

Housing and accommodation needs for Care Leavers

Executive Summary

This report sets out the summary of findings of a joint audit undertaken by Money Home Job and Children's Services in respect of children leaving care as they transition into adulthood.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board

To inform the Board of the key findings of the joint audit and how this may revise the Local Offer for care leavers.

Recommendations

- The Board is asked to note the Corporate Parenting responsibilities of the Council with regard to ensuring Care Leavers have suitable accommodation.
- To endorse the proposed recommendations and set out in the report.

Background papers: None

Resource and legal considerations

Local authority duties to young people and care leavers are set out in the following legislation:

Children Act 1989

Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000

Children and Social Work Act 2017

Homelessness Act 2002

Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Homelessness Act 2002 (HA 2002)

seeks to ensure that local authority children's social care and housing departments work together to ensure that the accommodation needs of care leavers are met and care leavers have priority need status.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 sets out various duties that local authorities have towards young people in and leaving care, including those relating to accommodation. The duties are

- plan with young people and involve them in decisions
- avoid moving young people who are settled
- assess young people's needs and prepare them for any move
- ensure that the accommodation meets any needs relating to impairment
- consider education, training and employment needs
- where practicable, offer a choice of accommodation
- set up a package of support to go with the accommodation
- have a clear financial plan for the accommodation and a contingency plan

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 introduced new duties so that everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness will have access to meaningful help, irrespective of their priority need status, as long as there are eligible for assistance:

- A new 'Duty to Refer' on named public bodies to ensure that services are working together earlier and effectively to prevent and relieve homelessness.
- Improved advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness and services are designed to meet the needs of particular groups that are at increased risk of becoming homeless, including care leavers and people released from prison or youth detention accommodation
- Extension of the period 'threatened with homelessness' from 28 to 56 days
- New duties to 'prevent' and 'relieve' homelessness for all eligible people, regardless of priority need and intentionality. Both duties last for up to 56 days. The 56 day period can be extended for anyone under the 'prevention' duty where homelessness is still a threat and could be extended for anyone who does not have a 'Priority Need' under the 'relief' duty
- Interim temporary accommodation will only be offered to people who are or may be: eligible, homeless and 'Priority Need'. Temporary Accommodation under the 'Main duty' is only offered to people who are eligible, homeless, 'Priority Need' and not intentionally homeless
- Assessments and creation of personalised housing plans, setting out the actions or 'reasonable steps' housing authorities and individuals will take to secure accommodation
- All care leavers under the age of 21 will be considered as having a local connection with an area if they were looked after, accommodated or fostered there for a continuous period of at least two years, which started at some point before their 16th birthday.

Reducing inequalities

The Corporate Parenting Strategy 2017- 2020 sets out the response to secure improvements in the equality of services, which, when achieved will have a positive impact on our most vulnerable children, young people and families. By being effective Corporate Parents for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, we collectively seek to redress the disadvantage that looked after children and care leavers face.

Consultation

We have undertaken wider consultation as part of our review with practitioners and foster carers and these are included in the findings of this audit.

The views of our young people have been central to the audit and have been ascertained by the Children's Champion during November 2020. The finding of the consultation with Young People are set out in Appendix 1

Contact Officer:

Jivan Sembi

Head of Service

Jivan.sembi@walsall.gov.uk

Leaving Care: Housing and accommodation needs for Care Leavers

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The journey out of care is a particularly important, and sometimes challenging transition. Most young people rely on their families for emotional and practical support when they make this transition, which usually takes place well into adulthood. The Office of National Statistics report that two-thirds of 16 to 24 year olds were still living at home (ONS 2019). In contrast, care leavers often live independently much earlier than their peers. When children become looked after it is important that they are helped to develop life skills from a young age so they can acquire independent life skills that enable them to be ready to make that transition.
- 1.2 When we are not able to engage with children effectively to implement a plan of transition, this can impact on their readiness for living independently. For transition planning to be effective, children need to be living in stable homes before they make their transition into adulthood. They need a robust plan of transition. For many young people, their transition to adulthood can be extended and delayed until they are emotionally and financially ready, or they have the qualifications they need and aspire to.
- 1.3 Securing suitable accommodation for care leavers is therefore much more than just finding them somewhere to stay. Care leavers need to be well prepared to live independently and their housing needs must be addressed before they leave care by effective pathway planning which considers their most appropriate accommodation options as they leave care. As corporate parents ensuring that we have the range of options including their housing needs requires effective partnership working across departments and agencies.
- 1.4 There are a range of factors that should be considered when assessing the young person's readiness to live independently and include:
- the young person's wishes and feelings.
 - the particular accommodation and support needs of the young person.
 - the personal characteristics and experiences of the young person.
 - the risks to the young person if s/he becomes homeless.
 - their existing support network of the young person.
- 1.5 For many young people, there is a transition period between leaving care either from a children's home, supported accommodation or foster care and taking up their own tenancy. Some young people will either "stay put" with their foster carers or live in semi-independent or supported living accommodation until they move into their own accommodation. Young people leaving care have a range of accommodation options
1. Staying Put arrangement is where young people remain with their existing foster carers until they are ready to live independently. A staying put arrangement is not the same as a foster placement. The young person staying put must be a former relevant child who is no longer a looked after child. The foster carer is no longer acting in the capacity of foster carer for that young adult; they are their 'former foster carer'. The foster placement becomes a

‘staying put arrangement’ and is not governed by fostering services regulations.

