



“Ready or not?” Administrative cut-offs and the youth–staff readiness gap in leaving care in China

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Leaving care
Institutional childcare
Youth agency
Care-experienced young people
Fuliuyan

ABSTRACT

In China, young people are expected to exit state care at 18 or on completing education, yet the boundary between administrative “readiness” and lived preparedness remains unclear. This study examines how leaving care is imagined, made possible, and governed by those approaching exit and by staff responsible for preparation. Semi-structured online interviews in Mandarin with nine university-level care-experienced young people and eight staff were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis with cross-group comparison. Young people framed leaving as a negotiated process conditioned by plans, emotions, and material thresholds: sequenced or conditional pathways; “readiness work”; and reliance on the institution as both home/belonging and subsistence support, with housing and income decisive for timing. Staff, by contrast, cast leaving as a bounded administrative event: responsibility ends at the cut-off, with residual, relationship-based help and conditional medical support, while substantive supports were delegated to other agencies. Cross-cutting mechanisms included hukou transfer as a jurisdictional handover that reallocates responsibility for housing and benefits, fragmented interdepartmental mandates, and locality-dependent financing. Higher-education leavers faced dual exposure at graduation (labour-market entry plus withdrawal of food and lodging). Findings support shifting from cliff-edge exit to scaffolded transition via early and tapered planning, guaranteed housing bridges, a named interagency navigator, and temporary benefit continuity during hukou-related jurisdictional change.

1. Introduction

Each year, thousands of young people in China leave state care and are expected to “stand on their own” upon turning 18 or completing education, irrespective of whether they have secure housing, stable income, or durable support networks (Shang & Li, 2015). Policy discourse frames this transition as a normal, individualised step into adulthood (Liu et al., 2022). Yet evidence across contexts documents elevated risks of homelessness, labour-market insecurity, and social isolation in the early post-care years (Gilligan et al., 2025; Keshri, 2021; OECD, 2022; Radityaputra et al., 2024; Yin, 2025a; Zhao et al., 2025). This tension motivates a clear question: while leaving care is treated administratively as a completed outcome, how is it experienced by young people in practice, and how do institutional actors understand and enact “readiness” at the point of exit? In this paper, readiness refers to the threshold for independent living as defined and negotiated by young people and staff, including the material and relational conditions seen as necessary

to manage life after care. We address the question by bringing into dialogue accounts from care-experienced young people nearing exit and staff responsible for preparing them.

1.1. Leaving care as a process

Across welfare regimes, leaving care is widely conceptualised as a process rather than a discrete event, with systematic disadvantages—relative to non-care peers—across housing, education, employment, and wellbeing (Stein, 2012). Studies consistently report uncertainty as the signature of transition. Early, relational planning is associated with more confident accounts of independence, while late or generic preparation amplifies apprehension (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010; Daly, 2012). These findings challenge policy imaginaries that equate a legal birthday or graduation date with readiness and instead foreground the tempo and texture of preparation: when it begins, whose voice drives it, and how material supports are sequenced. Cross-context evidence

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2026.108946>

Received 10 November 2025; Received in revised form 11 February 2026; Accepted 2 April 2026

Available online 4 April 2026

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from England also underscores the practical content of this readiness gap. In a national survey and follow-up interviews, many care leavers reported leaving care too early and abruptly, lacking preparation for everyday independent living, and feeling isolated at the point of exit; sizeable minorities also reported limited involvement in planning, and little say over where they lived (Ofsted, 2022). Education and institutional engagement further shape how readiness is imagined and assessed. Disrupted schooling and lower attainment can narrow perceived possibilities, making improvements in educational experience a social justice as well as a developmental priority (Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008). Policy design and tailored guidance also matter, because the quality of institutional engagement before and after exit influences young people's appraisal of their prospects (Goddard & Barrett, 2008).

Material conditions, particularly housing, are central to whether readiness can be enacted. Stable accommodation underwrites planning horizons; precarious housing compresses them and heightens risk (Glynn & Mayock, 2023; Taylor et al., 2025). This shifts attention away from purely individual employability framings towards place-based conditions and resources. Security of tenure, affordability, and proximity to work or study become the conditions under which skills and motivation can be converted into functioning adult roles. Simultaneously, scholars warn against an overly individualised reading of readiness. Young people frequently interpret poverty and social assistance as structural features rather than personal failings (Loignon et al., 2012), aligning with capability perspectives that distinguish capabilities from the conversion factors, including income, housing, documentation, supportive relationships, required to realise them. Health-transition research reinforces this point. In long-term conditions such as epilepsy and chronic pain, early and tailored transition planning improves confidence in navigating adult services, suggesting that readiness is a relational and programmatic achievement rather than an inherent state (Camfield et al., 2012; Higginson et al., 2019).

