating the value of shared experience amongst CEI as a facilitating factor during their preparation for adulthood.

5.3.4. Developing Skills for Adulthood

Development of practical skills in preparation for adulthood was interpreted as a prominent theme across all participants' accounts. This included the development of skills to support independent living, such as budgeting, applying for job vacancies, and paying utilities. A need for support with the development of practical skills is echoed in previous studies which have explored CEIs' transition to adulthood (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022), including opportunities to learn through modelling and applying skills in practice (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022). In a review of literature which explored CEIs' transition to adulthood, Baker (2017) found that despite being supported with the development of practical skills, CEI perceived that too little attention was given to the development of emotional skills for adulthood. Interestingly, this finding was not echoed in the present study, which can be hypothesised to be associated with the interpretation of CEIs' self-reliance which may have negatively influenced a perceived need to seek support with the development of emotional skills (Pryce et al., 2017).

The Development of Practical Skills. In line with previous research, participants were interpreted to perceive a need to be supported with development of practical skills during their preparation for adulthood (Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022). This included support with development of skills for independent living (e.g., budgeting, house management), accessing the community, and exploring and applying for employment opportunities. In line with findings from Hyde and Atkinson (2019), participants in the present study appeared to value support whereby practical skills were modelled (e.g., topping up gas and electricity metres), mediated via professionals offering a balance of independence and support; reflecting a model of *interdependence* (Propp et al., 2003). Moreover, it was interpreted that participants valued the opportunity for practical skills to be modelled in a supportive context during a transitional period e.g., during the training flat experience/staying with birth family prior to transition. In line with findings from Palmer et al. (2022), it can be suggested that findings of

the present study indicate that a transitional programme whereby CEI can develop skills for adulthood through modelling and real-world application is valuable for supporting their preparation for adulthood.

Self-reliance in the Development of Skills for Adulthood. Participants were interpreted to experience a sense of self-reliance in the development of skills for adulthood, a finding widely documented within the literature (e.g., Bengtsson et al., 2018; Pryce et al., 2021; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Stein, 2006b). This appeared to be associated with a perceived lack of support and self-sufficiency in response to their needs previously being inconsistently met. This finding aligns with research by Sting and Groining (2019), whereby CEI were found to have developed a self-reliant way of supporting their needs from a young age due to an absence of support from their care givers. Therefore, findings of the present study can be interpreted using Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), whereby it can be suggested that CEIs' previous experiences of inconsistent care may have impacted upon the development of secure and trusting relationships, ultimately leading to a sense they must rely on themselves to survive. Within the literature, it has been found that CEI perceive their own self-reliance as a protective factor to support their transition to adulthood (Butterworth et al., 2017; Driscoll, 2013; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). However, this has also been found to serve as a barrier to accessing support (Amaral, 2011; Driscoll, 2013). Within the present study, despite some participants appearing to experience a sense of self-reliance in development of skills for adulthood, they still shared their experiences of requesting and accessing support. This finding can be interpreted using Bowlby's (1988) conceptualisation of self-reliance, whereby self-reliant individuals appropriately seek out support when required. Therefore, aligning with findings from Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman (2018), it can be suggested that the present study illuminates the importance of promoting self-reliance as a protective factor for CEI during their preparation for adulthood whilst supporting a sense of inter-dependence through trusting relationships with others.

5.4. Comparison of IPA Themes to Thematic Synthesis

An SLR was completed in *Chapter Two* to discern existing knowledge regarding CEIs' transition to adulthood. The subsequent themes were identified following a thematic synthesis of the literature: '*Accelerated Adulthood*', '*Participation in Decision-making Processes*', '*The Importance of Supportive and Empathic Relationships*' and '*A Sense of Safety and Security*'. These themes are illuminated within the GETs of the present study, suggesting that these areas

are pertinent to the experiences of CEI during their preparation for adulthood. Themes from the thematic synthesis of literature and present study are presented in Table 5.1 below to support further comparison and identify how the findings from the present study are supported by and contribute to the existing knowledge base.

Table 5.1

A Table to Compare *Findings of the Thematic Synthesis with IPA Themes in the Present Study.*

Themes from Thematic Synthesis	Themes from IPA in the Present Study
Accelerated Adulthood	The Journey to Adulthood
Participation in Decision-making Processes	Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes
The Importance of Supportive and Empathic Relationships	The Role of Supportive Networks
A Sense of Safety and Security	Developing Skills for Adulthood

5.4.1. The Journey to Adulthood

'*The Journey to Adulthood'* was interpreted as a GET in the present study to capture the developmental experiences and priorities of CEI during their preparation for adulthood. Whilst CEIs' journey to adulthood was captured within the '*Accelerated Adulthood*' theme in the thematic synthesis of literature, characterised by abrupt endings and uncertainty during the transition to adulthood, findings from the present study add depth to existing knowledge via exploration of how CEI perceived their identity development during the journey to adulthood. This was interpreted to be influenced by a perceived developmental process from adolescence to adulthood, including the development of their adult identity informed by a sense of increased responsibility. CEIs' adult identity also appeared to influence how they were perceived by others, such as family and professionals, which was interpreted to have implications for support due to others' assumptions of their knowledge and understanding. This finding was not interpreted within the thematic synthesis of literature, indicating that the present study adds to our understanding of CEIs' identity development during their preparation for adulthood and how this may influence their perception of support that is received.

5.4.2. Timing of Discussions and Gradual Transition to Adulthood.

Within both the '*Accelerated Adulthood*' theme in the thematic synthesis and '*The Journey to Adulthood*' GET in the present study, it appeared important to CEI that they were provided with sufficient time to develop their skills and understanding to support their transition to adulthood. In the thematic synthesis of literature, it was interpreted that CEI advocated for a gradual model of transition to develop skills for independence. This was also reflected in findings of the present study whereby CEI shared their experience of developing skills in a supportive context during a transitional period, such as 'training flats' and staying with birth families. Moreover, in the present study, it was interpreted that individual variables, such as a sense of emotional security and developmental understanding, were important for informing the timings of discussion around preparing for adulthood. This finding was not reflected in the thematic synthesis of literature, indicating that the present study adds to our understanding of facilitating discussions around preparing for adulthood in line with CEIs' perceived developmental and emotional readiness.

5.4.3. Agency in Decision-making Processes

The importance of a sense of agency and control during decision-making processes for CEI during their preparation/transition to adulthood was interpreted in both the '*Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes*' GET in the present study and '*Participation in Decision-making Processes*' theme in the thematic synthesis. This included receiving support from professionals with understanding rights and entitlements (e.g., funding, tenancy agreements) to make informed decisions. Interestingly, in the present study, participants appeared to experience a sense of powerlessness in decision-making processes, influenced by systemic variables which they perceived as being out of their control (e.g., housing systems). This also appeared to be influenced by a perceived lack of influence over decision-making in comparison to professionals, such as their PAs. This suggests that whilst a sense of control in decision-making processes was interpreted as important in both the thematic synthesis of literature and IPA themes, the present study adds depth to our understanding of CEIs' perceived influence in decision-making processes during their preparation for adulthood which may be negatively impacted by a perceived power imbalance.

5.4.4. The Role of Supportive Networks

The role of supportive networks during CEIs' preparation/transition to adulthood was interpreted within both the thematic synthesis and present study, captured within the themes

'*The Importance of Supportive and Empathic Relationships*' and '*The Role of Supportive Networks*'. In the present study and thematic synthesis, it was interpreted that CEI valued an empathic approach from professionals whereby the challenges associated with the transition to adulthood were understood and validated. Furthermore, trust was found to be important for developing positive relationships and facilitating open and honest discussions around the transition to adulthood. In the present study, participants also appeared to reflect upon the influence of their care experience upon access to supportive networks, such as the care leaver community. This appeared to be influenced by a sense of shared experience and understanding of challenges associated with preparing for adulthood. This finding was not reflected in the thematic synthesis of literature, suggesting that the present study adds to our understanding of how CEI perceive the importance of shared experience with CEI in supporting their preparation for adulthood.

5.4.5. A Sense of Safety and Security.

Whilst a sense of '*Safety and Security*' has been interpreted as a standalone theme in the thematic synthesis of literature, this has been interpreted as subthemes related to the influence of supportive networks and journey to adulthood in the present study. This has been interpreted to conceptualise a need for basic and emotional needs to be met during CEIs' preparation for/transition to adulthood. In both the thematic synthesis of literature and findings of the present study, perceived access to supportive networks was interpreted to provide CEI with a sense of safety and security during their preparation/transition to adulthood. Furthermore, challenges accessing/removal of support was found to influence a perceived threat to CEIs' sense of safety and security in both the thematic synthesis and IPA findings. Interestingly, in both the thematic synthesis and findings of the present study, CEI described support from their foster/birth families as providing an important safety net to support their transition to adulthood, strengthening our understanding of the role of supportive networks in providing a sense of safety and security for CEI during their preparation for adulthood.

5.4.6. Opportunities for Skill Development

CEI were interpreted to value opportunities to develop skills for adulthood prior to their transition in both the thematic synthesis of literature and findings of the present study. This included development of practical skills such as budgeting, understanding correspondence, and cooking, following modelling of skills from professionals and opportunities to practice. CEI also appeared to reflect upon the influence of their care history upon their development of skills

for adulthood. In the present study, this appeared to be associated with a sense of self-reliance which impacted upon their requests for support with developing skills for adulthood. Interestingly, whilst a sense of self-reliance was interpreted to be associated with agency in decision-making processes in the thematic synthesis, it was not found to have an influence upon access to support for skill development. Therefore, it can be suggested that the findings from the present study add depth to our understanding of the influence of perceived self-reliance upon development of practical skills for CEI during their preparation for adulthood.

5.5. Summary of Findings

The present study aimed to answer the following research question: '*How do CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood*?'. Analysis of six semi-structured interviews using IPA illuminated the following GETs to understand how CEI made sense of their preparing for adulthood experiences: '*The Journey to Adulthood*', '*Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes*', '*The Role of Supportive Networks*' and '*Developing Skills for Adulthood*'. These findings are largely reflected within the literature which has explored CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood, suggesting that these areas of experience are also important for supporting CEI with their preparation for adulthood. The analysis highlighted convergence in CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood, whilst also illuminating the nuances in their experiences in line with IPA's idiographic focus. This gave focus to CEIs' individual voice regarding their preparation for adulthood, in line with the person-centred framework of the present study, Lundy's Model of Participation (2007).

5.6. Methodological Review

A methodological review will now be completed to explore strengths and limitations in the research approach before considering implications for practice and future research.

5.6.1. Methodological Strengths

In line with guidance from Smith et al. (2022), steps were taken to meet the following criteria outlined by Yardley (2000) to ensure quality in the methodological approach: *sensitivity to context*, *commitment and rigour*, *transparency and coherence*, and *impact and importance*. These have been outlined in *Chapter 3*, section 3.9.

The present study was informed by a critical realist ontology and phenomenological epistemology to understand CEIs' subjective experiences of preparing for adulthood and how they ascribe meaning to these experiences. An IPA methodology aligned with the philosophical

positioning of the study as it allowed a detailed exploration of CEIs' subjective experiences whilst considering the influence of broader social structures upon their experiences (Scott, 2005). Moreover, an IPA methodology allowed me to explore how CEI ascribed meaning to their experiences of preparing for adulthood, which was appropriate for answering the research question.

In line with the study's person-centred framework, Lundy's *Model of Participation* (2007), the research aimed to give *voice* to individual experiences of CEI during their preparation for adulthood. IPA's idiographic approach achieved this purpose through detailed, nuanced analysis of individual experiences (Smith et al., 2022), facilitated through individual, semi-structured interviews for participants to share their experiences in their own words. Moreover, initial meetings with CEI allowed time to build rapport prior to their participation in an individual interview which I perceived to be paramount in supporting them with feeling comfortable in sharing their experiences so openly with me.

A total of six CEI took part in the study. Whilst this may be considered a small sample size regarding transferability of findings (Noon, 2018), this was found to support sufficient engagement with the data at the individual and cross-case analysis level. Individual interviews lasted for a mean duration of 66 minutes, which was considered to provide a rich data set from which to explore CEIs' experiences. This is in line with guidance from Smith et al. (2022) who advocate for richness and depth whilst exploring individual experiences, which may pertain to a small sample size.

Participants were recruited via liaison with gatekeepers who were involved in CEIs' support. This informed identification of CEI eligible for participation to support the recruitment of a homogenous sample. Whilst this may have had implications for the selection of participants with whom gatekeepers perceived may have given a favourable response, recruitment via gatekeepers was found to be particularly important to identify participants who were not experiencing challenging personal circumstances to mitigate risk of emotional harm. I felt this was especially pertinent given that CEI are considered a vulnerable research population (Miller et al., 2022).

5.6.2. Methodological Limitations

The study will now be examined considering its methodological limitations to inform reflections of alternative approaches in the research.