2. Supported Lodgings provide a young person with a room of their own in a private home where they are a member of the household. The householder, or host, provides a safe and supportive environment, working alongside professional services to help and support the young person in gaining skills for independent adult life.
3. Return back to their families: Most young care leavers have contact with their birth family and for many of our children in care we would seek to secure this as part their planning before they leave care. Some young people will choose to return home when they leave care, sometimes for a short period of time, or long term. However, should young person want to change their decision, they will be supported to find alternative arrangements.
4. Supported accommodation is often seen as a stepping-stone towards independence and provides accommodation for young people aged 16 and 17 years to prepare them for their transition into independence and moving into their own accommodation. This form of accommodation is not registered with Ofsted. Walsall is part of a regional framework working with a wide range of providers for such accommodation. Young people will have their own room and can sometimes share or have their own kitchen and bathroom. Young people may have on site support from staff or floating support which can be tailored to meet the young person’s needs. Young people will be supported to develop life and independence skills.
5. Transition to Assisted Living Arrangements or Shared Lives. Many young people leaving care have a higher level of support needs. Some may have learning or physical disabilities or mental or physical health needs. They need for bespoke or specialist provision.

Some young people can either remain with their former foster cares under the Shared Lives scheme or can be matched with an approved carer prior. Shared Lives scheme have to be registered with the Care Quality Commission. Carers are trained and vetted by the scheme.

Young people are generally referred to the Adult Social Care Services at age 15 years and 6 months birthday to enable relevant assessments to be undertaken by Adult Services. Generally, Adult Social Care Services commence those assessments when the young person is aged 17 years and older.

We recognise that there is a need to improve transition planning and in view of this there is a multi-agency review in progress to improve the transition pathways with Health, Education and Local Authority partners.

6. Social Housing accommodation is provided at affordable rates, on a secure basis to people on low incomes or with particular needs. In Walsall, there are a range of Registered Social Landlords who own housing properties, with the largest providers being Walsall Housing Group and Accord.

The Council has developed Young Person's Housing Scheme in partnership with Walsall Housing Group which was first introduced in 2010. This provides **60 units** to Young People who are at risk of becoming homeless. The aim of the scheme is to support young people to maintain independence and prevent future cycles of homelessness with the end goal being they are able to succeed in making their tenancy permanent. Support is provided by Housing and Welfare Officers located in Money Home Job and a Young Person's Temporary Accommodation Officer from WHG, who work in partnership to assist the young people to achieve goals, develop independent living skills, support with education/employment training, and all aspects that are required to enable a successful transition into independent living.

Children's Services and Walsall Housing Group have secured a further **16** units under the Young Person's Housing Scheme in 2019. The key difference is that Children's Services have access to housing which is targeted for care leavers who are ready to live independently prior to their 18th birthday. They are supported by the WHG Young Person's Temporary Accommodation Officer, their Personal Advisor and where necessary additional floating support is spot purchased. This has enabled over 14 young people to move on from supported accommodation or foster care in the last 12 months. This housing option prepares young people for independence with support from their Social Worker and Personal Advisor. Young people are identified as being suitable at the Housing Pathway Panel and around 17 years and independent accommodation will be identified for the young person. They will move in with support, initially from both Children's Services and WHG or additional floating support. At some point after their 18th birthday, they take over the tenancy. The 'cliff edge' at 18 is minimised and support is on-going based on the young person's needs and they don't need to physically move in order to have their own tenancy.

Care leavers can access either scheme and their nomination is presented by their social worker or personal advisor to the Housing Pathway Panel which meets monthly with representatives from WHG, Money Home Job, Children's Commissioning and Children's Services. Based on the assessment and readiness to live independently the young person's need for housing could be met through the Young Person's Scheme.

7. Temporary accommodation - Care leavers who are vulnerable or at risk of homelessness have a 'priority need' and must be provided with temporary accommodation if this is needed. Temporary accommodation is provided whilst a full assessment is carried out. There are limited options for temporary accommodation within Walsall and that can mean that young people can be placed outside of the Borough either because there is limited capacity or their needs cannot be met locally. We would only seek to place care leavers in temporary accommodation as a 'last resort' and would always seek to provide young people with permanent accommodation based on their needs.

Rivers House is temporary accommodation (TA) provision which is owned by the Council and supports young people who are homeless and have made a homeless application in Walsall. This accommodation consists of 14 self-contained units, with 4 units being situated separately but on the same complex. The four units are utilised as temporary accommodation "move on"

for our tenants as they have gained more independence and require a reduced amount of support. Rivers House has staffing cover for 24 hours a day over a 7 day week. The staff situated at Rivers House work alongside the young person whilst they are temporarily accommodated and support development in life skills, education, money management and becoming tenancy ready to enable them the best opportunity to have sustainable tenancies moving forward.

8. Private Rented Accommodation: private rented properties can vary hugely in quality and affordability for people on low incomes or benefits and as a service securing a accommodation in the private sector is not a preferred option and would only be utilised in exceptional circumstances.
9. Bed and Breakfast: Care leavers are never placed directly from leaving care into Bed and Breakfast accommodation. However there are some rare instances when young people have exhausted all other types of accommodation.

2.0 Joint Audit of Young People Leaving care

- 2.1 A joint audit of transition planning for children leaving care was undertaken with Children's Social Care Services and Money Home Job in September and October 2020. The audits were undertaken by Housing and Children's Social Care Officers. A random sample of 50 young people between the ages of 17 and 19 years who left care or were going to leave care between August 2018 and July 2020 was selected to review how well we supported young people to achieve their outcomes.
- 2.2 As part of this audit we have held focus groups in November and December 2020 involving foster carers, social workers and personal advisors which included colleagues from Walsall Housing and Probation's Resettlement Team. The Children's Champion has also sought the views of young people as part of this consultation. .
- 2.3 There were equal numbers of males and females and the audits provided considerable evidence where transitions had worked well as well as areas where we need to strengthen joint working with housing. The young people in this audit were living in a broad range of accommodation or in custody or within family settings with either their parents or former foster carers.