Intervention evidence is cautiously encouraging but methodologically mixed. Career-readiness programmes for youth in foster care can build self-efficacy and practical skills, particularly when they include individualised support and real-world practice (Gates et al., 2018). Process studies show that when young people are co-authors of aftercare planning, perceived readiness and hopefulness rise (Glynn & Mayock, 2018), while workplace research suggests supportive employer and peer relations can stabilise early labour-market entry through emotional and practical social capital (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2020). Consistent with this overall pattern, a recent scoping review of life-skills development interventions for care leavers found a relatively small and diverse evidence base, spanning casework/holistic support, transitional housing, mentoring/coaching, and skills-training approaches; relational support and opportunities for practice-based learning were common threads but were not consistently specified or evaluated across studies (Cruz et al., 2025). Nevertheless, evaluations often face selection bias, short follow-up, and heterogeneous content, limiting generalisability and leaving uncertainty about which components are essential.

Finally, recent work highlights that readiness is also shaped by implementation conditions. In Queensland, young people who self-place in unapproved locations (e.g., sleeping rough, staying with friends) are frequently excluded from transition planning and formal supports, despite strengthened participation rights. This reveals an implementation gap where rights on paper do not translate into inclusive practice (Venables et al., 2025). The finding positions participation and voice not only as normative goods but as causal levers. Where young people's perspectives are marginalised, agency diminishes and readiness is experienced as contingent. Where voice is embedded in decisions, preparedness rises (Venables et al., 2024; 2025). Social capital also matters. Across African contexts, dense community ties and extended kin can provide emotional and practical buffers that bolster confidence in managing independence, though such supports are unevenly distributed and cannot substitute for guaranteed housing or income (Frimpong-Manso et al., 2025). Context-responsive aftercare models further

illustrate potential. For instance, in India, comprehensive, individualised support during COVID-19 improved stability and wellbeing (Modi & Kalra, 2022), but questions remain about sustainability, scalability, and reliance on non-state providers.

1.2. Knowledge gaps

These mechanism-focused insights are highly pertinent to China, where the institutional set-up for aftercare and the conditions of eligibility shape what support is possible at exit. China-based qualitative evidence highlights the unevenness of formal provision. Care leavers describe personal agency and sustained supportive ties with significant others (including staff, peers, and community members) as protective factors during leaving care and post-care adaptation, while also reporting substantial gaps in structured, reliable aftercare support that intensify reliance on informal networks at the point of exit (Yin, 2025b). At the system level, responsibilities are dispersed across departments and eligibility and benefit continuity are mediated by *hukou* (household registration) (Zhu, 2018). Fragmented mandates and uneven fiscal capacity are documented (Yin, 2024), yet we know less about how these structural features are perceived and navigated at the point of exit, or how frontline staff interpret their remit and constraints in practice.

Two further gaps sharpen the need for the present study. First, much anglophone scholarship is grounded in foster-care systems, with comparatively less attention to institutional care and the administrative architectures that condition access to support elsewhere. Second, studies often aggregate "care leavers" across pathways and ages (e.g., Harrison et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2025), obscuring distinctive experiences among those who remain in education, including higher education, where young people may combine credential accumulation with acute housing and income pressures at graduation. While the field endorses leaving care as a process (Anghel, 2011), operational details remain under-specified, including the duration of phased support, the non-negotiable elements (e.g., housing, income, health, relational continuity, participation), and the identity of the coordinating lead when responsibility is structurally dispersed. These omissions matter because they shape how readiness is defined, who is held accountable for it, and what happens when young people's lived thresholds for readiness do not align with administrative ones.

1.3. The current study

This study therefore prioritises care-experienced young people on a "school-leaver" pathway who have followed a sustained educational trajectory and expect to leave care after graduation (Yin et al., 2025), and considers their accounts alongside those of staff. This subgroup is analytically instructive because in China, young people typically leave care at age 18, or upon leaving education for those still in school/university at 18 (Shang & Fisher, 2017). Given this, higher education is positioned, both in institutional practice and policy discourse, as a legitimate route to self-reliance and thus as implicit evidence of readiness. University participation can also generate a "double transition" in which educational completion and care exit converge, frequently accompanied by a rapid reconfiguration of housing and income arrangements. Focusing on this pathway enables close analysis of how readiness is presumed, enacted, and contested where expectations of independence are particularly strong and where supports may be framed as time-limited because educational progression is treated as proof of preparedness. This purposive focus does not aim to represent all post-care trajectories; rather, it clarifies readiness-making mechanisms within a policy-salient pathway, while recognising that vocational and non-education routes may involve different timelines, resources, and institutional assumptions.

Drawing on interviews with care-experienced young people nearing exit and staff in residential childcare institutions in China (hereafter *Fuliuyan*), we examine (1) how "readiness" is defined and negotiated by

young people and staff, and (2) how organisational mandates and administrative practices shape what support is available at the boundary of exit. By bringing youth and staff perspectives into dialogue, the paper shifts attention from whether care leavers are “ready” to how readiness is produced, constrained, and allocated under structurally dispersed responsibility, with implications for strengthening transition practice and accountability.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

This article presents a secondary (re-)analysis of qualitative data generated for the first author’s PhD study (2020–2023). We work within an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, assuming that meanings are co-constructed in interaction and patterned by institutional context (Burns et al., 2022). Re-analysing extant qualitative data can yield new explanations by applying a fresh analytic lens to differently bounded questions, provided attention is paid to fit, context, and rigour (Bishop, 2007; Irwin & Winterton, 2012; Long-Sutehall et al., 2010).