It can be considered that the research question may have favoured a participatory research approach to explore how CEI made sense of their preparation for adulthood

experiences. Therefore, a limitation of the study is the absence of a participatory approach, which could have enhanced the research process by empowering and actively involving participants in the interpretation of findings and co-creation of knowledge (e.g., Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014). However, due to challenges experienced with recruitment and time implications, it was not possible to implement a participatory approach.

A further limitation of the study is the challenge with obtaining a homogenous sample, influenced by recruitment difficulties. Initially, the study sought to obtain a sample of up to six CEI attending the same FE setting to recruit a relatively homogenous sample for the purpose of identifying commonalties across experiences. However, due to recruitment challenges, five additional participants were recruited from another LA. Consequently, there were variations in the age, education/employment status and living arrangements of CEI participants, impacting upon the homogeneity of the sample. This may have influenced the interpretation of CEIs' experiences, as there appeared to be a high level of divergence across accounts. However, CEI are not a homogenous group (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018) and consequently, the idiographic approach of IPA is considered a strength in illuminating the nuances in CEIs' preparing for adulthood experiences.

Whilst IPA does not seek to claim generalisability (Smith et al., 2022), it is important to consider the study's transferability of findings. A small sample of six CEI participants were recruited across two LAs in England. It is likely that differences in support received across LAs may have shaped CEIs' individual experiences of preparing for adulthood which may impact upon the transferability of findings across geographical contexts. Moreover, to protect anonymity and safeguard CEI who took part in the research, it has not been possible to provide contextual information (e.g., participant pen portraits/LA-specific information), to support transferability of findings.

A further limitation of the research is the absence of a pilot study to ascertain the appropriateness and efficacy of the semi-structured interview schedule for answering the research question. This was associated with initial challenges experienced with recruitment which had implications for time available to complete a pilot interview. Consequently, I recorded my reflections following each interview to modify and adapt questions throughout the data collection process (Robson, 2024). For example, during the first interview, I recorded notes on an A3 sheet of paper however, I reflected that this impacted upon my ability to focus on active listening. Consequently, this technique was omitted during subsequent interviews.

My own bias will have inevitably influenced interpretation of the data and findings presented in the study. This is particularly pertinent as I can be considered an insider to the

research population due to my own care experience. I do not claim neutrality in my interpretation of interview data and have taken steps to mitigate the influence of my own bias. Throughout data analysis, I engaged in reflexivity and 'bracketed' my thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a reflexive diary to acknowledge influence of my bias upon interpretation of the data. Furthermore, verbatim quotes from participants have been presented throughout the research, with examples of the data analysis process presented in the appendices, to promote transparency in my interpretations. My interpretations were also discussed with a fellow IPA researcher to ensure they captured the essence of participants' experiences whilst remaining true to their original accounts. Whilst it would have been favourable to member-check findings with participants, this was not possible due to time constraints of the research.

5.7. Original Contribution

CEIs' complex transition to adulthood in comparison to their peers who have grown up in parental care is widely documented within existing literature (e.g., Harrison et al., 2023; Munro et al., 2022; Sacker et al., 2021). Research has also highlighted the disadvantages that CEI experience in adulthood in comparison to their peers, such as under-representation in higher education (DfE, 2023b), challenges with housing stability (Fortune & Smith, 2021) and difficulties transitioning into the labour market (Harrison et al., 2023). CEIs' transition to adulthood is further exacerbated by the Care Cliff, whereby they are expected to make the transition to independence, often without adequate support or preparation (Become Charity, 2022).

Previous research which has explored CEIs' transition to adulthood has found that they experience an accelerated transition to adulthood (Palmer et al., 2022; Sacker et al., 2021; Sanders, 2021), whereby they advocate for a gradual transition to support their development of skills prior to transition (Glynn & Mayock, 2019). Despite this, there is a gap in the literature which has explored CEIs' experiences of *preparing* for adulthood, particularly using phenomenological approaches such as IPA, which this research seeks to address.

Previous research has focused upon specific experiences for CEI during their transition to adulthood, such as transition to independent living (e.g., Palmer et al., 2022), higher education (e.g., Bayfield, 2023), and employment (e.g., Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021). Whilst these findings can be interpreted to ascertain their relevance to PfA outcomes outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015), there is a gap in the literature which has explored CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood directly associated with PfA domains. Consequently, existing literature predominantly produces findings applicable for social care professionals.

Therefore, in focusing upon the experiences of CEI in relation to PfA domains outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014,* the present study aims to address a gap in the literature via providing findings that inform the practice of EPs.

Findings of the present study are largely supported by existing literature, strengthening our understanding of what CEI perceive to be important for supporting their preparation for adulthood, including: a sense of safety provided through accessible support networks, agency in decision-making processes, and a transitional period to develop skills for adulthood. Moreover, the study's findings add depth to our understanding of CEIs' preparation for adulthood, such as the development of their identity during the journey to adulthood, facilitating discussions in line with CEIs' perceived readiness, the influence of events within CEIs' *chronosystem* such as the cost-of-living crisis, and the influence of perceived power imbalances.

The finding's implications for supporting CEIs' preparation for adulthood are discussed below.

5.8. Implications for Practice

Yardley (2000) advocates that the quality of a qualitative study is assessed on the *impact and importance* of its findings, including theoretical and practical implications. In line with the Lundy Model of Participation (2007), CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood will be considered regarding the *influence* they have upon policy and practice (i.e., "*the view must be acted upon, as appropriate*") (p.933). This is particularly pertinent following the comment shared by Ryan: "*I wanna have the impact but it's whether the impact will, get put through*" (p. 46). Consequently, the following sections will draw upon CEIs' experiences and findings from existing literature to suggest implications for policy and practice in line with corporate parenting responsibilities at the following levels: *LAs and wider government*, *schools/FE settings,* and *EPs.*

5.8.1. Implications for LAs and wider government

Chapter 1 outlined the current Staying Put arrangements in England which allow CEI to remain with their former foster carers after their 18th birthday up to the age of 21 to allow time to develop skills for adulthood akin to their peers who have grown up in parental care (DfE, HMRC & DWP, 2013). However, this arrangement is currently only available for CEI who were previously in foster care. Consequently, for many CEI, their 18th birthday represents the Care Cliff*,* characterised by a significant reduction in support and transition to

independence when they do not feel ready (Become Charity, 2022). This is exacerbated for CEI aged 16 years who move into semi-independent living (Become Charity, 2022).

In the present study, it was interpreted that CEI valued the opportunity to develop their skills for adulthood within a supportive context during a transitional period (e.g., training flat/whilst staying with birth families/former foster carers) in line with previous research findings (Palmer et al., 2022). Consequently, it can be suggested that LAs across England should endeavour to create transitional programmes whereby CEI can develop a range of skills for adulthood through modelling and practice within a supportive context. CEI in the present study also emphasised the importance of developing skills for budgeting, independent living, accessing the community and applying for job opportunities, suggesting that such skills should be a focus within transitional programmes.

It can also be suggested that change should be implemented at the wider governmental level to extend support for CEI beyond leaving care age. In the present study, CEIs' perceived readiness for adulthood was interpreted to be influenced by several variables, including perceived emotional and developmental readiness. Furthermore, it appeared important to CEI to experience a sense of safety and security prior to engaging in discussions around preparing for adulthood. Therefore, it can be suggested that wider government should endeavour to extend support for CEI after their 18th birthday to mitigate the impact of the Care Cliff (Become Charity, 2022). This could include an extension to Staying Put arrangements beyond the age of 21 for CEI who were previously in foster care, and safe and secure homes for CEI who were not in foster care so they can experience opportunities akin to their peers to develop skills to support their preparation for adulthood.

5.8.2. Implications for Schools/Further Education Settings

Schools and FE settings play an important role in supporting CEIs' preparation for adulthood (DfE, 2022). In line with previous research findings (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Glynn & Hayock, 2019; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Schofield et al., 2017) CEI in the present study appeared to value relationships with professionals who held high aspirations for them. This also aligns with the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015) which advocates that "*high aspirations are crucial to success*" when supporting CYP with their preparation for adulthood (p. 120). However, in the present study, high aspirations held by professionals caused Anthony to experience an increased sense of worry and pressure around the transition to adulthood. Consequently, it can be suggested that it is important that professionals within schools and FE settings understand and validate CEIs' worries around

transitioning to adulthood whilst upholding high aspirations that respect their individual wishes and views.

Professionals within schools and FE settings (typically a designated member of staff, i.e., '*Designated Teacher'*; DT), often have a role in supporting CEIs' preparation for adulthood via attendance at PEP meetings. In the present study, Anthony reflected upon the positive impact of PEP meetings upon promoting his motivation and engagement with education. Moreover, it appeared important to CEI that professionals advocated for decisions that were in line with their strengths and interests. Therefore, it can be suggested that professionals within schools and FE settings have an advocacy role for CEI during decision-making processes, such as PEP meetings, to support their preparation for adulthood.

The role of the DT in schools in England has a statutory responsibility to support CiC and previously looked after children (DfE, 2018e). Furthermore, colleges must have protocols to support CEI, including a designated member of staff who can provide support (DfE, 2022). In line with previous research findings (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022; Schofield et al., 2017), it was interpreted that CEI perceived that accessible support networks provided them with a sense of safety and security to support their preparation for adulthood. Therefore, it can be suggested that designated professionals within schools and college settings have a key role in supporting CEI with experiencing a sense of safety and security via responsive and accessible support. This is particularly important given CEIs' need to feel emotionally and physically secure to inform readiness for discussions around preparing for adulthood.

Findings from the present study also have implications Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinators (SENDCos) who support CEI with Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs). In the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015), it states that from Year 9 onwards, EHCP reviews should have a focus upon PfA, though discussions about longer term goals should start "*from the earliest years"* (p. 120). In the present study, it was interpreted that CEI valued early discussions to support their feelings of preparedness for adulthood. Previous research has found that CEI experience an accelerated transition to adulthood, characterised by abrupt transitions and uncertainty (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Kelly et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a), further illuminating the importance of early discussions to prepare for adulthood. However, in the present study, there were variations in CEIs' preparedness for discussions around adulthood, which appeared to be influenced by their individual circumstances and perceived emotional and developmental readiness. Therefore,

SENDCos supporting CEI with EHCPs with preparing for adulthood should explore their views on their readiness for adulthood to inform preparation aligned with their wishes.

5.8.3. Implications for Educational Psychologists

The present study explored CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood in line with PfA domains outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015). This has direct implications for the practice of EPs in supporting CEI with SEN. Moreover, EPs have a corporate parenting responsibility to support CEI and act as the "*best parent to the child or young person*" (Legislation.gov.uk, 2017, p.6). Implications for EP practice will be explored in line with the core functions of their role: *consultation, assessment, intervention, training*, and *research* (SEED, 2002). Implications for EPs' role in research will be explored in section 5.9.

Consultation. Findings from the study highlight the importance of CEI experiencing a sense of agency and empowerment in decision-making processes during their preparation for adulthood. EP practice is informed by the *Health and Care Professions Council* (HCPC) *Standards of Proficiency* (SoPs) (HCPC, 2023), which advocates that Practitioner Psychologists must work with service users to facilitate their preferred role in decision-making. Therefore, at the individual level it can be suggested EPs have an important role in working closely with CEI to explore their preferred role in decision-making during their preparation for adulthood which upholds their sense of agency and empowerment. For example, via suggestion of person-centred consultations such as *Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope* (PATH) (Pearpoint et al., 1993), which place the voice and aspirations of CYP at the centre of decision-making processes (Wood et al., 2019). To support CEI with their preparation for adulthood, these could have a specific focus on exploring CEIs' aspirations in line with the PfA domains outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015).

The findings also illuminate the importance of facilitating timings of discussions around preparing for adulthood in line with CEIs' perceived readiness. Therefore, it can be suggested at the school level, EPs could engage in consultation with SENDCos and/or DTs to identify when to introduce discussions around CEIs' preparation for adulthood in line with their wishes. Aligning with findings from Hyde and Atkinson (2019), this could also be facilitated through EPs involvement in Pathway Planning whereby CEIs' skills for adulthood could be developed through the graduated approach.

Assessment. The study's findings illuminate the importance of understanding CEIs' perceived challenges with achieving aspirations in adulthood and supporting them with identifying and building upon their existing strengths and resources. At the individual level, EPs could work directly with CEI to explore their perceived strengths in relation to skills for adulthood. For example, via the use of person-centred tools, such as the *Personal Skills Profile* (Tomlinson & Oland, 2023) which explores CYP's perceived skills relating to the PfA domains (DfE & DoH, 2015). Such assessment could also inform support for CEIs' transition to post-16 EET, whilst placing their voice at the centre.

CEIs' experiences also highlight the influence of ecological variables, such as the cost-of-living crisis and challenges with housing systems, upon their preparation for adulthood. This aligns with previous research findings which highlight the influence of ecological variables, such as the coronavirus pandemic, upon CEIs' transition to adulthood (e.g., Munro et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021a; Roberts et al., 2021b). This suggests that models which explore the influence of interacting variables within CEIs' environment, such as the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), are important for informing a holistic assessment of CEIs' preparation for adulthood. This has implications for EP practice, who triangulate information gathered across a range of sources and contexts to understand the influence of interacting variables upon CYP's development (Cline et al., 2023).