Of the 50 young people reviewed

- 2 Young people who had left care at 18 did not qualify for leaving care support as they had been in care for less than 13 weeks. Both young people have returned to the care of their families.
- 13 Young people remained with their former foster carers either under Staying Put or with Shared Lives carers (3) who were their foster carers.
- 7 Young people were living with their parents (6) or friends (1)
- 5 Young people are living in specialist adult services provision.

2 Young People were in temporary accommodation in Walsall.

8 Young people were residing in supported accommodation.

2 Young people are in custody

11 Young people are living in social housing (9) or privately rented (2) accommodation.

3.0 **Learning from the Audit. Focus Groups and Young People's feedback.**

3.1 Learning from this audit has highlighted three key areas where we need to improve transition planning for our care leavers.

- **Staying Put Planning and Support**
- **Preparation for living independently**
- **Supporting care leavers to move into settled accommodation as they leave care or when they are in custody.**

3.2 **Suitability of accommodation:**

We have a requirement to report to Department of Education whether young people are living in suitable accommodation annually.

"Accommodation is to be regarded as suitable if it provides safe, secure and affordable provision for young people. It would generally include short-term accommodation designed to move young people on to stable long-term accommodation, but would exclude emergency accommodation used in a crisis."

Positively no young person within this cohort had been placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. 2 young people were in accommodation that was deemed to be unsuitable accommodated, one young person was in custody and another young person was living with family members. This young person has now secured settled housing accommodation.

3.3 **Staying Put planning and Support to former foster carers:**

A staying put arrangement is not the same as a foster placement. The foster carer is no longer acting in the capacity of foster carer for that young adult; they are their 'former foster carer'. The foster placement becomes a 'staying put arrangement' and is not governed by fostering services regulations. For some foster carers who then stop fostering their individualised support from a supervising social worker ceases. In Walsall, there is a long history of young people remaining with staying put carers. Carers are paid a standard payment to which the young person will make a weekly contribution based on the individual circumstance of the young person.

3.4 Overall at the end of November 2020 there were **19** young people living with their former foster carers in staying put arrangements. Majority of our young people

remained with their former foster carers who are Walsall carers (12) and for 7 young people their former foster carers were registered with an Independent Fostering Agency. Staying put arrangements can either be short term or up to the age of 21 year in line with the young person's pathway plan.

3.5 Since April 2020, 11 staying put arrangements have ceased and the majority of these were time limited arrangements to support the young person's transition plan. Of these 2 young people are now at University and their current plan reflects that they would return to their carers during vacation time, 6 young people moved on to live independently in line with their plan and 1 young person is now aged 21. For 2 young people their staying put arrangement ceased because they wanted to live elsewhere and one of these young people returned to live with their staying put carer in November 2020.

3.6 As part of the Audit we reviewed the progress of 10 young people in staying put arrangements. It is evident that for all of the young people the continuity built on their attachments to their carers, so that they can move to independence at their own pace and be supported to make the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way. This arrangement was considered as part of the care planning for young people over a period of time and endorsed by their Independent Reviewing Officers. The audits evidenced that their needs continued to be met and the young people are thriving.

We also reviewed the care plan for one young person whose staying put arrangement ceased within 3 months of their 18th birthday. This arrangement required a greater level of support when difficulties arose. This could have been anticipated and appropriate support may have maintained the arrangement.

3.7 The learning from the audit identified that there was not sufficient focus on

- The timing of "Living Together Agreement" which details the arrangements and expectations negotiated between the young person and the Staying Put carer regarding the payment of personal contribution, coming home times, what meals are included, whether friends can visit or stay overnight etc.
- The support that the Staying Put carers will require during the course of their arrangement.
- Consider if we can improve the Staying Put offer to incentivise foster carers to enable young people to remain with them.

3.8 **Consultation with our foster carers:**

- There was variable practice amongst social workers in setting up the staying put arrangements.
- The agreements were not planned appropriately
- They were set up too late
- The support they received was variable.

3.9 **Actions:**

1. Review of Walsall's Staying Put practice guidance and process. This will be undertaken in consultation with the young people, their foster carers and practitioners. The Review will also consider the second report of the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leaver's published in November 2020.

Timescales for completion: April 2021

4.0 **Preparation for independence**

4.1 Leaving home is a challenging time for all young people, whatever their circumstances. However, young people with experience of the care system have experienced adversity, and often share distinct vulnerabilities and needs. The need to ensure that we plan and prepare our young people through this transition period with the help of a supportive network to draw upon is imperative.

4.2 The audit considered whether the planning was specific to the needs of the young person and how well the young person was encouraged to develop life and independent living skills so they are prepared for leaving care, for example, self-care, cooking, budgeting and managing their tenancy, being in work or education/ training. We expected to see this recorded on their pathway plans.

4.3 Auditors found:

1. There was good evidence of individualised preparation for independence and life skills depending on the assessed needs of the young person. Records referenced Catch 22 Get Ready for Adult Life (GRAL) workbook.
2. All young people's pathway plans evidenced the progress young people were making and identifying what further work was required to make in securing independence, self-care and life skills.
3. Personal advisors were proactive in supporting young people with appointments to secure benefits, viewing accommodation options, and managing money and budgeting, helping young people to move into their accommodation and supporting with practical matters such as putting furniture together etc.
4. Some audits evidenced certificates of achievement being awarded when independence preparation work had been completed and this supported their housing applications with Housing providers
5. Personal Advisors were proactive in considering how emotional support could be built into the young person's network.

6. There was evidence of transition planning meetings in place between the child's social worker and the personal advisor setting out the respective actions and goals
7. There was evidence of personal advisors attended multi-disciplinary care planning meetings for young people with complex needs particularly where the transition arrangements involved adult health and social care services.
8. Some of our young people who are parents and as such their support and preparation for living independently has to encompass help and support to care and safeguard their child. We found evidence of support and care provided by the personal advisors but this was not referenced in their pathway plans nor were other key universal or specialist agencies sited in the pathway plans.
9. The auditors found that pathway plans did not always evidence the collective role of provider, housing and tenancy support officers, other agencies (e.g. mental health services, adult services), or other support networks in the support that the young person required, though this was evident in other parts of the young person's records, for example, correspondence, case notes and supervision records. The actions required by the Personal Advisors were clearly evident in the Pathway Plans.