Here, the original doctorate examined care experiences and youth transitions broadly; the present paper is more tightly bounded, focusing on “readiness” and the event-versus-process framing of leaving care by juxtaposing youth and staff accounts. This lens produced analytic yield beyond thematic relabelling by (i) re-aggregation of data around mechanisms that produce or constrain readiness, (ii) systematic cross-stakeholder comparison of how readiness is defined and operationalised by young people and by staff, and (iii) specifying boundary conditions and accountability claims linked to mandates and eligibility at the point of exit.

2.2. Setting and participants

Fieldwork for the doctoral study was conducted in mainland China in 2021 across multiple *Fuliuyan*. The original study recruited two groups: (i) young people with lived experience of receiving institutional care, including those who have left care and those who remain after 18 years old, and (ii) staff working in childcare institutions.

For this re-analysis, we purposefully selected nine youth interviews and eight staff interviews that contained rich material on imagined exits, preparation, supports, and organisational mandates (see Table 1). Youth were eligible if enrolled in higher education, with a history of institutional care, and within ~24 months of expected exit. Staff were eligible if they had direct responsibilities for children/young people in care and at least one year in post. We sought variation in gender, academic major/role, and time in care/employment to maximise informational breadth (Patton, 2014). Youth and staff are identified with pseudonyms CS and Staff, respectively; participant IDs are non-contiguous because they follow the wider doctoral sampling frame (only a subset is included here).

Importantly, youth and staff interviews were drawn from the same broader *Fuliuyan* fieldwork frame but from different sites within that frame. Interviews were therefore not recruited as matched youth–staff dyads, and staff participants were not the direct workers for the specific young people included in the youth subsample. We did not attempt case-level linkage between staff accounts and individual youth in order to preserve confidentiality and because the analytic focus is on comparing stakeholder perspectives on readiness-making and institutional mandates rather than on dyadic relationships within specific cases.

2.3. Sampling and recruitment

The doctoral project used purposive sampling, supplemented by snowballing for hard-to-reach population. Gatekeepers (e.g., institution directors) were approached via the first author’s personal networks and cold site visits and informed eligible individuals about the study;

Table 1
Participant demographics.

Care-experienced Young People (n = 9)					
Name Code	Age	Gender	Health status	Age in care	Years in care
CS01	21	F	Non-disabled	12	9
CS02	22	F	Cleft lip and palate	0	22
CS04	23	F	Congenital heart disease	11	12
CS05	21	F	Non-disabled	11	10
CS07	19	M	Non-disabled	12	7
CS08	20	M	Non-disabled	9	11
CS09	24	M	Non-disabled	9	15
CS11	23	M	Leg impairment	8	15
CS12	23	M	Polio (difficult walking)	5	18

Care Staff (n=8)			
Name Code	Gender	Role	Year of Service
Staff 01	F	Zhuren (office manager)	21
Staff 02	F	Yuanzhang (institution director)	22
Staff 03	F	Shengong (social worker)	8
Staff 04	M	Yuanzhang (institution director)	2
Staff 05	F	Yuanzhang (institution director)	8
Staff 06	F	Yuanzhang (institution director)	5
Staff 07	M	Zhuren (office manager)	5
Staff 08	F	Shengong (social worker)	11

Note: (i) Participant IDs are non-contiguous because they follow the numbering used in a larger fieldwork frame; only nine university-level participants (CS01–CS12 subset) are included in this analysis; The number and name code contains no semantical value. (ii) The age and year of service was calculated by the birth/start year that was reported by each participant in 2021. (iii) Considering confidentiality and anonymity, here applies pseudonyms. The abbreviation “CS” means “Care stayer”—People who are over 18 years old but still living in care.

interested participants contacted the researcher directly to preserve voluntariness. No staff member recruited or consented youth. Sampling and preliminary analysis proceeded iteratively until additional interviews added limited information power relative to the aims (Malterud et al., 2016).

Although the subsample is modest (nine youth; eight staff), it is adequate for this paper’s narrowly bounded analytic aim: to examine how “readiness” is defined and enacted at the point of exit. Adequacy is supported by the high specificity of participants (university-track youth nearing exit; staff with direct responsibilities), the depth and detail of the interview accounts (see *Data collection*), and an analytic strategy designed for depth (re-coding from raw transcripts, within-group theme development, and iterative cross-group comparison). As analysis progressed, additional interviews primarily contributed nuance and within-group variation rather than substantively new readiness mechanisms relevant to this bounded question, consistent with an information power rationale.

2.4. Data collection

The first author conducted semi-structured, one-to-one online interviews in Mandarin (local dialects when preferred) using topic guides tailored to each group. Youth interviews for those remain in care and higher education covered imagined futures, preparation, supports/constraints, and feelings about leaving; staff interviews covered organisational roles, perceived mandates/cut-offs, supports, and resource constraints. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and lasted 33 min to 157 min. Immediately after each interview, the researcher wrote brief field notes and reflexive memos (Finlay, 2002).