Intervention. Findings from the present study highlight that CEI value support with the development of practical skills, such as budgeting, paying bills and applying for job vacancies. In line with previous research, CEI also found modelling of skills and opportunities to develop skills in practice helpful to support their preparation for adulthood (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Palmer et al., 2022). It can be suggested that EPs could support the development of targeted intervention to support CEIs' development of practical skills for adulthood, which could be designed in collaboration with professionals within social care, such as social workers and PAs. This could allow skill development to focus upon those outlined in PfA domains (DfE & DoH, 2015), as well as those discussed in Pathway Planning.

Training. CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood can be understood from a range of theoretical perspectives including a focus upon the influence of relationships (e.g., Attachment Theory, Bowlby, 1969), resilience (e.g., Resilience Theory, Masten 2001), and interacting systems in their environment (e.g., The Bioecological Model of Development, Bronfenbrenner, 1979). EPs are well positioned to deliver training to schools and

establishments to support understanding of the needs of CYP due to their knowledge of interventions, evidence-based practice, and psychologically informed perspectives (O'Hare, 2015). Therefore, it can be suggested that EPs can assist educational settings, multi-agency professionals, and families in understanding the unique challenges experienced by CEI during their transition to adulthood via theoretical frameworks which can be translated into practical approaches (National Scottish Steering Group for Educational Psychologists, 2019).

5.9. Implications for Future Research

Whilst the research aimed to place CEI voice at the forefront of the research in line with Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) using an IPA methodology, a participatory approach would have promoted the meaningful participation of CEI throughout all stages of the research process. However, due to recruitment difficulties and time constraints, this was not possible. Future research may wish to employ a participatory approach to further explore CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood and involve them in the co-construction of knowledge.

The IPA methodology required CEI participants to have communication skills which enabled them to participate in an individual interview which may have excluded the experiences of CEI with communication difficulties. Future research may wish to explore CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood using tools to support communication needs, such as the *Grid Elaboration Method* (GEM) (Joffe & Elsey, 2014) and participant-generated photo elicitation methods (Coupes et al., 2018).

In line with the Lundy Model of Participation (2007), future research may wish to further explore how CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood can have an *influence* upon practice. For example, via sharing the findings from the present study and previous research with EPs and/or multi-agency professionals to explore how the voice of CEI can have direct *influence* on practice.

CEI participants in the present study were recruited from two LAs in England, limiting the geographical transferability of findings. Future research may wish to explore the experiences of a larger sample of CEI across a broad range of settings and geographical locations to add depth to our understanding of their experiences of preparing for adulthood to inform policy and practice.

5.10. Research Conclusion

It is widely documented within existing research that CEI face acute challenges during their transition to adulthood in comparison to their peers who have grown up in parental care.

The official leaving care age in England is 18 years old, which has been described as the 'Care Cliff' (Become Charity, 2022) for CEI who are not supported via a Staying Put arrangement, characterised by an abrupt ending in support and accelerated transition to adulthood. This is exacerbated for CEI who move into supported accommodation under recent legislation (DfE, 2023a), whereby they can experience the Care Cliff from as young as 16-years-old. This context highlighted an important area for research whereby CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood should be explored to inform support, considering their accelerated transition from an increasingly young age.

A review of literature from an ecological perspective illuminated the influence of interacting systems within CEIs' environment upon their transition to adulthood (e.g., governmental policy at the *macrolevel*; collaboration between partners at the *mesosystem* level). In line with the person-centred approach of the research, this prompted a systematic review of literature to understand what was known about CEIs' experiences of transitioning to adulthood. The review highlighted that whilst a number of studies had explored CEIs' transition to adulthood, these appeared to be focused upon specific transition experiences (e.g., independent living/employment/HE). Moreover, research typically pertained to social care practice. Consequently, a gap was identified regarding CEIs' experiences of *preparing* for adulthood to inform EP practice, particularly via the use of phenomenological approaches, such as IPA.

To address this gap, an exploratory study utilising an IPA methodology was employed to answer the following research question: '*How do CEI make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood*?'. A total of six CEI across two LAs in England took part in semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences of preparing for adulthood in line with the PfA domains outlined in the *SEND CoP 2014* (DfE & DoH, 2015). Four GETs were interpreted to capture CEIs' shared experiences of preparing for adulthood: '*The Journey to Adulthood*', '*Agency and Influence in Decision-making Processes*', '*The Role of Supportive Networks*' and '*Developing Skills for Adulthood*'. The analysis highlighted that whilst there were shared patterns of meaning that CEI ascribed to their experiences of preparing for adulthood, there was a level of divergence across accounts, illuminating nuances in their experiences. This appeared to be influenced by a number of variables, including CEIs' individual care histories, access to supportive networks, and perceived emotional and developmental readiness for adulthood.

Findings of the present study were largely supported by previous research, indicating the importance of continued support for CEI following their transition to adulthood. Moreover,

findings from the study add depth to our understanding of CEIs' experiences during their preparation for adulthood, including facilitating discussions in line with their perceived readiness and understanding the influence of *chronosystem* events, such as the *cost-of-living crisis.* The study's focus upon exploring CEIs' experiences of preparing for adulthood in line with PfA domains also provides implications directly for the practice of EPs, which were missing from existing literature.

A methodological review highlighted the suitability of IPA for exploring CEIs' preparation for adulthood, given its focus on small sample sizes to engage deeply with data and build rapport with participants. This aligned with the person-centred approach of the study via providing CEI with *space* to share their *voice*, however it was acknowledged that this could have been facilitated further through use of participatory approaches. Considerations around the transferability of findings were explored, with an aim to inform implications for practice and future research.

Findings from the study informed implications for practice at the LA and wider governmental level, including funded transitional programmes to support CEI with developing skills for adulthood, and extension to policies which allow CEI to transition to adulthood at a time when they feel ready. Implications at the school/FE setting were explored, including the role of accessible adults in providing a sense of safety and security, having high aspirations, and advocating for CEI in line with their wishes and interests. The following implications for the role of EPs were explored: promoting participation of CEI in person-centred consultations; holistic assessment to understand the influence of interacting systems on CEIs' preparation for adulthood; interventions to support the development of practical skills; and staff training to translate theoretical frameworks into practical strategies to support CEIs' preparation for adulthood. Finally, implications for future research were discussed, including implementation of a participatory project with CEI, exploring the experiences of CEI with communication difficulties, and investigating how CEIs' experiences can *influence* professional practice.

Concluding Comments

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to complete this research and work with the most inspiring and courageous young people. My research journey has facilitated important conversations with colleagues and peers around the challenges CEI experience during their transition to adulthood, and I will continue to advocate for them throughout my professional career.

During conversations with the YP who took part in this research, they emphasised the importance of others hearing their story and informing implications for change, and I hope that this thesis does just that.

"*Hopefully with this research, our voices can be heard*". (Phoenix, p. 42).

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Appendices

Appendix A.

Quality Appraisal of Studies using Gough's Weight of Evidence (WoE) Framework (2007) including Criteria for WoE A, B and C.

Gough's Weight of Evidence (WoE) Framework (2007)								
Weight of Evidence A: *Generic on quality of execution of study* Mays and Pope's (2000) Criteria for Assessing Quality in Qualitative Research								
	Bayfield (2023)	**Furey (2020)**	**Glynn (2019)**	**Hyde (2019)**	**Kelly (2021)**	**Palmer (2022)**	**Roberts (2021a)**	**Schofield (2017).**
Worth or relevance:								
Was this piece of work worth doing at all?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Has it contributed usefully to knowledge?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Clarity of research question:								
If not at the outset of the study, by the end of the research process, was the research question clear?	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Was the researcher able to set aside his or her research preconceptions?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

	Bayfield (2023)	**Furey (2020)**	**Glynn (2019)**	**Hyde (2019)**	**Kelly (2021)**	**Palmer (2022)**	**Roberts (2021a)**	**Schofield (2017).**
Appropriateness of the design to the question:								
Would a different method have been more appropriate? For example, if a causal hypothesis was being tested, was a qualitative approach really appropriate?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Context:								
Is the context or setting adequately described so that the reader could relate the findings to other settings?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Sampling								
Did the sample include the full range of possible cases or settings so that conceptual rather than statistical generalisations could be made (that is, more than convenience sampling)?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

	Bayfield (2023)	**Furey (2020)**	**Glynn (2019)**	**Hyde (2019)**	**Kelly (2021)**	**Palmer (2022)**	**Roberts (2021a)**	**Schofield (2017).**
If appropriate, were efforts made to obtain data that might contradict or modify the analysis by extending the sample (for example, to a different type of area)?	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Data collection and analysis								
Were the data collection and analysis procedures systematic?	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Was an "audit trail" provided such that someone else could repeat each stage, including the analysis?	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
How well did the analysis succeed in incorporating all the observations?	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

	Bayfield (2023)	**Furey (2020)**	**Glynn (2019)**	**Hyde (2019)**	**Kelly (2021)**	**Palmer (2022)**	**Roberts (2021a)**	**Schofield (2017).**
To what extent did the analysis develop concepts and categories capable of explaining key processes or respondents' accounts or observations?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Was it possible to follow the iteration between data and the explanations for the data (theory)?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Did the researcher search for disconfirming cases?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Reflexivity of the account:								
Did the researcher self-consciously assess the likely impact of the methods used on the data obtained?	1	1	1	1	0	1	0.5	1

	Bayfield (2023)	**Furey (2020)**	**Glynn (2019)**	**Hyde (2019)**	**Kelly (2021)**	**Palmer (2022)**	**Roberts (2021a)**	**Schofield (2017).**
Were sufficient data included in the reports of the study to provide sufficient evidence for readers to assess whether analytical criteria had been met?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total WoE A =	**13**	**15**	**15**	**15**	**14**	**15**	**14.5**	**15**
Weight of Evidence B: *Review specific on appropriateness of method*								
A clear definition of the participant sample (e.g., age, gender, context), to support with replication and applying research findings into practice.	1	0.5	1	1	1	1	1	1
Did the authors use a range of data gathering methods (e.g., drawings, mind-maps) to explore the views of participants? (Boswell, Douglas-Osbourn, Halkyard & Woods,2021).	0.5	0.5	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	1	0.5

	Bayfield (2023)	**Furey (2020)**	**Glynn (2019)**	**Hyde (2019)**	**Kelly (2021)**	**Palmer (2022)**	**Roberts (2021a)**	**Schofield (2017).**
Did the authors provide the participants with recognition for contribution and offer a follow-up? (Boswell, Douglas-Osbourn, Halkyard & Woods,2021).	0.5	1	1	1	0	0.5	1	0.5
Total WoE B =	**2**	**2**	**3**	**2.5**	**1.5**	**2**	**3**	**2**
Weight of Evidence C: ***Review specific on focus/approach of study to review question***								
1) A clear exploration of CEIs' individual experiences.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2) Research focus related to PfA domains as outlined in the SEND CoP 2014 (DfE & DoH, 2015).	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	1	1
Total WoE C =	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**1.5**	**2**	**2**	**2**
WoE D =	**17**	**19**	**20**	**19.5**	**17**	**19**	**19.5**	**19**

Appendix B.

Organisation of Initial Codes, Descriptive Themes and Analytical Themes for Thematic Synthesis.