4.4 The learning from the audit identified the following

- Developing life and independence skills need to be embedded in care planning meetings through the child and young person's care journey.
- We need to embed a structured life and independence living skills toolkit which starts around 13 years recognising that children acquire life skills as they achieve their developmental milestones. This will be supported by training which is utilised by foster carers, key workers, independent reviewing officers', social workers and personal advisors.
- We explore the option of developing training flats for young people to have an opportunity to with some support experience living alone, manage money and assist young people in understanding more about living more independently.
- Transition preparation and planning needs to be informed by an assessment of need and embedded in the child's care planning from an early age
- Pathway Plans need to be clearer about what we expect of the young person to work towards, how and who will work with them, what do we expect them to do and how will we know that this has been achieved.

4.4 Consultation with our foster carers:

- Our foster carers told us that they were not aware of the Catch 22 GRAL workbook and was not talked about in care planning meetings.

- They would welcome more structured support and training in helping children and young people develop life and independence living skills.

4.5 Consultation with young people: (appendix 1)

- Young people in foster care said that some given chores such as 'pegging out the washing', 'hoovering', others said their foster family had really prepared them, they could 'cook meals', do their laundry and was able to manage their finances.
- In relation to direct work that could be undertaken with them by a range of professionals to develop their independent skills only a small number of young people could talk about the use of different resources
- Some young people told us that they had participated in workshops when they lived in semi independence accommodation.
- Most young people told us that they had done a lot of the preparation themselves.
- Their awareness of the Catch 22 resource Get Ready for Adult workbook was variable, some responded 'not heard of it.' Some said 'it sounded familiar' but went on to say they did not know what it was and many said 'no'.

4.6 Actions

2. Workshops are scheduled with practitioners to ensure that when developing pathway plans with young people pull on the support of key partners. We evidence the skills the young person has, the preparation work we need to focus on, specifying how, who and when this work is undertaken with the young person and their carers.

Timescales for completion: January 2021

3. Task and Finish Group will be established in January 2021 to review our practice and approach to preparing young people for living independently and develop a structured toolkit and associated training for practitioners and carers. This will include the delivery of group based workshops with young people. Young people will be supported in building portfolio of achievement and attain certificate which evidences that they are tenancy ready.

Timescales for completion: April 2021

4. We need to review the support and interventions provided to our care experienced young parents. The feedback from young people and our findings has prompted the need for a focused audit in respect of our care experienced young parents and parents to be. This audit is underway.

Timescales for completion: February 2021

Example ASDAN

ASDAN was originally developed to support the Government's 'Keep on Caring: Supporting young people from care to independence' strategy. It's reported that the course has been well received in the authorities which are using the materials with young people. ASDAN is a curriculum development and awarding organisation and developed the 'Living Independently Short Course' with assistance and expert input from Bristol City and North Somerset leaving care services.

This is a 60 hour course and has 9 modules which cover:

- Earning and spending money
- Keeping track of your money
- Making financial choices
- A place of your own
- Health and wellbeing
- Cooking on a budget
- Practical cooking skills
- Career management
- Preparing for the world of work

4.7 Training flats:

Our care leavers say that they want to leave care so that they can get their 'own place'. The reality of living alone as the first move after leaving care can be very different from what young people expect. Many local authorities are using training flats to help care leavers experience what it is really like to live on their own, without the risk of them losing their own first tenancy.

Recommendation 1

Scope the cost and development of a training flat and a report is presented to the Directorate Management Group for consideration.

Timescales for completion: February 2021

5.0 Supporting care leavers to move into settled accommodation as they leave care or custody.

There was significant learning in reviewing how well we support young people to move into settled accommodation as they leave in care. The Audits and consultation with young people, carers and practitioners considered the following.

- Was there an understanding of the housing options available to them?
- How do practitioners and young people experience the application process for settled accommodation?
- Are our young people prioritised for housing ?
- How well do we plan for young people leaving custody ?
- How can we improve the offer for our young people ?

5.1 Where young people, foster carers and practitioners aware of the range of housing options available to them?

1. The Audits identified that for most young people their personal advisors, sometimes in conjunction with housing officers would talk through the options available to them. However, the range of options for some young people narrowed due to eligibility or specificity about their choice of the area or because options had been exhausted or where it was felt that the young person was at yet ready to manage a tenancy.
2. For young people who are late entrants to care or have experienced several moves in care or have been in custody there was clear evidence that their options to secure housing accommodation is compromised because we have not been able to secure sufficient stability to work with them to develop their independence skills.
3. The impact of several moves has meant that despite considerable effort by social workers and personal advisors the window of opportunity to work meaningfully before they are young adults is not sufficiently consistent.
4. Four young people in this cohort are living in long term temporary accommodation, and some having exhausted options in Walsall, including Rivers House and are living in long term temporary accommodation outside the Borough. (St Basils or YMCA).
5. 2 of our young people in this cohort had either been evicted or subject to eviction notices whilst being placed at Rivers House. A further young person remains at Rivers House and is making good progress.

5.2 Consultation with young people (appendix 1) and foster carers:

- Young people reported that their understanding of the range of housing options and the choice that they are able to exercise is variable.
- Some young people had limited options and choice and this was not always explained to them.
- Foster carers did not feel that they had an understanding of the range of options and felt that young people have limited choice.

5.3 Consultation with practitioners:

- There is an over reliance on personal advisors and housing officers to hold and impart information about housing options.
- Information on our website needs to be updated and more accessible.
- We need to be able to explain when we are not able to meet preferences and choice.