2.5. Transcription, translation, and data management

Recordings were transcribed verbatim in Chinese by the first author and checked against the audio by the research team. For publication, illustrative quotations were translated into English by a bilingual researcher and cross-checked by a second bilingual team member to preserve meaning, register and nuance; where culturally specific terms (for example, *hukou*—household registration) appeared, we retained the original term with an explanation on first use (van Nes et al., 2010). Transcripts were de-identified as MS Word documents; access was restricted to the research team.

2.6. Analytic approach

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis with iterative movement across six phases (Clarke & Braun, 2017). To mitigate “analytic inertia” in secondary analysis, we re-coded from the raw transcripts rather than relying on prior doctoral codes, treating the original codebook as background only (Heaton, 2004). Steps were: (1) familiarisation via repeated reading/listening and memoing; (2) inductive, semantic coding within youth and staff datasets, sensitised to transition, support, and administrative context; (3) initial theme generation within each group; (4) review and refinement against extracts and whole datasets, collapsing/splitting themes to enhance coherence and distinction; (5) defining/naming themes for explanatory power; and (6) comparative analysis across groups to surface convergences/divergences. Analytic memos documented interpretive moves and decisions, providing an audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017).

2.7. Researcher reflexivity and rigour

The first author collected the original data and led the re-analysis; this insider proximity improved contextual understanding but risked confirmation bias. We addressed this through reflexive journaling, independent re-coding of a subset by a second analyst, and regular peer-debriefs that challenged theme boundaries and sought disconfirming cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail (guides, memos, coding frameworks), thick description for transferability, and grounding of claims in data extracts for confirmability.

2.8. Ethics

The doctoral study (2020–2023) received institutional ethics approval (see Ethics Approval Statement at the end of the paper). Participant consent materials explicitly permitted subsequent scholarly publications using de-identified data. The current study represents a secondary analysis of these anonymised data, for which no additional ethical approval was sought. Participation in the original study was voluntary, and participants were reminded that involvement would not affect access to services. Pseudonyms are used for all individuals and institutions. Audio and transcripts were stored on encrypted drives; only de-identified data were used in reporting.

2.9. Reporting

Reporting follows established qualitative standards. We draw on the COREQ checklist to structure accounts of team, methods and context, present quotations to evidence interpretations, and signpost where we move from description to analysis (Tong et al., 2007). All translations are the authors’ own; bracketed notes indicate clarifications where needed.

3. Findings

3.1. Young people’s readiness-making

Drawing on interviews with nine university-level student orphans, reflexive thematic analysis generated three interlinked themes that illuminate how young people imagine, make possible, and emotionally negotiate leaving care. Participants voiced purposeful plans alongside conditional aspirations and affective ambivalence, with housing and income operating as decisive thresholds for exit.

3.1.1. Imagining independence: plans, possibilities, and conditions

Participants spoke about leaving care on a sliding scale—from carefully sequenced routes to open-ended, conditional hopes. What they shared was not a single answer to “what next?”, but an effort to picture lives that could be lived, and the terms under which those lives might be possible. Some narrated leaving care as already charted. One young man sketched a primary trajectory with a clear fallback:

“I wish to be a soldier first... I may have more job opportunities after I’m done with the army. If I can’t join the military, I’ll focus on my major... and find a good job after graduation.”—CS07.

The voice is instrumental and sequential: a plan to execute rather than endure. Others framed independence as desirable yet explicitly conditional, hinged on ability and “actual situation.” The hesitations (“Um... Well...”) and repeated clause “if my ability permits” mark independence as an aspiration tethered to self-evaluation:

“...It depends on the actual situation... If I have the ability, of course I want to live outside... If my ability permits, I still prefer to live outside.”—CS12.

Here, leaving is imagined as a test of competence as much as a change of address; readiness is felt rather than assumed. A third way of imagining combined a steady moral horizon, such as plain life, stability, giving back, with plural routes and timelines:

“There are many possibilities after leaving, this... I’m not sure. I personally prefer a plain life. I may want to find a stable job after graduation. Through my own efforts to obtain my own house and other stuff, (I) also hope to help the children in the Fuli Yuan... I also want to travel and do travel photography if I have the opportunity.”—CS05.

This account is rich in valued ends (stability, contribution, creativity) yet deliberately non-committal about means, signalling openness to paths that may emerge. Moreover, a minority rendered the future as workable enough even without a fixed plan. They described small, concrete tactics stitched into a safety net of one’s own making:

“Not sure what’ll happen... I’d like to go to a graduate school... In case I can’t make it, I think I’ll be more or less able to live independently. Maybe I’ll rent a room... When it comes to food... If it’s not possible, I’ll cook for myself.”—CS01.

Across these variants, “orientation” is not a static trait but a moving position. The same participant can toggle between certainty and conditionality, hope and hedge, as they try language on for a life not yet lived.