Codes (including number of studies which feature codes)	Descriptive Themes	Analytical Themes
Being responsive to CEIs' needs (1)	Being Kept in Mind	The Importance of Supportive and Trusting Relationships
Lack of availability (1)		
Interest in CEIs' goals (1)		
Importance of communication (1)		
Lack of communication – impact on relationship (2)		
Importance of consistent contact (1)		
Professionals initiating contact (2)		
Ongoing availability (1)		
Frequency of support (1)		
Prioritising CEI (1)		
Coronavirus – feelings of loneliness and isolation (2)		
Reliable support (1)	Trust	
Developing relationships (3)		
Seeking supportive networks (1)		
Issues with communication (1)		
Respect/disrespect (1)		
Not being treated as an adult (1)		
Being treated like an adult (1)		
Helping relationship- power imbalances (2)		
Maintaining relationships (1)		
Importance of face-to-face contact (1)		
Being labelled as vulnerable (1)		
Mistrust in the education system (1)		
Mistrust in systems (2)		
Importance of trust (3)		
Disengagement with services (1)		
Emotionally supportive environment (1)	Empathic Approach	
Personalised support (3)		
Importance of understanding individual experience of transition (3)		

Importance of supportive adults (workplace) (1)		
Feeling cared for (3)		
Responsive to emotional needs (4)		
Importance of emotionally supportive relationships (4)		
Emotional support (2)		
Emotional support from personal relationships (1)		
Personalised emotional support (1)		
Therapeutic approach (3)		
Worries around requesting help (1)		
Contractual relationships (2)		
Genuine interest (2)		
Low expectations for CEI (2)	Empowerment	
Support and encouragement (1)		
High aspirations for CEI (2)		
Defying expectations (1)		
Reassurance (1)		
Professionals not giving up on CEI (1)		
Codes	**Descriptive Themes**	**Analytical Themes**
Self-reliance (1)	Accessibility to Support	A Sense of Safety and Security
Communication issues (4)		
Knowledge and experience of others offering support (1)		
Importance of key adults (2)		
Systemic issues impacting on support (1)		
Support for transition from peer mentor (1)		
Timeliness of support (5)		
Availability of support (7)		
Lack of support (3)		
Knowing where to access support (3)		
Difficulty understanding systems – finances (3)		
Difficulty accessing support (2)		
Digital poverty – impact on access to support (1)		
Challenges with online learning (1)		
Coronavirus – accessibility to support (2)		

Coronavirus and parenthood – availability of resources (1)		
Financial support (2)	Having Basic and Emotional Needs Met	
Targeted approach to emotional needs		
Unmet emotional needs (2)		
Importance of stable housing (2)		
Lack of emotional support (2)		
Support from families (3)		
Practical support (5)		
Lack of support network (1)		
Limited social capital (1)		
A sense of connection (1)		
Support from key adults (1)		
Limited support at home (1)		
Coronavirus – impact on mental health (2)		
Coronavirus – a need for contact (2)		
Regular contact (3)	Predictability and Consistency	
Contact with a named person (3)		
A sense of security (1)		
Variation in support offered by LAs (1)		
Inconsistency in support (2)		
Insufficient support (1)		
Tailored support (4)		
Quality and type of information shared (2)		
Constraints on support (1)		
Issues with communication – type of information (1)		
Differences with satisfaction of support (1)		
Equity of support (1)		
Importance of stability (5)		
Family contact – sense of security (2)		
Coronavirus – impact on employment (2)		
Coronavirus – impact on stable housing (2)		
Coronavirus – impact on financial security (2)		
Participation – security (1)		
Codes	**Descriptive Themes**	**Analytical Themes**
Lack of choice in planning process (2)	Being Listened to	Participation in Decision Making Processes

Influence of negative experiences on participation (1)		
Never listened to (1)		
Informed decision making (1)	Rights and Entitlements	
CEI rights (4)		
Being made aware of rights (2)		
Extra-curricular activities to support decision making (1)	A Sense of Agency	
Participating in planning processes (1)		
Choice over engagement (1)		
Utilising skills and interests (1)		
A sense of agency (2)		
Self-determination (2)		
A sense of accomplishment (2)	Self-determination and Resilience	
Emotional readiness for work (1)		
Low self-efficacy (1)		
Resilience (3)		
Coping with difficult situations in the past (2)		
Ending the negative trajectory (1)		
Codes	**Descriptive Themes**	**Analytical Themes**
Feelings of uncertainty (2)	Abrupt Endings and Uncertainty	Accelerated Adulthood.
Impact on financial support (2)		
Housing instability (2)		
coronavirus – impact on transition plans (2)		
Abrupt endings (3)		
Loneliness and isolation (4)		
Accelerated adulthood and anxiety (1)		
Accelerated adulthood – decision making (1)		
Accelerated adulthood and homelessness (1)		
Emotional challenges (1)		
Accelerated adulthood (2)		
Coronavirus – impact on transition planning (2)		
Difficulty planning for the future – personal circumstance (1)	Influence of Previous Care Experience	
Reflection and planning (1)		
Care experience and multiple transitions (1)		
Risk of vulnerability resurfacing (1)		
Influence of previous experience of rejection (1)		

Impact of previous behaviour on opportunities in adulthood (1)		
Past experience and perceived self-efficacy (1)		
Placement stability and preparation (1)		
Additional packages to support transition (1)	Opportunities for Skill Development	
Practical support (3)		
Practical challenges of independent living (1)		
Influence of care placement on development of skills (1)		
Modelling of skills (2)		
Insufficient opportunities (1)		
Importance of preparation (1)	Importance of Gradual Transition	
Transition planning as a one-off event (1)		
Limited transition planning (1)		
A gradual approach to transition (2)		
More time to adjust (4)		
Feeling overwhelmed (1)		
Accelerated transition – impact on decision making (2)		

Appendix C.

Prevalence of studies contributing to Descriptive Themes in Thematic Synthesis.

Descriptive Themes	**Study (1st author)**							
	Bayfield (2023)	**Furey (2021)**	**Glynn (2019)**	**Hyde (2019)**	**Kelly (2021)**	**Palmer (2022)**	**Roberts (2021a)**	**Schofield (2017)**
Accessibility to Support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Having Basic and Emotional Needs Met	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Predictability and Consistency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Empathic Approach	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Being Kept in Mind	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Trust	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Empowerment	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓

Descriptive Themes	Bayfield (2023)	Furey (2021)	Glynn (2019)	Hyde (2019)	Kelly (2021)	Palmer (2022)	Roberts (2021a)	Schofield (2017)
Abrupt Endings and Uncertainty	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Opportunities for Skill Development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Influence of Previous Care Experience	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Importance of Gradual Transition	✓		✓	✓		✓		
Self-determination and Resilience	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Agency	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Rights and Entitlements		✓	✓			✓	✓	
Being Listened to			✓		✓			✓

Appendix D.

Ethical Approval Letter (May 2023).

The University of Nottingham
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Friday 19th May 2023

Dear Taylor Stone & Yvonne Francis

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'Investigating the Role of Educational Psychologists in Supporting Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood from the Earliest Years.'

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the Committee's approval.

However:
Please note the following comments from our reviewers.

Reviewer One:

- There is little information on how interviews will be recorded and the process of safe transition from the recording device to electronic storage of audio and transcript data. If using a portal audio recorder, ensure it is password protected and upload to a GPRD compliant university storage system (e.g., OneDrive) as soon as possible and then delete from the portal recorder.
- In some parts of the application, you state that audio recordings will be stored on an encrypted memory stick. The university does not recommend this method - please talk to IT and research support for GDPR compliant options.
- Participants should be given a timeline for when data withdrawal is no longer possible in the research cycle and process (after analysis and data reporting). Currently it reads as though it will be possible indefinitely.
- Consider adding to the consent form for the focus groups a statement asking participants to agree to keep information discussed by others during the focus groups confidential.
- "I give permission for the written transcript of my interviews from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected." This standard statement on the consent form was likely written with numerical studies in mind where anonymization is easier. I would instead suggest that you state your processes for ensuring confidentiality but acknowledge this is a possible possibility that others may identify them if they have shared these experiences with others (but discuss the small/unlikely possibility of it).
- Clarify the time frame that participants can withdraw from the study after the data have been gathered.
-

Ethical Approval Letter (May 2023) (continued).

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Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.
Yours sincerely

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix E.

Reflexive Commentary from Recruitment Process.

Reflexive Commentary – December 2023

The difficulties I've experienced with recruiting participants highlight the unique challenges that CEI experience in comparison to the general population. During one meeting with a prospective participant, they shared their 21st birthday was approaching, though they would not be spending it with their family and friends. I empathised with the participant as I understood the emotions associated with calendar events, such as significant birthdays, which can feel triggering and invoke heightened emotions due to not spending it with family. Prior to engaging in an individual interview, the gatekeeper notified me that the participant shared it would not be the right time to participate in an individual interview to support their own emotional wellbeing. I feel that the initial meeting with the participant was significant for supporting the participant with this decision, as it provided them with the space and time to reflect on whether they gave their informed consent. This highlights the importance of initial meetings with participants, which will be paramount for ethical practice throughout the recruitment process.

The initial meetings were conducted in the November/December of the Autumn Term 2023, leading up to the Christmas period. I understand that Christmas time can feel particularly challenging for individuals with care experience, which may be influencing the difficulty I'm experiencing with recruitment attempts. I feel that recruitment during early Spring Term (January-February 2024) will be more appropriate, though I will need to ensure that this does not coincide with other calendar events such as Mother's and Father's Day, which may feel particularly triggering for CEI. I need to be mindful that there may still be significant milestones/anniversaries that CEI experience throughout the year which may impact upon their emotional wellbeing and suitability to take part, which will be supported via liaison with gatekeepers.

Reflexive Commentary from Recruitment Process (continued)

Reflexive Commentary – December 2023

Following difficulties that I've experienced with recruitment; I need to consider an approach which will be feasible within the time limits of the study. My priority is to place the voice of CEI at the centre of the research, and I feel an IPA study meets this aim in illuminating the individual voice of CEI. I will amend the design of the research to reflect this as opposed to a two-phase qualitative design. Whilst the rationale for my originally proposed design was to explore how CEI voice can have an *influence* on EP practice via discussing the findings in a focus group, I feel I can meet this aim via discussing the findings during a CPD session in my current service to explore how CEI voice can have implications for practice. Following discussion with my academic tutor, we've agreed that I will make an application for minor amendments to the ethics committee.

Reflexive Commentary – January 2024

The difficulties I've experienced with recruitment has prompted my reflections upon the challenges involved in recruiting participants from vulnerable groups, such as CEI. Following unsuccessful attempts at contacting VSs to discuss recruitment of CEI participants, I began to hypothesise that my difficulties in receiving responses were associated with professionals' unfamiliarity with me, which may have impacted upon their support and trust in the research. Consequently, I contacted a VS with whom I'd had prior contact, which successfully supported the recruitment of five CEI participants. I feel that the recruitment process was supported by the VS's understanding of my positioning within the research, including my role as a TEP and researcher at the University of Nottingham. The VS were reassured that potential ethical risks were mitigated against following ethical approval received from the university. Subsequent approval was also required from the Head of Service within the LA where the remaining CEI participants were recruited, reflecting the hierarchical process often required when recruiting participants from vulnerable groups, such as CEI whereby gatekeepers control access whilst safeguarding participants.

Appendix F.

Ethical Approval for Minor Amendments (November 2023).

The University of Nottingham
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School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

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Tuesday 14th November 2023

Ref: **S1553 Chair Approval Minor Amendments**

Dear Taylor Stone and Yvonne Francis,

Your name and contact details:- Taylor Stone, taylor.stone@nottingham.ac.uk
Today's date:- 27.10.2023
Title of new project: Investigating the Role of Educational Psychologists in Supporting Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood from the Earliest Years

Details of the previous study:
Applicant: Taylor Stone
Title: Investigating the Role of Educational Psychologists in Supporting Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood from the Earliest Years
Date of approval: 19.05.2023
Reference number (if known): S1519

As Chair of the Ethics Committee I have considered your request and I am happy to grant approval for the following changes:

List of significant changes in the proposed study. This list should include any changes which could potentially impact on ethical risks of the work e.g., moving from student participants to vulnerable adults; use of sensitive stimulus materials; changes in remuneration or consent procedures:

1. Extension of participant age range from 16-18 to 16-25 years.
The previously approved study (ref. S1519) aimed to explore the experiences of care experienced individuals (CEI) aged 16-18 years old however, the new project proposes to extend the age-range of participants to 16-25 year.
This extended age range is in line with the most recent Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (Department for Education; DfE, 2015) which saw the extension of the role of Educational Psychologists (EPs) to work with children and young people up to the age of 25 years.
The extension in age range also aims to extend opportunities to CEI over the age of 18 up to 25 years to share their experiences in relation to the preparation for adulthood, following discussions with their Personal Advisor from the age of 16 years.
The same inclusion criteria for participation will apply in relation to the following:
• Attend a further education setting (e.g., college, sixth form);
• Communication skills which enable them to express their views and participate in a semi-structured interview.

Ethical Approval for Minor Amendments (November 2023) (continued)

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In addition to the ethical risks considered in the previously approved study, the following ethical risk has been identified following extension in participant age range from 16-18 to 16-25 years:

• Recruitment of participants who are vulnerable adults.

The following actions, informed by the University of Nottingham's Ethical Risks Checklist and British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021a) and BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021b), will be taken to ensure ethically sound procedures in relation to the identified risk:

• Participants will be recruited via a gatekeeper at their further education setting who will have primary responsibility over supporting the mental health and emotional wellbeing of care experienced individuals (e.g., college care coordinators). I will liaise with the gatekeeper during the recruitment process to ensure that pastoral support is available for participants following their participation in individual interviews and that appropriate support services are identified. The gatekeeper will attend the initial meeting with the participant and I to explore the purpose of the research and will be available immediately after the interview has taken place.

• Initial meetings will take place with prospective participants to explain the purpose of the research and engage in rapport building prior to the individual interviews taking place. This will also be important for answering any questions or exploring any concerns prior to taking part in the individual interview to ensure that the participants are able to provide valid and informed consent. During the initial meeting, the following areas will be discussed:

o Aim of the project and how findings will be shared with them.

o Method of collecting data (audio recording of individual interview followed by transcription of interview) and time associated with data collection (approx. 90 minutes for individual interview).

o Measures to protect anonymity and confidentiality, including selection of pseudonym to include within interview transcript.

o How their personal data will be used and stored in line with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

o Prospective participants will be reminded to only share information that they feel comfortable with discussing.

o The opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time with no adverse consequences and to have supplied data destroyed upon request up to 6 weeks after the data has been collected.

o Contact details of myself and my research supervisor.

o Debriefing arrangements, i.e., discussion of debrief form (submitted with previously approved study) and follow-up with gatekeeper responsible for providing emotional wellbeing support (i.e., college care

Ethical Approval for Minor Amendments (November 2023) (continued)

The University of Nottingham
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coordinator).