5.4 Learning

- We need to provide young people, carers and practitioners with information about their housing options in a simple and accessible manner

- We need to ensure that social workers and foster carers equally understand the range of housing options available in Walsall.
- We must ensure that we have exhausted all avenues of support jointly to avoid the risk of eviction and we review our escalation process as part of the review of the housing protocol.

5.5 Actions

5. We will jointly develop the information about the range of housing options in an easily accessible format and will be set out in our Local Offer and.

Timescales for completion: March 2021

6. Joint workshops with colleagues from housing will be held to educate our social workers and foster carers about the range of housing options available.

Timescales for completion: February 2021

- 5.6 Young people in temporary accommodation are often placed either in a crisis or because they are not yet ready to manage their own tenancy. Having a fall back option if things go wrong is a reassurance for care leavers and offering this to care leavers reduces the pressure on them, and is part of being a good corporate parent. This offers is the space to engage care leavers to work with us to resolve their situation and offer 'second and third chances'. Eviction should therefore should be the last resort and requires the need to for us to jointly harness all of our collective resources to avoid this.

Recommendation 2

The decision to evict a care leaver from local authority housing accommodation will only be made by the Director of Customer Engagement (or a delegated substitute) following consultation with the Director of Children's Social Work. Whenever safe, and practical to do so, these Directors, will jointly develop a plan with the aim of preventing the eviction from occurring..

- 5.7 **How do practitioners and young people experience the application process for settled accommodation?**

5.8 Audits found:

1. Personal advisors support the young person in making their application for housing and this can vary depending on their age or whether their need could be met by "general needs" or through WHG Young People's Scheme.
2. All care leavers have a priority status but their "Gold Banding" is secured at the age of 18 years and agreed by the housing providers. Care leavers who later request a move though their social housing landlord do not always retain their priority status.

3. The audit found that not all young people required a housing assessment or a Personalised Housing Plan but where that assessment was undertaken and personalised housing plans were developed these were held on housing records only. It was also difficult to evidence how or whether personal advisors had contributed to Personalised Housing Plans and these did not inform the young person's Pathway Plan. Similarly it was not always evident whether the Pathway Plan had been shared with housing officers..
4. Housing electronic systems do not flag care leavers on to their systems at first sight and we were unable to determine if this is impacted on their responsiveness to direct contact from a care leaver. Conversely the audit identified that some housing officers have access to Children's Services Mosaic records which provides access to care history of the young person and this is not proportionate.
5. Auditors saw positive relationships and good joint working between allocated housing officers and personal advisors with young people and much of this evidenced on case notes via emails and phone calls and in face to face meetings with young people. Whilst, records across both housing and social care records evidenced good communication between personal advisors and housing officers, it was not always clear what actions had been agreed/taken or the 'reasonable steps' housing officers, personal advisors and young people would need to take to secure accommodation. Where transition planning meetings were held they did not always include housing officers, though there was evidence of both the housing officers and personal advisors meeting jointly with young people.
6. We found that it was not always clear when the legal "Duty to Refer" had been initiated as much of the communication in these circumstances was through direct contact or emails with the housing officers. The "Duty to Refer" portal was not always used. There was evidence of personal advisors / managers advocating or challenging decisions on behalf of young people but this not always done so on the basis of the Housing Assessment.
7. The audit also identified a number of young people who were parents who in the main had been able to secure appropriate housing and as their circumstances changed were seeking move to either a larger properties as their family had grown or were in private tenancies who wanted to move into social housing as this provide them greater security. We found that they have allocated housing officers who were progressing these requests.
8. Young people who were residing in the WHG Young Person's Scheme commissioned by Children's Services did not have an allocated Housing Officer and we found that this has led to delay in the "flipping" the tenancy and us The process to address this is currently underway.
9. Auditors found that support from personal advisors over the last 6 months has been regular with a clear emphasis on emotional well-being and practical support. There was good evidence of communication and liaison with the young person's support network.

10. Auditors found that where young people who were in a joint tenancy the support was not always tailored to the individual needs of the young person to ensure that their tenancies are not compromised due to the actions of the other person and reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown.

11. We found that planning for young people leaving custody and meeting their accommodation needs lead to some young people living in temporary accommodation and secured to close to their release date and this compromised our support for them.

Young people leaving custody are particularly at risk of living in unsuitable accommodation or becoming homeless, and have often experienced poor accommodation or placements before their experience in custody. They may have additional challenges in accessing housing and the support to meet their needs. Planning for young people on short custodial sentences can be challenging, and young people often don't know where they are going to live until the last minute before they leave custody. This can be very unsettling for young people as well as leading to additional problems after they are released

5.9 Consultation with young people (Appendix 1)

- Some young people were happy with their accommodation and felt supported from their personal advisors, social workers and housing officer.
- Some young people told us that their experience good preparation and he understood that what his options are and what is likely/unlikely to be available to him.
- Some young people told us that they were offered no or limited options in Walsall.
- Young people did not always know who their Housing Officer or aware of personalised housing plans.
- Some young people did not feel safe and told us that they did not feel that they were helped to move or apply for alternative accommodation.
- Managing money was an issue raised with some young people when speaking about budgeting and their finances and wanted more help. 'Nobody paid my first month's rent that put me in debt' which may resonate with many more young people who are trying to maintain their tenancy whilst being in first time employment.
- Young people who were spoken to, most were very clear that they wanted to live independently despite not having all the skills to equip them.
- Young people spoke very positively about the support from their personal advisors and were confident about contacting them when they need help. They said that their personal advisors were responsive.

- When discussing if young people had ever been faced with homelessness the young people spoken to have not found themselves in this situation however felt confident enough to get support from their PA if this did happen.