3.1.2. Making independence possible: readiness work and material means

When talk shifted from imagining to doing, two intertwined logics appeared. One was about building leverage, accumulating credentials and experiences to widen options. The other was about negotiating affordability, which aligns exit timing and form with housing and income realities. Several participants described “stacking” qualifications and seeking competitive experiences as a deliberate risk strategy—part signalling device to employers, part self-efficacy builder:

"I'm also trying to improve myself... in preparation for looking for a job, I've earned a bunch of certificates... I've taken exams for a tour guide certificate, a teacher qualification certificate, CET4 and CET6 [Note: CET stands for College English Test], etc."—CS04.

"... I work hard every day, and I study while working... I'll review those exam materials... I'm also looking for ways to participate in competitions. I'll take the chance to compete if I have the chance. I'll take some more tests..."—CS08.

The cadence is cumulative ("bunch of certificates," "some more tests"), framing preparation as an ongoing buffer rather than a singular threshold crossed. Equally present was the arithmetic of leaving: rent, meals, wages, savings. Young people named these not as afterthoughts but as the decisive boundaries within which plans have to fit. For some, this meant delaying exit to keep costs low:

"Indeed, I wanna leave now... but considering my finance, I find it quite difficult to make it... I've thought through my own sources of income. If I want to save money to buy a house and get married, I feel that my salary is still too small. So, I can only find ways to save money. Plus, I work locally, so I want to stay here (Fuliuyan). Because I don't have to pay for meals or whatever..."—CS09.

For others, it meant selecting jobs that package subsistence with employment:

"It depends on the future situation... If I can't find a place to live outside, I still want to live in Fuliuyan... (so) it is necessary to find a job that covers both food and lodging."—CS11.

A different tactic was to anchor feasibility in anticipated municipal arrangements, even when specifics were hazy:

"I'm sure I'll want my own house... I can say that is the feeling of homelessness... It seems that they (the local authorities) will arrange accommodation for us... I heard but not sure. I didn't ask" — CS02.

"It seems..." and "I didn't ask..." index a knowledge gap that sits alongside hope. The practical imagination here is collaborative, which is predicated on others doing their part.

Taken together, making independence possible is narrated as a twin movement: accumulate what you can control (certificates, experiences, fallback tactics) while fitting the exit to what you cannot (housing supply, wage levels, placement decisions). Preparation is a hedge, not a guarantee.

3.1.3. Letting go of home: belonging, loss, and the pace of exit

Beyond plans and budgets, leaving care is felt as leaving home, a place repeatedly voiced as both shelter and social world. Anticipation of departure pulled forward grief, anxiety, and a desire to slow the moment of separation. For example, one participant named the feeling plainly due to the sadness of an abrupt unmaking of the everyday:

"For sure I must be very sad when it's time to leave... I've been living in this place for so many years and get used to everything. But all of a sudden, everything is gone. This is surely not a good feeling." — CS08.

Here, the imagined loss is not abstract: "so many years," "get used to everything," then "all of a sudden, everything is gone." The speed of ending ("all of a sudden") is part of what hurts. Crucially, attachment operated as both emotional bond and decision-making constraint. The same "home" that held routines and relationships also covered meals and sometimes lodging, and this double anchoring shaped the pace and sequencing of exit: lingering to save (CS09), seeking room-and-board roles (CS11), or staying until a placement materialised (CS02). In this sense, emotion did not merely accompany transition; it organised choices by pulling young people toward options that preserved continuity and away from steps that intensified exposure to loss and uncertainty. Timing itself became an emotion-management strategy: slowing, staging, or deferring exit helped contain grief and anxiety while material

feasibility was secured.

Across accounts, young people used timing tactically, e.g., deferring exit, phasing change, or accumulating qualifications, not only to improve prospects but to regulate separation and manage anxiety about what would follow. Where information about entitlements or practical supports was partial, uncertainty itself became heavy, narrowing planning horizons and amplifying the impulse to "...I haven't made any special preparations... I would take things as they came." (CS02).

3.2. Staff constructions of leaving-care readiness

Drawing on interviews with eight staff from childcare institutions, our analysis shows that leaving care is commonly framed as (a) a time-bounded handover from institutional responsibility to individual self-reliance, and (b) supported, mostly, by residual, relationship-based help.

3.2.1. "Care ends here": leaving as a boundary event and personal responsibility

Staff consistently referenced a clear cut-off, typically age 18 or completion of higher education, as the point at which institutional responsibility ceases, and young people are expected to be self-sufficient. Their accounts rarely framed this boundary as ethically troubling; instead, it was largely normalised as a taken-for-granted feature of mandate and governance, expressed in "can't" and "not our remit" terms rather than as a site of moral dilemma. The future outside was imagined as something young people "should" manage once they can earn, with little emphasis on structured preparation for the transition itself:

"After they go outside (Fuliuyan) and earn money, their basic lives should be self-sufficient..." —Staff 03.