- As discussed in the previously approved study, the Best Practice for Educational Psychologists in Gaining Consent guidance (Association of Educational Psychologists; AEP, 2022) will be used to inform decisions regarding the mental capacity of CEI to make an informed decision to participate in the research.
- Prior to completing individual interviews, I will familiarise myself with safeguarding policies of the further education settings in which the research will be held and identify the Designated Safeguarding Lead. Participants will be made aware during the initial meeting and individual interview that all information shared will be confidential, unless I perceive that they or others are at risk of harm, in line with safeguarding procedures. I will also follow this up with the safeguarding procedures in the Local Authority where I am currently completing the research. As I have previous experience of working with vulnerable children and young people, such as CEI, I feel competent in my ability to engage in practice that protects their emotional wellbeing and follow appropriate safeguarding procedures.
- A debrief will be completed with participants following the individual interview, whereby a debrief sheet will be shared and the participant will have a follow-up with the gatekeeper (e.g., college care coordinator).
- To address my own psychological and physical safety and wellbeing, I will engage in regular supervision with my research supervisor, Yvonne Francis (Specialist Senior Educational Psychologist and Academic Tutor).

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix G.

Ethical Approval for Minor Amendments (January 2024).

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tel: +44 (0)115 846 7403 or (0)115 951 4344

Monday 15th January 2023

Ref: **S1579 Chair Approval Minor Amendments**

Dear Taylor Stone and Yvonne Francis,

Your name and contact details:- Taylor Stone (taylor.stone@nottingham.ac.uk)
Today's date:- 09.01.2023
Title of the new project:- An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood.
Are you an undergraduate, postgraduate or staff? PGR

Details of the previous study:
Applicant: Taylor Stone
Title: Investigating the Role of Educational Psychologists in Supporting Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood from the Earliest Years
Date of approval: 14.11.2023
Reference number (if known): S1553.

As Chair of the Ethics Committee I have considered your request and I am happy to grant approval for the following changes:

List of significant changes in the proposed study. This list should include any changes which could potentially impact on ethical risks of the work e.g., moving from student participants to vulnerable adults; use of sensitive stimulus materials; changes in remuneration or consent procedures:
1. Change in research design.

- The previously approved study (S1553) proposed a two-phase qualitative design. This included an initial phase using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to complete individual interviews with care experienced individuals (CEI) to understand how they make sense of their experiences of preparing for adulthood. The subsequent phase proposed to share the findings from the CEI interviews within a focus group of Educational Psychologists (EPs) to understand how the views of CEI could have implications for the practice of EPs.
- The proposed amendment to the previously approved study includes a change to the research design whereby the new project will incorporate a single-phase qualitative design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This will focus on illuminating the voice and experiences of CEI and consequently, the second phase with EP participants will no longer be completed due to the timescale of the study. This is due to difficulties that have been experienced with recruitment of CEI participants and subsequently, as approved in the previous study, CEI participants are being recruited across LAs.
- I have taken steps to inform EP participants who had agreed to participate in the second phase of the study that this will no longer be taking place. However, the findings from the

Ethical Approval for Minor Amendments (January 2024) (continued).

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Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study with still be shared with EP participants to discuss implications for their practice.

2. Change in data collection method – data collection via virtual procedures.

- A subsequent proposed amendment to the new project includes a change to the data collection method whereby CEI participants can select whether they would like to complete a face-to-face/virtual interview (e.g., via Microsoft Teams or Skype). The amendment to data collection procedures in relation to completing virtual interviews (e.g., via Skype/Microsoft Teams), is proposed in response to the travel implications associated with recruiting participants from across England. An option for completing a face-to-face/virtual interview will also support participants to feel comfortable during the data collection process.
- The identified ethical risks associated with this proposed amendment are presented in Table 1 below. Actions to mitigate possible risks informed by the University of Nottingham's Ethical Risks Checklist, British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021a) and BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021b) are also presented.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.
Yours sincerely,

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix H.

Participant Information Sheet.

The University of Nottingham
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Participant Information Sheet

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood.

Ethics Approval Number: S1579

Researcher: Taylor Stone

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis

Contact Details:

Taylor ([redacted])

Yvonne ([redacted])

This is an invitation to take part in a research study to explore your experiences of preparing for adult life. You are being invited to take part as you have experience of being in care and have been involved in *Pathway Planning* with your Personal Advisor. Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Who?

My name is Taylor Stone, and I am studying to become an Educational Psychologist.

Educational Psychologists work closely with children, young people, schools, and families to help pupils in school with change they would like to see.

Why?

A document called the *Children and Families Act 2014* highlights the importance of children and young people being involved in decision making processes that directly affect them.

I am conducting this research because I think it is important for young people to have a voice in their preparation for adulthood.

What will I be asked to do?

If you choose to take part, I will ask you to complete a short questionnaire which will ask your age, gender, and age at which you started to have conversations around preparation for adulthood. You will then be asked to meet with me to complete an interview which will last up to 90 minutes. You can have a key adult with you if you would like. I will ask you some questions about your preparation for adulthood in relation to the following areas: ***employment, being happy, fit, and healthy, being part of the community and independent living.***

Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. You can choose to stop the interview at any time, and you do not have to say why. You can choose what you want to say and do not have to talk about anything that you do not feel comfortable about.

Participant Information Sheet (continued).

Where will the interview take place?

If you choose to take part, we can arrange a time and place to complete the interview that suits you. This can be done in person, or virtually via a platform such as Microsoft Teams or Skype. Please note that to complete a virtual interview you will need access to the internet and a quiet place free from distractions.

What happens to the data that is collected?

The questionnaire data will help me to get an overview of the young people who took part in the study. This may also be included in a table in my research report to give readers an overview.

The interview will be audio recorded on Skype/Microsoft Teams and a password protected device (Dictaphone). The recording will then be transferred into a secure file on OneDrive, which will be deleted once I have transcribed the recording (typed out what you have said). I will look for themes in your answers which will be shared with Educational Psychologists to see how they can support care experienced young people with their preparation for adulthood.

How will my information be kept private?

Only I will hear the audio recording of your interview. Once I have written down what you have said, I will delete the recording. All the personal information you share with me will be confidential. To do this, I will change your name in the write-up and ensure that you cannot be identified. All information will be stored securely and in line with the Data Protection Act. **The only time I would need to tell someone about what you said to me would be if I thought that you or others were not safe.**

What happens if I do not want to take part/change my mind?

Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. You can choose to stop the interview at any time, and you do not have to say why.

You can still choose to withdraw from the research following the interview without providing any reason. This will be absolutely fine, and I will remove your data from the research.

It will not be possible to remove your data once analysis has started. Please let me know within 6 weeks of completing the interview if you would like your data removed.

What will the research findings be used for?

It is hoped that your involvement in the research will inform the way in which Educational Psychologists support young people in care with their preparation for adulthood from the earliest years.

The findings will be typed up into my research paper (thesis) and shared with my university. This may also be made available online. A graphic illustration will also be created with the main findings from the study which you are welcome to have if you would like.

What happens next?

If you would like to take part, you will be asked to complete a consent form. I will then be in touch to arrange a date/time to meet with you.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to ask now. I am also happy to meet with you beforehand to discuss the research to help with your decision.

Please also refer to the Privacy Notice for collection of your personal data.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee) stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix I.

Participant Data Privacy Notice.

Research participant privacy notice
Researcher: Taylor Stone **(email)**
Supervisor: Yvonne Francis **(email)**

Personal data *refers to information that is collected about you, e.g., your name, gender, age.*

Privacy information for Research Participants.
For information about what the University of Nottingham must do with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data.
The University of Nottingham collects personal data under the terms of the University's Royal Charter for the purpose of advancing education and learning.
For this research, your personal data will be collected and included within a research paper (thesis) to explore the role of Educational Psychologists in supporting care experienced individuals' preparation for adulthood from the earliest years.

Legal basis for processing your personal data under GDPR.
There is something called a **legal basis** for processing your personal data under important guidance called the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This means that we need to be clear about why we are processing your personal data.
For the present research, the legal basis for processing your personal is Article 6 (1a) consent of the data subject. This means that you have given your consent for the researchers to process your personal data for the purpose of a research study that looks to explore the role of Educational Psychologists in supporting care experienced individuals with their preparation for adulthood.

How long we keep your data.
The University may store your data for up to 25 years and for a period of no less than 7 years after the research project finishes. The researchers who gathered or processed the data may also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research.
The researchers will keep your personal data safe in the following ways:

- Storing the audio recording from your interview in a password protected file on the University of Nottingham secure OneDrive (this will be deleted once the audio recording has been typed up word-for-word).
- Your name and other names that may have been mentioned in the interview (e.g., school/college, friends, other adults) will be replaced with a pseudonym (a made-up name). This means that you and others will not be identified.
- Your consent form will be scanned electronically and stored in a password protected file. The paper copy of your consent form will then be disposed of using a confidential waste bin.

Who we share your data with
Snippets of things that you shared during the interview may be included in the research paper that may be available online, but readers will not be able to identify you. Your data may also be stored in a secure place to refer back to in the future (data repository). It may also move with the researcher who collected your data to another institution (e.g., university) in the future.

Appendix J.

Researcher One Page Profile

Taylor

My Role

I am currently training to be an Educational Psychologist and work for [redacted] Educational Psychology Service. As part of my role, I work with children and young people aged 0 to 25 years to support their learning and emotional wellbeing. I am also a student in my final year at the University of Nottingham, and I am completing a research project called a thesis.

My Experience

I have worked in lots of different settings including nursery, primary and secondary schools. In my previous role as an Assistant Psychologist, I worked closely with the Virtual School, completing 1:1 and group work with children in care. This role was really important to me, as I am care experienced myself.

My Research Interests

I am really interested in hearing others' stories and experiences; particularly those who are or who have experience of being in care. I think that listening to unique stories can help to shape the support that is offered by services, such as Educational Psychology.

My Personal Interests

Outside of work, I like going for dog walks with my little sausage dog. Frank! I also like going to music events and trying my hand at baking - though admittedly, I'm not very good!

Appendix K.

Participant Consent Form.

School of Psychology

Consent Form

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood

Ethics Approval Number: S1579

Researcher: Taylor Stone

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis

Contact Details:

Taylor (emai)

Yvonne (email)

The participant should answer these questions independently. Please circle your responses:

I have read and understood the Information Sheet.	Yes	No
I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.	Yes	No
All my questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable).	Yes	No
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study, at any time and without giving a reason.	Yes	No
I give permission for my contact details to be collected for the purpose of organising the individual interview. These will not be included within the data analysis and will be deleted as soon as the interview has taken place.	Yes	No
I give permission for my interview to be audio recorded via the virtual platform (e.g., Microsoft Teams/Skype) and/or the external recording device (Dictaphone). This will not be shared with any other person.	Yes	No
I give permission for the anonymised written transcript of my interview from this study to be shared with other researchers.	Yes	No
Though all my information will be anonymous, I understand that people who know me really well may be able to identify me within the research if I have shared my experiences with them.	Yes	No

I understand that I need to let the researcher/s know within 6 weeks following participation in the interview if I would like my data removed prior to analysis.	Yes	No
I agree to take part in the study.	Yes	No

Participant Consent Form (continued)

"*This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time*."

Signature of the Participant: Date:

Name (in block capitals)

I have explained the study to the above participant, and they have agreed to take part.

Signature of researcher: Date:

Appendix L.

Participant Semi-structured Interview Schedule (with script).

Care experienced individual (CEI)
Semi-structured Interview Schedule

The University of Nottingham
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An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood.

Researcher: Taylor Stone
Supervisor: Yvonne Francis

Introduction

- **Re-introduce role and clarify purpose of the interview – to explore their experience of preparing for adulthood.**
  "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I really appreciate you giving up your time and I'm really looking forward to learning more about you and hearing about your experience of preparation for adulthood".

- **Clarify that the process will last for approximately 90 minutes (including introductions, demographic questionnaire, and debrief).**
  "The whole interview process is likely to last for around 90 minutes. I will start by asking you to complete a short questionnaire that will ask your age, gender, current living situation and age at which you began to have discussions around your preparation for adulthood. This will help other people who read the research know a little bit about the context of young people who are taking part. We will then start the interview. I will have a list of questions in front of me to prompt me to ask you about different topics in relation to your preparation for adulthood. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers, the most important thing is me listening to your experience. Also remember that you do not have to answer anything that you do not feel comfortable with".

- **Ask if the YP still consents to the interview being recorded.**

"The interview will be audio recorded so that I don't miss anything important that you say. Only I will listen to the recording so that I can type up the interview, which will be deleted straight afterwards. I won't use your name or any information that will let people know that it is you that I've spoken to. Do you still give your consent for the interview to be recorded? I will also use a fake name when I type up our interview. Have you thought of a name that you would like to use?"