5.10 Consultation with practitioners which included social workers, personal advisors, 2 housing officers and resettlement officer from Probation. Practitioners told us:

- Personal advisors and social workers reported that they had positive working relationships with colleagues in housing and that communication was improving between the two services.
- Applications for housing can be made directly to Housing officers or via the Duty to Refer portal. These can then be dealt with by one of three teams in Money Home Job depending on the circumstances of the young person, the General Needs Team or the Young Person's Team or the Rapid Rehousing Team. Practitioners told us that this leads to confusion, a variable response and conflicting communication.
- Practitioners sought clarification of whether Housing systems flagged care leavers much in the same way as they are in other agencies e.g DWP or HMP which leads to a response that is tailored to the needs of care leavers.
- Young people leaving custody are generally dealt with by the Rapid Rehousing Team rather than the Young Person's Team and this leads to a disjointed planning and communication. Some young people have been released from custody without a housing option in place.
- Practitioners told us that when working with other local authorities housing nomination and referral documentation is streamlined with a single pathway for care leavers.
- The general consensus was for a more streamlined approach using one referral form and one doorway for care leavers.
- They would like the Gold Banding to be allocated earlier by our registered social landlords to enable young people to bid and move into their properties before their 18th birthday.
- Practitioners reported that there is disparity in some care leavers being provided with white goods and others not. This impacts on the use of the Setting Up Home Grant for some young people.
- Practitioners suggested the availability of "training flat" which could support better preparation for young people providing them with an opportunity to experience living independently before doing so.
- Practitioners were positive about the Children's Services WHG Young Person's Scheme but noted that these young people were disadvantaged by not having an allocated Housing Officer leading to delays in tenancies transferring to them when they are 18 years old.

- Practitioners wanted to have a clear escalation process which supports young people to exercise their rights of appeal.

5.11 Learning:

- We would like to see care leavers being awarded Gold banding prior to their 18th birthday and from their 17th birthday.
- Establish a clear streamline process for young people to be referred to Housing by their 17th birthday.
- Ensure that children's services staff understand how to exercise the "legal duty to refer" and use the Duty to Refer portal so that timescales and decisions can be effectively tracked by managers in Housing and Children's Services.
- It is good practice to contribute to Housing Assessments, Personalised Housing and Pathway Plans and that these are shared with respective services with the consent of the young person based on their housing need. The Housing Assessment and Personalised Housing Plan can then be added to the young person's record
- We need to review the access to children's records is proportionate to enable Housing colleagues to identify the young person's basic details and service / personal advisor involvement.
- Personal advisors to be involved and contribute to Personalised Housing Plans and equally we need to see the contribution of Housing Officers reflected in Pathway Plans, and that these plans are shared with housing officers and personal advisors with the consent of the young person.
- Explore with Social Housing Landlords the possibility of awarding care leavers Gold Banding prior to their 18th birthday.
- Review the pathway for young people leaving custody with Money Home Job, Probation and Children's Services.

5.12 Actions

7. To jointly review and simplify the nomination and referral documentation for care leavers, ensuring that the language used is more reflective of the needs of care leavers, including how the Duty to Refer operates in Walsall when a care leaver is threatened with homelessness.
8. Review and streamline the processes in the WHG Young Person's Scheme to ensure that young people are not disadvantaged.

9. Review the access to Children's Services records to ensure that this is proportionate and further information is requested on the basis of an agreed protocol.

10. **Care Leavers Leaving Custody** – Jointly review and revise how Money Home Job, Children's Service, National Probation Service and the Youth Offending Services work together to support the release of young people from custody ensuring that there is appropriate pre-release planning in place. This will include the need to ensure accommodation needs are identified early, and actions taken to ensure care leavers do not leave custody without an accommodation plan in place.

11. Children's Services to work with the Housing and Welfare Service to consider how a single pathway for care leavers can be developed in Walsall.

Timescales for completion: March 2021

5.14 **Gold Banding:**

In order to enable young people to secure Gold Banding in advance of their 18th birthday registered social landlords will require the local authority to act as rent grantors to enable young people to bid and move into their properties before their 18th birthday.

Recommendation 3

The Board asks Walsall Council develops a rent guarantor scheme with Registered Social Landlord/s in Walsall and a report is presented to the Directorate Management Group for consideration.

Timescales for completion: March 2021

5.15 We want to ensure that our young people get the best start and avoid getting into debt. The Council currently provides a 100% Council Tax exemption to provide immediate financial assistance and helps reduce the risk of debt.

We would ask the Children's Services and the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service to improve the offer to young people leaving care with the expense of setting up and managing their home.

This could include the provision of a package of furniture and essential domestic appliances which then allows the young person's £2000 setting up home grant to go much further.

Recommendation 4

Local Authority meets the first month's rent for young people to reduce the risk of young people entering debt

Recommendation 5

The Board asks the Housing and Welfare Team to explore the costs associated with improving the offer to young people leaving care to help support them with the expense of setting up and managing their home. A business plan will be developed, and taken to Cabinet, to seek approval

for any additional funds that may be required to support the development of this scheme.