This boundary was narrated not only as temporal but also as administrative and jurisdictional. Staff emphasised that once a young person's *hukou* is moved out of the institution's jurisdiction, responsibility shifts to other authorities. In this framing, moving *hukou* reorganises who is accountable (from the institution/civil affairs system to other departments and local governments) and what can be accessed (through locality-linked eligibility and administrative procedures). For instance,

"After leaving care, their hukou will be moved out... If they have any problems... they should talk to the local authorities... It has nothing to do with us." —Staff 06.

The practical effect is that needs remain, but they are reclassified as "outside remit," shifting the coordination burden and the risk of gaps in support onto the young person:

"Our work is basically in the early stage of their lives, such as to ensure their healthy growth, to help them learn a craft, so that they can find a job when they grow up... But after they find a job and get married, it's their own business to lead an independent life in society. We won't worry about it that much. And we can't handle it if we are required to do so." —Staff 02.

Even where staff expressed willingness to help, they described a fragmented implementation environment that diluted capacity to act. Delivering tangible support (jobs, housing) requires coordination across multiple local departments (e.g., Human Resources and Social Security, Housing and Urban-Rural Development, Public Security), while childcare institutions sit under Civil Affairs Department. Staff depicted this as a multi-agency maze:

"So, what our care home can do for care-leavers is quite limited. It's not that we don't act. But it's that there are too many departments involved in this field and the process is very complicated..." —Staff 04.

Limited finances further contributed to this situation. In many senses, China is known as unbalanced regional development and widening regional disparities among the eastern, central, and western

regions (Yu, 2018). The issue of financial shortage in the childcare system is also a long-term concern. Multiple measures have been in place to resolve it to support care receivers (Shang & Fisher, 2017). However, it still prevented local authorities and the childcare system from supplying additional support and social services to care leavers. In this context, staff described local provision as tightly tied to municipal finances, creating uneven implementation and a de facto postcode lottery:

“This depends on the local economy, there is little support. I think the Ministry of Civil Affairs advocated to give some support, but the specific implementation depends on the financial capacity of the local. In our area, so far as I know, there is nothing. After those children reach 18 years old, if they continue studying in college, the bureau of civil affairs will continue supporting them. If not, they have to live on their own.”
—Staff 07.

In staff talk, leaving care is an administratively tidy event (the cut-off and *hukou* transfer) but a practically messy process delegated to other agencies and to the young person. Fragmented mandates and uneven financing normalise a sudden shift from institutional to individual responsibility, with minimal transitional scaffolding.

3.2.2. Residual safety net: emotional care and conditional medical help

Where post-care support was acknowledged, staff described a narrow, residual safety net centred on ongoing relational contact and, in limited cases, medical help. Emotional reassurance, “like a family member”, was the most commonly available form:

“Except that we may give them some emotional support and take care of them verbally as a family member, there is nothing else we can do.”
—Staff 01.

Routine follow-up was uncommon; contact was typically on demand rather than proactive:

“After leaving Fuliuyan, basically we won’t contract or track them if not necessary. I think the main thing we can do for them after leaving Fuliuyan is to provide a sort of emotional support, and they can still come back to us when they are sick or hospitalised...” —Staff 06.

Medical assistance, when available, was explicitly conditional on administrative status. If a leaver’s *hukou* remained within the institution’s jurisdiction, some medical insurance payments could continue; once moved, the institutional relationship and associated benefits were said to end:

“If their hukou has left Fuliuyan, our effort on this group of people is handed over to others. The relationship between our side and those children automatically ends. But if they have left, while their household address doesn’t change [Note: but, by definition, surely it must change], they can turn to us if they find any problems, like illness, or accidents. Because we still pay for their medicine insurance.” —Staff 05.

Evidently, post-care provision is residual, reactive, and administratively gated. The same discourse that invokes family-like care simultaneously delimits access through paperwork status, leaving care-leavers with ambiguous expectations about what support, if any, remains once they exit.

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary of findings

This study examined how university-level care-experienced young people nearing exit imagine and enact leaving care, and how staff working within the same institutional ecology understand their remit before and after the transition. As a secondary analysis of the first author’s 2020–2023 doctoral dataset, the findings reflect institutional arrangements and policy practices during that period. Read together, youth and staff accounts reveal a persistent mismatch in temporal

framing and in the locus of responsibility. Young people portray leaving care as a paced and negotiated process in which plans and preparation are continually weighed against emotional stakes and material thresholds, most notably housing and income. Staff, in contrast, predominantly frame leaving as a bounded handover event, after which responsibility is transferred to the individual and to other departments through jurisdictional and administrative rules. This divergence echoes international concerns about “cliff-edge” exits (Stein, 2012; 2019), while showing how an event logic is reproduced in everyday practice within China’s administrative architecture.