Pseudonym:

- **Ask whether there is any information that requires clarification in the *Participant Information Sheet* and whether they would still like to take part.**
  "*Following our discussion that we had, is there anything else on the information sheet that you would like me to clarify*?"
  "*Would you still like to take part in the research?"*

- **Remind the young person of their right to withdraw and that they can request to have a break/leave the interview at any time.**
  "*Remember that you can have a break and/or stop at any time. You also do not have to answer questions that you don't want to. You can also withdraw from the research at any time and without giving a reason. If you change your mind within 6 weeks, please let X or me know.*

- **Safeguarding**
  "*Everything that we discuss during this interview will be confidential however, if I feel that you or others are at risk of harm then I will have to let someone know. This is to ensure that you and others are safe*".

Prior to interview starting, ask the young person to complete the demographic information questionnaire. This should take up to 10 minutes.

"*Thank you for completing the short questionnaire. I will now turn on the recording for the interview*".

Interview Schedule

RQ: *How do care experienced individuals make sense of their experiences of preparation for adulthood?*

Issue/Topic	**Main Question**	**Probes (to be used flexibly)**	**Prompts**
Opening Discussion/Rapport	So that I can get to know a little bit more about you, could you tell me a little bit about yourself?	What kind of things do you enjoy doing in your spare time? What are your hobbies/interests?	
Transition to Adulthood	As we've previously discussed, I'm interested in learning more about your experience of preparing for adulthood. I wonder if we could start with thinking about what adulthood means. How would you define adulthood?	What does adulthood mean to you? When you think of adulthood, what are the main things that come to mind? How would you describe what adulthood means to another person?	Could you tell me more about that?

	What was it like when you first began having discussions around preparing for adulthood?	When did you start to have those discussions? What were discussions centred around? Who was there to support you?	What were you thinking at the time? How did it make you feel?
Refer to printed handout with PfA domains. "*We're going to look at this sheet to help you think a little bit more about your experience of preparation for adulthood in relation to the following four areas: lifelong learning and employment, being part of the community, being happy, fit and healthy, and independent living***".**			
Lifelong Learning and Employment (i.e., Higher Education and/or Employment)	Please could you tell me about your current experience in [post-18 EET] so far?	What support did you receive for helping you understand different educational/vocational routes? When did you begin to have discussions around post-16 educational/vocational routes? What helped/what would you change?	How do you feel about your [post-16 EET] experience?

Being Part of the Community (i.e., Participating in Society)	What does being part of a community mean to you?	If you had to define community to another person, what would you say? When you think of community, what is the first thing that comes to mind? What support did you receive for understanding how to be part of your community during your preparation for adulthood? When did you begin to receive such support? What has helped/what would you change?	How does this make you feel? Can you tell me more about that? What does X mean?
Being Happy, Fit and Healthy (i.e., Being as Healthy as Possible in Adult Life).	How would you describe your current situation in relation to keeping yourself happy, fit, and healthy?	What support have you received for managing your health and emotional wellbeing? When did you begin to have discussions around managing your health and wellbeing?	How have these discussions made you feel?

		What has helped/what would you change? What is important to you when having such discussions?	
Independent Living	Please could you tell me about your current living arrangement?	What skills or knowledge were you provided with in preparation for independent living? When did these discussions begin? What helped/what would you change?	How did you feel during these discussions? What support was available to you?
Relationships and Support	Could you describe any important relationships or support systems that you had during your preparation for adulthood?	How did these help? What would you change/keep the same?	How did this make you feel?

Challenges and Coping Mechanisms	Were there any challenges you faced during your preparation for adulthood?	What helped overcome these challenges?	How did this make you feel?
Decision-Making	Please could you describe your role in decision making during your preparation for adulthood? What are your aspirations for the future?	How do you see your role in shaping your own future? What would you change/keep the same? What is important for professionals to know when supporting you with achieving your aspirations for the future?	
Closing	I have asked all the questions related to the topics that I wanted to explore with you. Is there anything else that you would like to share that I haven't asked you?	Do you have any further questions about the interview process?	

Participant Semi-structured Interview Schedule (with script) (continued).

Debrief

"*Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I really enjoyed getting to learn more about you and your experiences of preparation for adulthood. I will now upload the audio recording to my university OneDrive and delete from the device. I will type up the interview verbatim (exactly how you said it) and will make sure that there is no identifying information in the written transcript, using the pretend name that you have given to me. Remember that you are still welcome to withdraw from the study without giving reason. Please let me know within six weeks if you would like to withdraw from the study and I won't include your interview in the final write-up'*.

Provide and discuss debrief sheet. Meet with gatekeeper for final debrief.

Appendix M.

Participant Debrief Sheet.

School of Psychology

Debrief Sheet

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An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Care Experienced Individuals' Preparation for Adulthood.

Ethics Approval Number: S1579

Researcher: Taylor Stone

Supervisor: Yvonne Francis

Contact Details:

Taylor (email)

Yvonne (email)

Thank you for taking part in this study which has explored your experiences of preparation for adulthood.

What happens now?

The aim of this study was to explore your experiences of preparation for adulthood to inform the way that Educational Psychologists support care experienced young people. Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with me.

I will now look at the information that has been shared by all participants and complete an analysis to identify the main points. These will be shared with Educational Psychologists to see how they can help care experienced young people with their preparation for adulthood, based on the main points that were shared during the interviews.

The findings from this study will be written up into my research paper (thesis). A graphic will also be created which will highlight the main findings from the study which I can share with you if you would like.

I've changed my mind and wish I hadn't taken part.

This is ok. As your participation is completely voluntary, it is ok for you to withdraw at any time, and without giving a reason.

If you would like to withdraw from the study, please let your Personal Advisor know or contact me directly at (email) to let me know as soon as possible. I will then remove your data from the research and delete all information that you have shared with me.

Please note that it will not be possible to withdraw your data once I have started to analyse it. Please let me know within 6 weeks of completing the interview if you would like your data to be withdrawn.

I feel sad or worried about something I have spoken about. What can I do?

If, following the interview, you feel sad or worried about something you have spoken about, please speak to an adult that you trust.

You can also access support from the following:

- Your Personal Advisor (PA)
- **Kooth**
  Online emotional and mental wellbeing community whereby you can anonymously access support from a qualified counsellor, articles to support with emotional wellbeing and discussion boards on a range of topics.
  https://www.kooth.com/
- **Young Minds**
  Online guides and advice for requesting and accessing mental health support.
  You can text YM to 85258 any time to chat to someone if you're finding it hard to cope. You can also follow Young Minds on Instagram @YoungMindsUK for regular mental health tips and reminders.
  https://www.youngminds.org.uk/

Where can I get more information?

If you have any further questions regarding the research, please do not hesitate to contact me at (email) or my supervisor, Yvonne at (email)

Thank you again for taking part!

Taylor

Appendix N.

Demographic Questionnaire.

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Young Person Demographic Information Questionnaire

Ethics approval number: S1579
Researcher: Taylor Stone
Supervisor: Yvonne Francis

Thank you for joining me today to discuss your experiences of preparation for adulthood. Before we begin the interview, it would be really helpful if you could answer the following questions so that I can learn a little bit more about you before we start. Please do let me know if there are any questions that you are unsure of. You do not have to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable with.

1. **What is your age?**

   _____

2. **What is your gender?**

   _____

3. **What is your ethnicity?**

   _____

4. **What type of post-16 education, employment or training are you currently accessing? (please tick)**

College	☐	Sixth Form	☐	Volunteering	☐
Traineeship	☐	Apprenticeship	☐	Supported Internship	☐
School	☐	Other	_____		

5. **At what age did you go into care?**

   _____

6. **What is your current living arrangement?**

   _____

7. **At what age did you begin to have conversations around preparing for adulthood?**

   _____

Please hand this back to me when you have finished, and we can begin the interview – thank you! 😊

Appendix O.

Reflexivity during Data Analysis Process.

Excerpts from my Reflexive Diary during the Data Analysis Process for Bella.

Reflexive Commentary – (Step 1: Reading and Re-reading).

Whilst initially reading through the transcript and recording my initial thoughts, I found that I was often trying to apply theory to interpret Bella's experiences, e.g., through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs when trying to understand their need to experience a safety and security. I felt this approach was influenced by my role as a TEP, as I often understand CYPs' experiences through application of psychological theory and research. However, for the purpose of making sense of Bella's experiences, I needed to put this aside to engage in an inductive approach to understanding how Bella was making sense of their experience, by going back to the experience itself.

Reflexive Commentary – (Step 2: Exploratory Noting).

Aligning with my critical realist ontological position, I found myself interpreting Bella's experience in relation to the context within which their experience was situated. For example, via the influence of causal mechanisms such as support from the LA, and how this may have been influenced by wider governmental policy. Whilst engaging in this process, I found that sometimes I began hypothesising around explanations for their experiences, which again I felt to be influenced by my role as a TEP whereby I adopt a scientist-practitioner mindset. Therefore, it was important that I focused upon my role as a researcher, and my phenomenological epistemological approach to creating knowledge through my interpretation of their experience, as opposed to finding an explanation for it.

Whilst making sense of Bella's experience, I found myself reflecting upon my own care experience. This helped me to consider Bella's experience from their perspective as I could situate myself in the context of their experience. I continuously reflected upon the influence of my care experience, and where there were similarities and areas of divergence in our shared experiences. This process of bracketing was paramount to minimise the influence of my own bias upon interpretation of Bella's experience, though I was mindful that complete separation would not be possible.

Reflexive Commentary – (Step Three: Constructing Experiential Statements).

I found this step to be a challenging part of the process, as I aimed to ensure that I was simultaneously capturing the essence of Bella's experience and incorporating my interpretation. Whilst the purpose of this step was to construct experiential statements using my exploratory notes, I found that I would often go back to the transcript to ensure that my interpretations were grounded in the original data. Peer supervision with a fellow IPA researcher supported with ensuring that my experiential statements reflected my interpretation of how Bella made sense of their experience, as opposed to a descriptive summary. Continuous personal reflection was crucial at this stage to ensure that my experiential statements captured my interpretation of Bella's experience as opposed to my own. I also needed to ensure that I was not focusing upon themes within the data at this stage, to ensure that I was focusing upon the individual parts of Bella's experience to understand the whole.

Reflexive Commentary – (Step Four/Five: Searching for Connections across Experiential Statements and Naming the PETs).

During this stage, I found that I had constructed a large volume of experiential statements which felt quite overwhelming. This prompted me to look back at the original transcript to ensure that my experiential statements had captured my interpretations rather than descriptive summaries. This reflected the iterative and inductive cycle of IPA, as I used the steps flexibly to support my interpretation of Bella's experience.

To look for connections across experiential statements, I cut them up and spread them randomly on a table so that I could fully immerse myself in the data. Whilst looking for connections, I found myself referring back to the original data to ensure that connections reflected shared patterns of meaning. I found that this process took me a significant amount of time, which may have been because it was my first time engaging in this process. Peer supervision with fellow IPA researchers supported me during this process, e.g., via suggestion of placing experiential statements on top of the other where there were similar meanings. I engaged in a continuous process of naming the PETs to ensure that they accurately reflected my sense making of Bella's experience. I found that these were continuously refined throughout the analysis and write-up stage as I gained a deeper understanding of their experience.

Appendix P.

Example of IPA Exploratory Noting and Constructing Experiential Statements (Bella).