Timescales for completion: March 2021

6.0 Additional Support

- 6.1 Most young people who had secured housing accommodation were able to access tenancy support from the Housing provider, their allocated housing officer and personal advisor. For many young parents their support network included health professionals and sometimes social workers from adult services or children's services.
- 6.2 Young people living in supported living or accommodation or in the Young People's Scheme have tailored support which can range from between 5 hours a week to up 24 hours based on the assessed needs of the young person and will gradually reduce as the young person's is able to live independently. This can be extended post 18 based on the young person's needs is either secured from the provider or is spot purchased. It was also evident that for some young people there was a need for more tailored and intensive tenancy support to avoided the need for them to experience further moves. For many young people additional day to day support.
- 6.3 The service has recognised that we needed to develop targeted support and have utilised short term grant funding to establish 2 part time posts to deliver more targeted support to young people at risk of homelessness and asylum seeking care leavers using the Rough Sleepers Grant and Migration Fund.
- 6.4 In March 2020, we appointed a part time support worker to work with vulnerable young people at risk of homelessness who is currently working with 12 young people aged from 17 years and above. The funding has also been utilised to secure 0.5 personal advisor capacity in the service. The service also engages with the Council's Rough Sleepers Team to secure housing options and other support.
- 6.5 In 2019, we also appointed a part time support worker utilising funding from the Migration Fund to support care leavers who were previously Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers with specific focus on targeted support focussing on helping them to navigate the immigration systems, support in accessing mental health support and reducing isolation and targeted work to prepare young people should they exhaust all appeal rights.
- 6.6 The service also access to fulltime Impact worker as well as Careers Advisor located in the Virtual School to work directly with young people to secure work or training. The pandemic has had a significant impact on young people in education and employment on many of our young people.

7.0 Joint Housing and Children's Protocol for Care Leavers

The joint housing protocol was developed and agreed by the Executive Directors of Children's Services and Resources and Transformation in 2018. It aims to ensure that we were working effectively, complying with the legislation and to ensure that we were anticipating the vulnerabilities, young people have the levels of support they require and reducing the risk of tenancy failure or homelessness.

The housing protocol will be revised on the basis of the actions and recommendations outlined above, best practice from other local authorities and the new guidance for councils to help ensure care leavers have the stable homes they need and prevent them from becoming homeless.

This guidance was published in October 2020 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/action-to-help-prevent-vulnerable-young-people-from-becoming-homeless>.

- 7.1 We would like to work towards removing ‘intentionality’ from the housing protocol so that no young person is being deemed to have made themselves ‘intentionally’ homeless and therefore without support from housing going forward.

We would like to involve our registered social landlords to be included in the protocol.

Timescales for completion: April 2021

8.0 Summary of Recommendation’s and Actions:

The recommendations and actions set out below contribute to the Local Offer to young people who are leaving care and those who have left care. These actions will also be informed by the second report of the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leaver’s published in November 2020.

- 8.1 The Board is asked to consider the following recommendations

Recommendation 1

Scope the cost and development of a training flat and a report is presented to the Directorate Management Group for consideration.

Timescales for completion: February 2021

Recommendation 2

The decision to evict a care leaver from local authority housing accommodation will only be made by the Director of Customer Engagement (or a delegated substitute) following consultation with the Director of Children’s Social Work. Whenever safe, and practical to do so, these Directors will jointly develop a plan, with the aim of preventing the eviction from occurring.

Recommendation 3

The Board asks Walsall Council to develop a rent guarantor scheme with Registered Social Landlord/s in Walsall and a report is presented to the Directorate Management Group for consideration.

Timescales for completion: March 2021

Recommendation 4

Local Authority meets the first month’s rent for young people to reduce the risk of young people entering debt and a report is presented to the Directorate Management Group for consideration.

Timescales for completion: February 2021

Recommendation 5

The Board asks the Housing and Welfare Team to explore the costs associated with improving the offer to young people leaving care to help support them with the expense of setting up and managing their home. A business plan will be developed, and taken to Cabinet, to seek approval for any additional funds that may be required to support the development of this scheme.

Timescales for completion: March 2021

Recommendation 6

We propose the Councillors as Corporate Parents visit the range of accommodation options we provide for our children leaving care and care leavers.

8.2 Summary of Actions

1. Review of Walsall's Staying Put practice guidance and process. This will be undertaken in consultation with the young people, their foster carers and practitioners.

Timescales for completion: April 2021

2. Workshops are scheduled with practitioners to ensure that when developing pathway plans with young people pull on the support of key partners. We evidence the skills the young person has, the preparation work we need to focus on, specifying how, who and when this work is undertaken with the young person and their carers.

Timescales for completion: January 2021

3. Task and Finish Group will be established in January 2021 to review our practice and approach to preparing young people for living independently and develop a structured toolkit and associated training for practitioners and carers. This will include the delivery of group based workshops with young people. Young people will be supported in building portfolio of achievement and attain certificate which evidences that they are tenancy ready.

Timescales for completion: April 2021

4. We need to review the support and interventions provided to our care experienced young parents. The feedback from young people and our findings has prompted the need for a focused audit in respect of our care experienced young parents and parents to be. This audit is underway.

Timescales for completion: February 2021

5. We will jointly develop the information about the range of housing options in an easily accessible format and will be set out in our Local Offer.

Timescales for completion: March 2021

6. Joint workshops with colleagues from housing will be held to educate our social workers and foster carers about the range of housing options available.

Timescales for completion: February 2021

7. To jointly review and simplify the nomination and referral documentation for care leavers, ensuring that the language used is more reflective of the needs of care leavers, including how the Duty to Refer operates in Walsall when a care leaver is threatened with homelessness.
8. Review and streamline the processes in the WHG Young Person's Scheme to ensure that young people are not disadvantaged.
9. Review the access to Children's Services records to ensure that this is proportionate and further information is requested on the basis of an agreed protocol.
10. Care Leavers Leaving Custody – Jointly review and revise how Money Home Job, Children's Service, National Probation Service and the Youth Offending Services work together to support the release of young people from custody ensuring that there is appropriate pre-release planning in place. This will include the need to ensure accommodation needs are identified early, and actions taken to ensure care leavers do not leave custody without an accommodation plan in place.
11. Housing and Welfare Services to work with Children's Services to consider how a single pathway for care leavers can be developed in Walsall.

Timescales for completion: March 2021

12. Revised Joint Housing and Children's Services Housing Protocol

Timescales for completion: April 2021

Appendix 1 – Consultation with Young People

The Housing Consultation of young people

This report will look at the findings from consultation of young people around the support they received around housing when entering into independence.