4.2. Interpretations

On the youth side, participants described orientations that ranged from carefully sequenced “blueprints” to conditional, exploratory hopes. They paired these orientations with visible readiness work, including credential-stacking, participation in competitions, and contingency tactics, alongside bridging strategies such as delaying exit, seeking room-and-board roles, or anticipating municipal placements. Preparation was understood as a hedge rather than a guarantee, which aligns with evidence that post-care risk is shaped by tight labour and housing markets (Dworsky et al., 2012; Parsons and Schoon, 2023; Yin, 2025a). The data also foreground housing and income as gatekeepers of feasible independence, corroborating work showing that stable accommodation extends planning horizons while precarious housing compresses them (Glynn & Mayock, 2023; Natalie & Johnson, 2011; Usman et al., 2024). Analytically, youth accounts suggest housing operates in two registers that are difficult to separate in lived experience: as material security (affordability, tenure, subsistence) and as symbolic belonging (a “place” that anchors identity, safety, and non-homelessness). In this study, these dimensions were mutually constitutive because the care setting was experienced as both home and safety net—providing relational continuity while also underwriting meals and lodging. Leaving therefore entailed a dual withdrawal of belonging and subsidy, which helps explain why “practical” strategies (e.g., saving, accommodation-linked work, delaying exit) were intertwined with managing separation and uncertainty.

This interlocking of affect and material support also clarifies why emotion functions as a mechanism in readiness-making, not only an outcome of transition uncertainty. Review evidence shows that emotions exert predictable influences on judgement and choice, including risk appraisal and preferences under uncertainty (Lerner et al., 2015), and decision-neuroscience accounts likewise demonstrate that affect can modulate subjective valuation and choice through multiple pathways (Phelps et al., 2014). In our data, grief and attachment operated as “relational stakes” that increased the perceived costs of abrupt departure, making pacing itself part of the strategy set: slowing, staging, or deferring exit helped manage anticipated loss and anxiety while material feasibility was secured, consistent with emotion-regulation perspectives that highlight how individuals shape emotional trajectories through situation selection and timing (Kobylińska & Kusev, 2019). Under partial information, anxiety further narrowed planning horizons and increased preference for continuity-preserving options that minimised exposure (e.g., prioritising accommodation-linked work, delaying exit, or relying on anticipated municipal arrangements). Readiness, then, was affective as well as material. Emotions shaped what options appeared liveable, what risks felt tolerable, and when leaving became imaginable, thereby influencing how—and how fast—independence was enacted.

Staff accounts in this study, by contrast, reasserted a cut-off logic. Once age or education thresholds were crossed, institutional responsibility was imagined to cease, and post-care needs were positioned as beyond mandate. Assistance was described as residual, reactive, and relationship-based, such as on-demand reassurance or, in some cases, conditional medical help. Substantive supports, including housing and employment, were explicitly delegated to other agencies. This difference

is not merely attitudinal; it is structurally produced by governance arrangements that diffuse responsibility across departments and localities. In this administrative ecology, *hukou* transfer operates as more than a trigger for exit: it functions as a jurisdictional handover mechanism that reallocates responsibility for housing, employment support, and benefit access from childcare institutions to other authorities tied to the destination locality. Needs do not disappear, but they are reclassified as “outside remit,” shifting coordination burdens and exposure to discontinuity onto young people as they navigate multiple departments and eligibility rules. Locality-dependent finances further intensify this redistribution by producing uneven implementation capacity. This administrative landscape has been documented in China (Chen, 2011; Shang & Fisher, 2017; Zhu, 2018) and resonates with international concerns about fragmented governance after exit (Radityaputra et al., 2026; Refaeli et al., 2026; Stein, 2019). Constrating with youth accounts, it also clarifies the dual nature of housing: for young people it is simultaneously shelter and home, whereas for staff it is primarily an administratively allocated resource that becomes someone else’s responsibility once *hukou* changes—thereby formalising an event framing in everyday work.

Seen through a multi-level lens, the youth–staff pairing clarifies the mechanism generating the observed gap. At the micro level, young people engage in planning, hedging, and timing strategies to reconcile material thresholds (especially housing and income) with the emotional stakes of leaving “home.” At the meso level, childcare organisations practise bounded caring, in which aftercare is construed as residual and conditional and transition preparation is not owned as a formal task. At the macro level, *hukou*-based jurisdiction, dispersed departmental responsibilities, and uneven municipal finances redistribute responsibility and risk across institutions and individuals, producing locality-contingent access to housing and benefits. The interaction of these layers explains why young people experience leaving as a process requiring bridges while institutions enact an event that presumes independence at the cut-off.

4.3. Knowledge contributions

These findings contribute to the literature in four ways. First, they recast readiness as *work under constraint* rather than an attained status. Young people’s credential accumulation, contingency tactics, and timing strategies demonstrate purposeful effort, but these capabilities must be converted into functioning through external conversion factors, including affordable housing, liveable wages, documentation, and supportive ties. This is consistent with capability perspectives that locate agency within structural conditions (Loignon et al., 2012). Second, the analysis clarifies housing not only as a material gatekeeper of feasible independence but also as a symbolic anchor of belonging. In this setting, “home” is simultaneously relationship and subsidy: affective attachment to the care setting interlocks with its provisioning role (meals and lodging), helping explain why abrupt exits are experienced as both grief and budget shock. Importantly, emotion is shown to operate as a mechanism in readiness-making, shaping risk appraisal and exit timing by pulling young people toward continuity-preserving pathways and away from abrupt transitions. Third, by focusing on higher-education leavers, the study addresses a population often submerged in aggregated categories of “care leavers.” It shows how credential-stacking can coexist with acute exposure at graduation, when institutional food and lodging cease, linking educational completion to simultaneous labour-market entry and subsistence withdrawal (Harrison, 2017; Harrison et al., 2022). Fourth, the study specifies administrative technologies of exit, especially *hukou* transfer, as mechanisms that do more than mark transition; they redistribute responsibility and risk. *Hukou* reassigns responsibility and eligibility, reclassifying post-care needs as “outside remit” and shifting the coordination burden onto young people across multiple departments, thereby institutionalising a handover model even where staff express willingness to help. In doing so, the findings also highlight