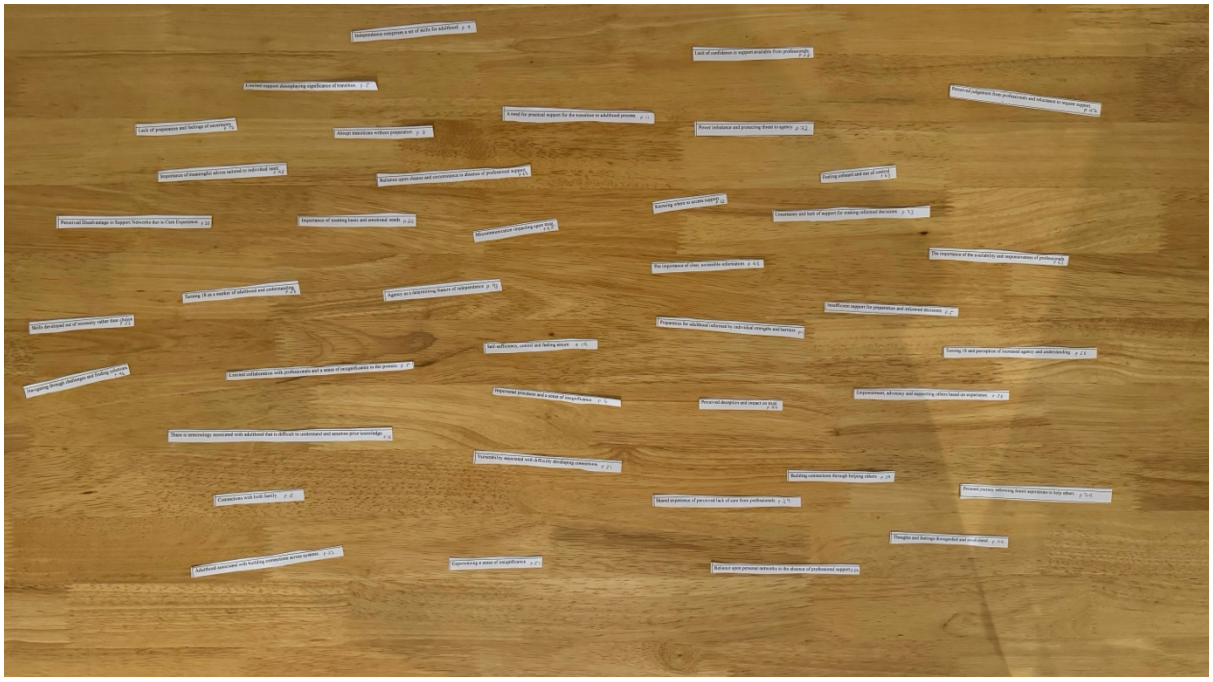
Experiential Statements	Original Transcript	Exploratory Notes Descriptive /Linguistic/Conceptual
Insufficient support for preparation and informed decisions.	I: Can you tell me what it was like when you began having discussions around preparing for adulthood? B: Uhmm, I didn't really have many discussions about it before I was actually doing the process of moving out into my own place. I think I only met with my PA like twice about it. I: Mmhm. B: And that's probably it. And then, I was put on that register where you pick a house and then that was it. Like I didn't really have more than two discussions. I: So, were discussions around living independently? B: Yeah, like even then I didn't really get any kind of conversation about it, it was more about the process of moving into the house and nothing else apart from that. **I:** Right ok, and how old were you when you were having those discussions, well, that involvement from your PA?	**Limited support before engaging in process of transitioning to adulthood. 'I think' – limited support that was received was not impactful.** **"Probably it" – insufficient. 'That register' – process not explained by professionals. Lack of support to make informed decisions.** **Conversations focused on process. Repetition of phrase – "didn't really" – a sense of insignificance around support received?**

Limited support downplaying significance of transition.	B:	Uhm, I got my PA when I was 17, so she had like a very very brief discussion just being like, so do you wanna move out or do you wanna do semi-independent kinda thing?	**Brief nature of conversations – insufficient support that does not go into much depth. Downplaying language – social care not considering significance of the event?**
	I:	Mmhm.	
Limited collaboration with professionals and a sense of insignificance in the process.	B:	Uhm yeah and then that's it. And then I said I wanted to be in independent living, and then I was just put on the register, and that was it.	**Autonomous decision – juxtaposed with *"I was just"* and "*that was it*". A sense of insignificance? Being *done to* rather than *with*?**
	I:	So, the involvement from your PA was mainly around the housing process and you putting your name down for what type of accommodation you wanted, is that right?	
Impersonal processes and sense of insignificance.	B:	Yeah, the [] website it's just like a website that loads of people go onto, it's full of like council houses and council flats. And they separate you into like banding and which houses suit you.	**A sense of insignificance? Council properties – influence of care leaver offer on secure housing? "They separate you" – lack of control in the process.**
	I:	Yeah.	
	B:	So, I'd only be allowed to bid on 1-bedroom things. But like a family would bid on the two-bedroom category and stuff like that.	**"I'd only be allowed" – contributing to sense of insignifance and lack of control in housing process?**

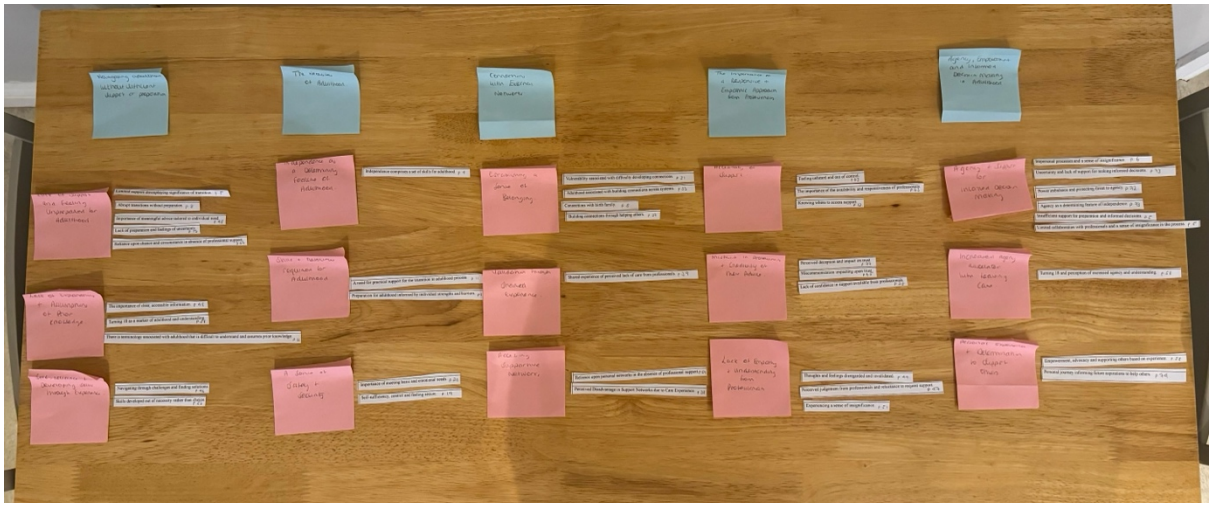
Appendix Q.

Example of Searching for Connections across Experiential Statements to create PETs (Bella).

Experiential Statements Pre-grouping



Experiential Statements Post-grouping (PETs and Subthemes)



Appendix R.

Example PET Table (Bella).

Each PET is shown in **UPPERCASE BOLD**, with subthemes presented in **lower case bold.** Linked experiential statements are presented underneath subthemes with associated quotations from the transcript.

A. NAVIGATING ADULTHOOD WITHOUT SUFFICIENT SUPPORT OR PREPARATION.

Lack of Support and Feeling Unprepared for Adulthood.

Abrupt transitions without preparation.

- *"Uhm it was very very difficult because, I had zero preparation for it"* (p. 8).

Lack of preparation and feelings of uncertainty.

- *"So, it made me just, it made me feel really lost and I was really confused". (*p. 17).

Reliance upon chance and circumstance in absence of professional support.

- *"I was just picking it off of the area that would be closest to my sister's college to help her, which luckily turned out to be a nice area"* (p. 67).

Importance of meaningful advice tailored to individual need.

- *"You get like useless leaflets when you leave care about who to contact for things, but they're just like filler stuff" (p. 48).*

Limited support downplaying significance of transition.

- *"When I was 17, so she had like a very very brief discussion"* (p.5)

Self-reliance and developing skills through experience.

Skills developed out of necessity rather than choice.

- *"Yeah, I could budget myself because my dad was rubbish at it".* (p. 52).

Navigating through challenges and finding solutions.

- *"It took me that long, to be able to figure out, whilst trying to balance all of these other adult things"* (p. 46).

Lack of Explanations and Assumptions of Prior Knowledge.

There is terminology associated with adulthood that is difficult to understand and assumes prior knowledge.

- *"Yeah, it was basically like they were just talking in jargon because they were like, oh you just pay your bills"* (p. 16).

The importance of clear, accessible information.

- *"Or even if they like just give you a little handout or something as a care leaver being like this is what you do"* (p. 48).

Turning 18 as a marker of adulthood and understanding.

- *"It's like. The second you turn 18, they see you as a different person who apparently should magically know everything"* (p.58).

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF A RESPONSIVE AND AN EMPATHETIC APPROACH FROM PROFESSIONALS.

Accessibility of Support.

The importance of the availability and responsiveness of professionals.

- *"They were like, okay, well, I'm gonna give you this number and if you've gotta ring housing repairs and I was like, thank you so much"* (p. 63).

Knowing where to access support.

- *"Well not even advice just like support with getting the right advice like who to speak to, what professionals to speak to*" (p. 32).

Feeling unheard and out of control.

- *"Anything that you could not understand, they will not be there for you. There will be absolutely no support"* (p.63).

Mistrust in Professionals and Credibility of their Advice.

Lack of confidence in support available from professionals.

- *"Uhm, I mean, there's not any professionals really because it should be my PA"* (p. 28).

Perceived deception and impact on trust.

- *"There was a lot of things on there, where people would be arguing with me and being like oh, oh that didn't happen"* (p. 77).

Miscommunication impacting upon trust.

- *"And then I was like, the website isn't working and then I rung them back and they were like, oh, why you doing that? Like because you told me to?"* (p.65).

Lack of Empathy and Understanding from Professionals.

Perceived judgement from professionals and reluctance to request support.

- *"I couldn't go to my PA because they'd just be like, well why haven't you done it, it's been two years*?" (p. 47).

Experiencing a sense of insignificance.

- *"And she wasn't there because she had, like, something important to do on that day or something".* (p. 51).

Thoughts and feelings disregarded and invalidated.

- *"They'd just be really awful instead and be like well why haven't you done it, you're an adult, you need to do it now, you need to actually get a grip and do it*". (p.44).

C. **THE NECESSITIES OF ADULTHOOD**

Independence as a Determining Feature of Adulthood

Independence comprises a set of skills for adulthood.

- *"It's like, independence is the umbrella term and then everything else falls underneath"* (p. 4).

Skills and Resources Required for Adulthood

Preparation for adulthood informed by individual strengths and barriers.

- *"For people without barriers in place, it would be to just be able to live by yourself without the constant relying on other people*" (p.3).

A need for practical support for the transition to adulthood process.

- *"I could like do the stuff that means you live in a house but I didn't have any of the like house management skills"* (p. 11).

A Sense of Safety and Security

Self-sufficiency, control and feeling secure.

- *"It's a lot better now because I know how to do the heating and how to pay my bills"* (p. 19).

Importance of meeting basic and emotional needs.

- *"With the current financial situation of society, a lot of people can't afford to just move out even if they're emotionally ready"* (p.20).

D. CONNECTIONS WITH EXTERNAL NETWORKS

Establishing a Sense of Belonging

Building connections through helping others.

- *"I had a good go at like trying my best to like become part of the community"* (p. 37).

Vulnerability associated with difficulty developing connections.

- *"I'd probably learn to be less trusting"* (p. 31).

Adulthood associated with building connections across systems.

- *"With adulthood and independence, it would be more to do with like neighbours, and like, peers from wherever you are"* (p. 33).

Connections with birth family.

- *"It was next to my sister's college so it meant that I would get to spend more time with her"* (p.8).

Validation through Shared Experience.

Shared experience of perceived lack of care from professionals.

- *"One of my friends in my class is a care leaver too and I've known him for quite a few years, and we had a conversation the other day about how crap our PAs were"* (p. 39).

Accessing Supportive Networks.

Reliance upon personal networks in the absence of professional support.

- *"Luckily, my boyfriend at the time, his dad had a van, so he helped me move my things"* (p. 54).

Perceived Disadvantage in Support Networks due to Care Experience.

- *"I think coming straight out of care, especially because care leavers, get like a lot less support than normal"* (p. 38).

E. AGENCY, EMPOWERMENT, AND INFORMED DECISION-MAKING IN ADULTHOOD

Agency and Support for Informed Decision-making.

Agency as a determining feature of independence.

- *"It is a good thing to have complete control over them because you will need that independent living"* (p. 73).

Power imbalance and protecting threat to agency.

- *"I don't want you to control my bank account, go away"* (p. 72).

Limited collaboration with professionals and a sense of insignificance in the process.

- "*I was just put on the register, and that was it*". (p.5)

Insufficient support for preparation and informed decisions.

- *"I didn't really have more than two discussions"* (p.5).

Uncertainty and lack of support for making informed decisions.

- *"You don't know what either of them means, but they will change your life"* (p. 73).

Impersonal processes and a sense of insignificance.

- "*I'd only be allowed to bid on 1-bedroom things. But like a family would bid on the two-bedroom category and stuff like that*" (p.6).

Increased Agency Associated with Leaving Care.

Turning 18 and perception of increased agency and understanding.

- *"They seem to think that as soon as you turn 18, you magically know how to do everything"* (p. 44).

Personal Experience and Determination to Support Others.

Empowerment, advocacy and supporting others based on experience.

- *"I'm very glad it happened to me first, because then I can stop all of this from happening to my sister*" (p. 58).