Young people were spoken to individually by the Children's Champion supported by two child and family support workers giving them the opportunity to speak confidentially about their own experience of the support they received in terms of their housing and the service. Young people were very open about the level of support they received and the responses varied in different areas.

Preparation for living independently

Many of our young people had different journeys into independence, some came from foster care who wanted to be independent or where their placement broke down and no offer of stay and put and some from residential homes.

When looking at how well young people were prepared to develop skills to live independently the young people spoken to who had the stability of long term foster care gave a mixed response. Some said they were given chores such as 'pegging out the washing', 'hoovering', others said their foster family had really prepared them, they could 'cook meals', do their laundry and was able to manage their finances.

When looking at how young people were taught to develop their independent skills to establish if any direct work was undertaken by professionals who supported them with different resources, very few said there was any direct work undertaken from the professionals. Some mentioned there were occasional workshops for those who lived in semi independence accommodation but most said they had done a lot of the preparation themselves.

When asked if they knew about the Catch 22 resource Get Ready for Adult life designed specifically for Children and Young people in care or leaving care, very few young people knew about this resource, some responded 'not heard of it.' Some said 'it sounded familiar' but went on to say they did not know what it was and many said 'no'

Housing Options and Support.

As young people entered into independence the ones that were spoken to around their housing options, from the responses given, did not seem to have been given much of a choice when they spoke to by their PA's SW or housing officer. Not all young people spoke about different types of accommodation.

Some young people said 'Before I moved in the flat I was not given much option' 'I accepted the flat without viewing it' When the young person was asked how they felt about this the young person said she 'I was ok with this as it was a new build' One response from a young person went on to say 'I think the support around housing as failed, they put to many young people in the same area with problems'.

Another young person had a totally different experience saying in preparation for independence was very detailed in telling him what his options are and what is likely/unlikely to be available to him, compared to another young person who said '***I wasn't given options I was just told I was moving here***'

When asked about the level of intervention they had received from their Housing Officer this appeared limited. Some did not know who their officer was, some young people did not seem to know what a personalised housing plan was and said 'if this was discussed they could not remember'. A few said they were in private rented accommodation and did not read their agreements.

Although some young people were happy with their accommodation and felt supported from their PA's and Social worker and housing officer, some said they did not feel safe where they were living.

A young person whose foster placement had broken down and was sofa surfing with relatives which resulted in double eviction is now residing in private accommodation said 'I don't feel safe, the front door is like a bedroom door.' Another young person went on to say 'I lived by a person who did nasty things to me as a child, no one helped me to move despite me telling' The young person has now moved in what she considers a safe area, having asked for help which she reported was not good however was able to do her own housing application for her current property.

Employment and paying rent was also an issue raised with some young people when speaking about budgeting and their finances. Young people didn't feel they were supported very well around this area as the reality of having their own accommodation and managing their bills at an early age was difficult.

Although not every young person living independently was spoken to a young person spoke about getting into debt in the early part of their tenancy and not having support 'Nobody paid my first month's rent that put me in debt' which may resonate with many more young people who are trying to maintain their tenancy whilst being in first time employment.

Young people who were spoken to, most were very clear that they wanted to live independently despite not having all the skills to equip them. Young people spoke very positively about the support from their PA's whilst it was not always clear from the information received. Most young people felt confident to contact their PA's when they need help and reported most PA's got back to them if they was not available when young people tried to make contact. When discussing if young people had ever been faced with homelessness the young people spoken to have not found themselves in this situation however felt confident enough to get support from their PA if this did happen.

What have we done well:

The young people spoken to reported a mixed response of their experience of what the service did well for to support them. As a whole young people said their PA's were helpful. One young person said he couldn't say enough at how well he was supported from his PA and felt equipped for independence.

What some young people spoken to said ***'As soon as I said I wanted to move, my PA was on it straight away, they did most of the work for me, filled out application form, rang everyone for me and I can text them daily'***
'Always gives us a choice if we need help, Always there when we need them'
'Learnt me how to budget'
'Always someone you can contact'
'Residential staff was kind and caring'
'Not sure'
'Nothing'
'Helping me'
'WHG Helped with the decorating'
'Paid for a holiday in Malaga'
'Made no effort to build a relationship with me'

What did we not do well and could have been done better.

What young people said

'Let's a lot of young people down, gives us false hopes, make promises that never happen everything is a shamble' We want you to be honest with us'

'As soon as we made a mistake we were moved on we should be able to have more chances from the services given our history of care.'

' Could have helped me with money management, when I was in care I didn't need to buy food shopping, didn't know about rent, we expect it all to be given to us'

The service could have prepared us at an early age so it did not come as a shock when we was leaving care.

'Workers telling us they are over worked, we just want to be cared for'

'Would like more visits to check they are ok and they have food in the cupboard and the transition period from SW to PA could be extended until we are well established'

'When we present as being well, we are left alone, my worker hardly came and visited me, I always came to her. More home visits to ensure we are coping'.

The young people who participated in the consultation was mainly living independently, therefore received support only from their PA's. The young people in stay and put and semi-independent continue to receive support into full independence from their carers and staff.

What can we do better

The findings highlighted that young people received inconsistent levels of support. Whilst some young people did not want any support and felt equipped for independence and wanted to be left alone. This was not the case for others.

Whilst some of these resources listed below are available to young people this is what some young people spoken to suggest would help them now they are living independently which highlights inconsistent levels of support.

- Parenting Groups Mother and Baby Groups '***Once I had the children I felt so isolated***'
- Someone to talk to, '***if I have a problem they can help me fix it***'.
- Workshops to help manage finances, using different scenarios and resources around budgeting
- Support with moving
- Independent living skills '***I didn't feel ready for independence***'
- Basic DIY skills
- More home visits '***It can be very lonely living on your home***'
- 'More consistency from my PA'

Michelle Cummings
Children's Champion