participation and navigation as causal levers: information opacity and on-demand (rather than proactive) follow-up make it essential to know who to contact, when, and with what documentation, echoing evidence that participation rights must be operationalised to shape readiness (Venables et al., 2024; 2025).

4.4. Implications

Policy and practice implications follow directly. If leaving care is to function as a scaffolded process rather than a cliff-edge, planning should begin well before the cut-off and extend for a defined period after it, combining practical preparation with relational and emotional support for separation and change. Support should taper and target youth-identified thresholds, most immediately housing bridges such as transitional accommodation, rent-deposit guarantees, and regulated room-and-board apprenticeships, and income supports matched to local labour markets. Given that timing is part of how young people manage uncertainty and attachment, systems should also enable paced transitions where feasible, for example, staged move-on arrangements and clear options to defer or phase exit when key thresholds (housing, income, documentation) are not yet secured (Courtney et al., 2011; Mendes et al., 2023; Stein & Morris, 2009). Assigning a single coordinating navigator with an explicit mandate to broker across Civil Affairs, Human Resources, Housing and Urban–Rural Development, and Public Security would reduce the navigation burden that currently sits with young people and would give institutional form to participation. Where feasible, a transitional window that decouples essential healthcare continuity from immediate *Hukou* changes would mitigate administrative cliff effects. Finally, making entitlements legible through a plain-language “Leaving Care Passport” and scheduling proactive check-ins at set intervals could align practice with the forms of support young people prioritise. For higher-education leavers in particular, aligning graduation calendars with access to bridging accommodation and short-term income supports would address the dual exposure identified here (Gullo et al., 2021).

4.5. Limitations and future directions

These implications must be read alongside study limitations. This article reports a secondary analysis of a purposively selected subsample from a 2020–2023 PhD study; the qualitative claims are analytically, not statistically, transferrable. The dataset is cross-sectional and time-bounded, and therefore cannot capture within-person shifts in perceptions of readiness or directly observe how expectations are recalibrated after leaving care. We accordingly treat “leaving care as a process” as an interpretive frame for examining how readiness is anticipated, negotiated, and operationalised at the boundary of exit, while recognising that post-exit trajectories and change over time require follow-up designs. Secondary analysis also precluded re-contact for clarification, and translation may have shifted nuances despite cross-checking. Further, youth and staff were not interviewed as matched dyads and were drawn from different sites; findings therefore represent contrasting stakeholder perspectives on readiness-making and institutional mandates, not case-level corroboration. Finally, perspectives from actors who directly shape access to housing and work, such as municipal officials, employers, and landlords were not included and merit incorporation in future research.

Future work could follow cohorts longitudinally to examine whether combinations of housing bridges, navigators, and benefit-continuity windows translate into sustained housing stability, earnings, continued education, and wellbeing. Comparative studies across municipalities with varying fiscal capacity would clarify locality effects on transition experiences. Policy experiments, including navigator models, transitional housing schemes, and benefit-continuity pilots, merit mixed-methods evaluation to address common weaknesses in the intervention literature such as selection bias and short follow-up. Equity-focused analyses that attend to gender, disability, rural–urban

hukou, and ethnicity are also needed to identify who benefits least from current arrangements and why, and to tailor supports accordingly. Given the 2020–2023 fieldwork window, a short follow-up wave with the original sites, paired with municipal policy audits, would help assess whether the identified mechanisms persist under any post-2023 reforms.

4.6. Conclusion

In sum, the study corroborates the international consensus that leaving care is a process requiring bridges while adding context-specific detail on how *hukou* and fragmented mandates pull practice in the opposite direction. It reframes readiness as work under constraint, explains the youth–staff mismatch through a concrete multi-level mechanism, and identifies actionable levers. These include housing bridges that recognise housing as both material security and a locus of belonging, clearer navigation support, benefit continuity across *hukou*-related jurisdictional shifts, and tailored supports for higher-education leavers. Together, these steps align institutional arrangements with how young people actually experience and negotiate leaving care.

Ethics approval statement

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham (Reference: 2021-053-PGR), where the first author was affiliated, ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines.

Funding statement

No funding support

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express my gratitude to Dr Siobhan Laird and Dr Lisa Warwick for their invaluable supervision throughout this research. We are also deeply appreciative of the participants who generously shared their experiences and perspectives for this study.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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