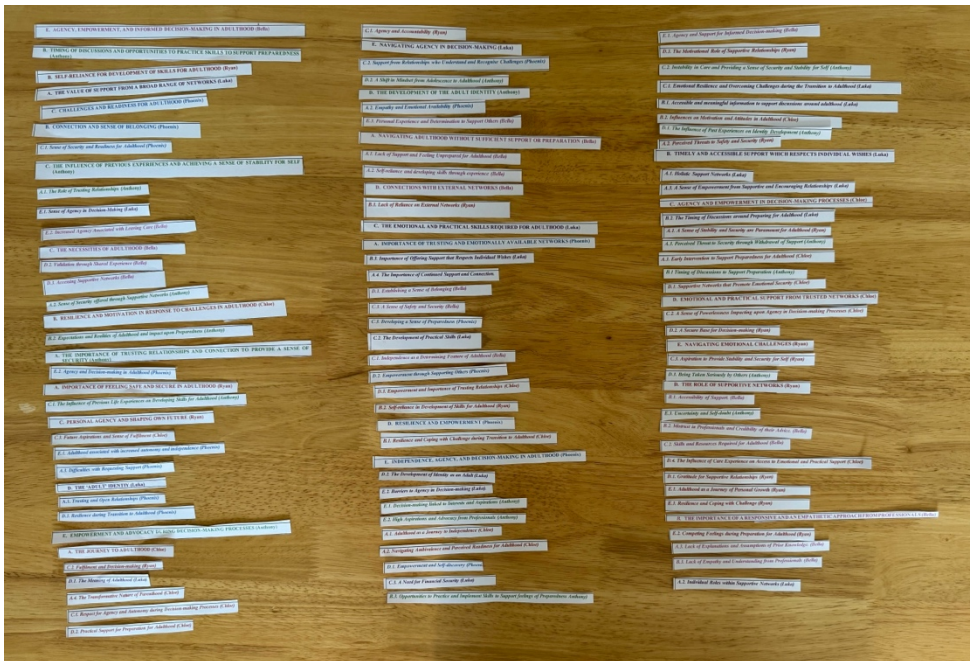
Personal journey informing future aspirations to help others.

- *"And become a social worker in their looked after children's team, where there are specifically children with a disability. Because I think that their voices need to be heard a lot more than they are"* (p.74).

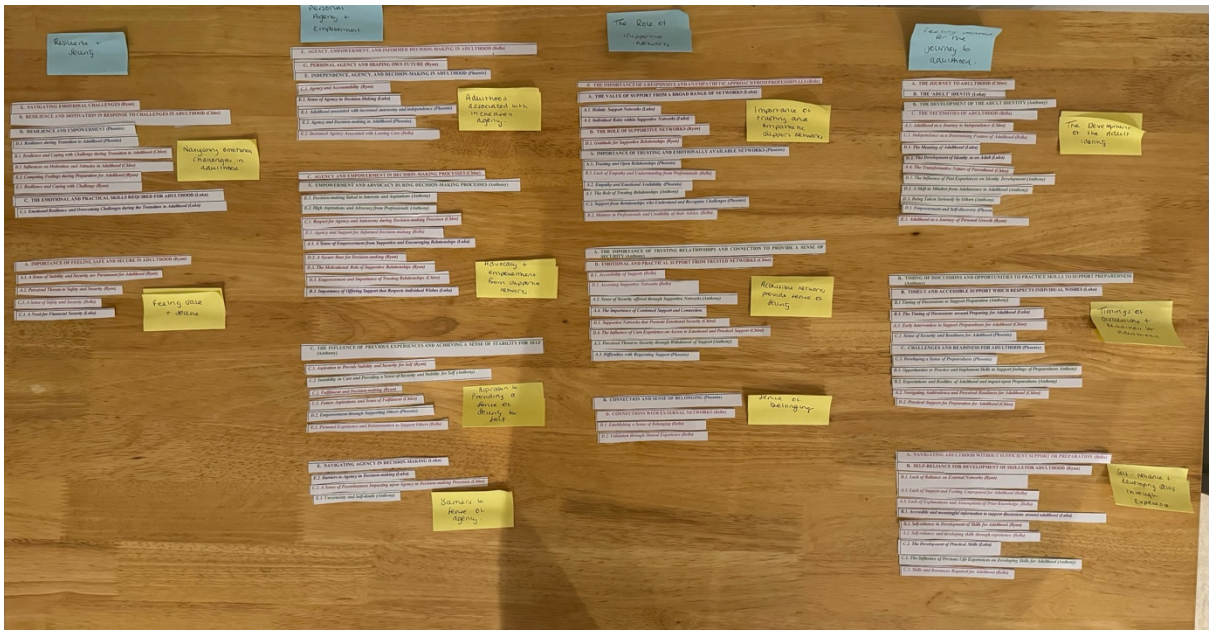
Appendix S.

Searching for Connections Across PETs to Develop GETs.

Pre-grouping of GETs with PETs and associated Subthemes



Post-grouping of GETs and Subthemes



NB GETs and subthemes were continuously refined throughout the analysis process.

Appendix T.

Table of GETs following Cross-case Analysis.

Each GET is shown in **UPPERCASE BOLD**, with subthemes presented in **lower case bold.** Linked experiential statements are presented underneath subthemes with associated quotations from the transcript.

A. THE JOURNEY TO ADULTHOOD

The Development of the Adult Identity

- *When you become an adult, you realise certain things that you don't realise when you're a kid which is normal* (Anthony, p.6).
- *Whenever I think about anything to do with adulthood it's like, independence is the umbrella term and then everything else falls underneath that in like different sections* (Bella, p. 4).
- *Not rely on other people and stuff. And it's a big step, isn't it really?* (Chloe, p. 5).
- *So, you still feel like a teenager. To keep that childlike self in yeah (laughs)* (Luka, 12).
- *Adulthood tends to give you a bit more freedom when in it when actually, as in your childhood, you didn't really have much freedom.* (Phoenix, p. 2).
- *You have to be financially stable to be prepared for adulthood. Because if you don't, then you're still living in, your childhood brain* (Ryan, p.5)

Personal Growth and Resilience

- *So, because I've went through all of this now. That's why I'm the man I am today* (Anthony, p. 28).
- *I'd probably learn to be less trusting* (Bella, p. 31).
- *Because I've had kids so early, like I've had to grow up a lot quicker as well. But you know what? I'm glad that I did* (Chloe, p.46).
- *Especially I was 18 and was again just moved into the property. Umm, there was a lot in my head* (Luka, p. 85).
- *I felt pride in myself like. Like, if this is what I'm capable of. Just think about like what my future could hold as well* (Phoenix, p. 24).

- *My whole drive to get my own adulthood back together because my childhood wasn't my, expectations of adulthood.* (Ryan, p.15).

Timing of Discussions and Readiness for Adulthood

- *So those times when they will talk to you about like things you need to do budgeting. But I feel like sometimes it might be too late* (Anthony, p. 11).
- *It was very very difficult because, I had zero preparation for it* (Bella, p.8).
- *Because there's some people that would be absolutely buzzing. But I would have found it quite daunting* (Chloe, p. 9).
- *But when it came to like, the bills and stuff that didn't come about until I was old enough to understand* (Luka, p. 76).
- *So, at the at the time my mind was a bit in chaos but, when everything settled down, I knew what I wanted* (Phoenix, p.4)
- *It's like, overwhelming and like anxiety just kicks straight in, you think, am I even gonna be able to do this?* (Ryan, p.11).

Feeling Safe and Secure

- *I'm always at my house because, like, it's the one stable place. I know it's there (*Anthony, p. 25).
- *Especially like with the current financial situation of society, a lot of people can't afford to just move out even if they're emotionally ready and things like that*". (Bella, p.20).
- *Cause the cost-of-living crisis has, it has been a lot. Especially like I think my rent has gone up twice since being in my property* (Luka, p. 24).
- *Having that stability in your life of, like, not just of mentally and physically, but also financially as well (Phoenix, p.3).*
- *My whole point of getting my own flat is to make sure me, is stable enough to look after me and my little brother* (Ryan, p.12).

B. AGENCY AND INFLUENCE IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES.

Agency and Influence in Decision-making.

- *I don't want to, force myself in doing something I'm not good at and fail* (Anthony, p.23).

- *I think that I should have had complete control over all those decisions* (Bella, p.73).
- *I've always felt like I can make my own decisions and that my voice is heard* (Chloe, p.44)
- *It's how I'm shaping it to be, and that is my plan* (Luka, p.98)
- *I do feel like, sometimes I'm not, you know, in a sense, as like sometimes when you get big headed, you can make, like rash decisions* (Phoenix, p. 36).
- *If you do a wrong action or wrong move, it's like a game of chess, you always have to play your people properly.* (Ryan, p. 51).

Sense of Fulfilment.

- *It's very rewarding. In the sense of like, I'm helping our young people, that's that's all I need* (Anthony, p. 55).
- *I'm gonna go to university to do social work and become a social worker in their looked after children's team, where there are specifically children with a disability. Because I think that their voices need to be heard a lot more* (Bella, p.74)
- *I'll move out and then I'l be sorted there and I'll literally have everything* (Chloe, p. 43).
- *The negative experiences I had in my life I cause I wanted to be, more positive and be that positive role model around the people around me* (Phoenix, p. 12).
- *You wanna enjoy yourself at work, you don't wanna be sat there looking at a machine going meh* (Ryan, p.6)

Sense of Powerlessness.

- *If it was like decisions about myself, then it's pretty like easy, but if I know it's gonna affect someone, then I'm a little like okay, cool. What do I need to do?* (Anthony, p. 55).
- *I don't want you to control my bank account, go away* (Bella, p. 72).
- *I might ask if he can send another e-mail questioning the lack of houses because it's, it's just ridiculous* (Chloe, p.34).
- *I mean kind of. I put my three places down and that was the 1st place I've got* (Luka, p. 93).
- *We are literally just the puppets. We don't know what's gonna happen* (Ryan, p.7).

C. THE ROLE OF SUPPORTIVE NETWORKS

Advocacy, Respect and Empowerment

- *He [support worker] was the one that pulled me through that process* (Anthony, p.21).
- *It was her [PA] that persuaded me to apply for it. So, I'm really grateful for that* (Chloe, p. 15).
- *Because she [friend] was the only one. Like you've got it, you can do it, you're awesome!* (Luka, p. 56).
- *He just goes, "there you go, the world's your oyster you've got a blank canvas here mate. "You build what you wanna build, you do what you wanna do"* (Ryan, p. 29).

Importance of Trusting, Non-judgmental and Empathic Relationships.

- *She's [support worker] like the kind of person that you feel like, I've known, for my whole life* (Anthony, p. 50).
- *I couldn't go to my PA because they'd just be like, well why haven't you done it, it's been two years* (Bella, p. 47).
- *My sister, she's 10 years older than me. So, like she looked after me a lot when we was growing up. So like, she always tells me what's what* (Chloe, p. 40).
- *They weren't horrible like, the strict side of things. Like, the reality of what it's like to live by yourself* (Luka, p. 20).
- *With my YPA, he listens to how I'm feeling at the time, and they all listen to like any problems or situations I'm going under* (Phoenix, p. 15).
- *He's not gonna go "aw you've messed up, that's the biggest mess up in your life"* (Ryan, p.30).

Accessible Relationships provide a Sense of Security.

- *People are willing to hear and listen to what I have to say and like if I'm really struggling about something. I do have people to talk to* (Anthony, p. 38).
- *Anything that can go wrong, like on a day-to-day basis or anything that you could not understand, they will not be there for you. There will be absolutely no support* (Bella, p.63)

- *Knowing that, there is support there and you're never really. You're never on your own* (Chloe, p. 24).
- *Luckily, the people I have now, they reach out to me if they don't hear from me for about a couple of days (Luka, p.84).*
- *I know that, that my sister and that is just a call away, that if I need to talk about anything. I talk to my sister, every day* (Phoenix, p. 21).
- *Until the age of twenty-five, our PAs will all be here, we've got a safety net then. If we fall, we've got something to catch us there* (Ryan, p.52).

The Influence of Care Experience on Access to Support

- *When you're in care, there's a lot of people you can seek help from* (Anthony, p.27).
- *One of my friends in my class is a care leaver too and I've known him for quite a few years, and we had a conversation the other day about how crap our PAs were* (Bella, p. 39).
- *I can turn to that can help me with it and I feel like it's just really nice to be able to know because let's say that I was never in care. I wouldn't have that sort of thing* (Chloe, p. 41).
- *I'm part of the care community, but they support, we support each other, that's the community* (Luka, p. 52).

D. DEVELOPING SKILLS FOR ADULTHOOD

The Development of Practical Skills.

- *Money management? It was the most important and it was like it took me a while, but I got there in the end* (Anthony, p. 52).
- *I could like do the stuff that means you live in a house, but I didn't have any of the like house management skills (Bella, p. 11).*
- *They give me money and showed me how to top up my gas and electric* (Chloe, p.35).
- *It was a good way as again, I learn by practical skills* (Luka, p. 21).
- *I would say budgeting, cooking, and shopping as well. Uhm, I would say another one is like your health as well, like sexual health* (Phoenix, p. 22).

Self-reliance and Developing Skills through Experience.

- *I was already doing that from a young age. So it's kind of like I'm already over the whole parent situation* (Anthony, p. 25).
- *I could budget myself because my dad was rubbish at it, so I basically paid his bills for him* (Bella, p. 52).
- *The skills. As again, the skills came in when I was. Like when I was a kid* (Luka, p. 75).
- *I didn't go off a piece of paper. I did that out my own thoughts* (Ryan, p. 47).