

Update on Actions and Recommendations of Housing Report

Executive Summary

This report sets out progress to recommendations and actions arising from the Report presented to the Board in January 2021 in respect of children leaving care and care leavers as they transition into adulthood.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board

To update the Board of the progress of the actions and recommendations of Housing Report presented in January 2021.

Recommendations

- To note the progress of the recommendations and actions as set out in the report.

Background papers:

Housing Report presented to the Board in January 2021

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 consultation as part of our implementation of the actions and recommendations with practitioners across children's services and Housing as well as foster carers. The views of our young people have been central to our developments and these have been considered in the development of actions and recommendations.

Further consultation with the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Forum is scheduled in March 2022.

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Update on Actions and Recommendations of Housing Report.

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. 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 **Suitability of accommodation:** Local Authorities are required 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.”

- 1.5 Range of accommodation options in supporting the transition of children young people
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.
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. 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. This form of accommodation is not registered with Ofsted.
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.

Shared Lives scheme have to be registered with the Care Quality Commission. Carers are trained and vetted by the scheme. 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.

Young people are referred to the Adult Social Care Services 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 which is developing a tool kit to support practitioners 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.
 - a) The Council has developed Young Person's Housing Scheme in partnership with Walsall Housing Group which was first introduced in 2010. 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. This provides **60 units** to Young People who are at risk of becoming homeless.
 - b) Children's Services and Walsall Housing Group have a secured a further **16** units under the Young Person's Housing Scheme. 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 and their Personal Advisor. In order to strengthen the support to our care leaver we have appointed 2 part-time Housing Support Workers in November 2021 who are located in the Transition and Leaving Care Service.

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 support from housing support workers. 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.

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 not 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 **Progress against recommendations and actions agreed by the Corporate Parenting Board in January 2021**

2.1 **Recommendation 1**

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

Update: The cost of establishing a training flat was agreed, preliminary meetings have been held with housing providers and a specification has been developed. There has been some delay in progressing due to the pandemic and changes in staffing and this is now on track. We are currently reviewing best practice in neighbouring local authorities to establish how the flat will be used and possible locations are being explored. The appointment of housing support workers located in the service will greatly enhance the support to young people

The Training Flat will be integrated into the Local Offer in 2022/23.

2.2 **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.

Update: This recommendation was implemented and will be reflected in the revision of the protocol.

2.3 **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.

Update: Money Home Job, Walsall Housing Group and Children's Services have considered the circumstances in which we would need to secure settled accommodation for young people prior to their 18th birthday. We anticipate utilising the Young People Housing Scheme in the first instance as it is able to meet the needs of most of our young people.

It was acknowledged and recognised that in the main, most young people would not necessarily require the support of the Guarantor Scheme as they would be signposted/supported with accessing relevant services in line with their needs. However, for some there are particular circumstances where this would be of assistance to those that would otherwise be at a disadvantage to that of their peers, for example, Young Parents or when leaving custody and sometimes young people wishing to live with another adult (namely a partner or an older brother/sister). The numbers of young people that this would apply to is not significant.

However, we agreed that in some circumstances, a rent guarantor scheme would be a better option. The young person would still have access to support tailored to their needs.

Following agreement of the Directorate Management Team in March 2021 Walsall Children's Services have developed a rent guarantor scheme with Walsall Housing

Group which was agreed and implemented in 2021. We would be able to put this in place with other Social Landlords should this be required.

This is included in our Local Offer since 2021

2.4 **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.

Update: A report was presented to the Directorate Management Group 11 March 2021 setting out a range of options. When young people apply for their Universal Credit, Children's Service continue to support them financially until their claim is processed which can take between 3 to 6 weeks. This is backdated to their 18th birthday and we do not recoup the financial support they receive in the interim. Where young people are eligible for Housing Benefit this is also backdated to their 18th birthday and can covers up to 100% of their rent. This can take up to 2 to 4 weeks to be processed. This provides a financial buffer which reduces the risk of entering debt.

We can also support young people who have accrued debt through Discretionary Housing Payment but they would need meet specific criteria to access support from the fund.

On balance we felt that there were a number of measures in place to ensure that young people were financially supported in those first few weeks and on this basis this recommendation was not implemented.

2.5 **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.

Update: In February 2021 a report was presented to the Directorate Management Team which agreed to increase the Setting Up Home Grant (SHUG) from £2,000 to £2,500 which applies to **all** young people leaving care from 1 April 2021 irrespective of where they choose to live.

This is included in the our Local Offer since April 2021

2.6 **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

Update: The restrictions related to the Pandemic has meant that this recommendation has yet to be implemented and will be progressed from March 2022.

2.7 **Action: 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.**

Staying Put - 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.

There are currently 32 young people living with their former foster carers and this has increased since January 2021 when there were 20 young people in staying put arrangements.

We have reviewed and updated the Staying Put Policy to bring it in line with national guidance and sets out clear guidance for staff in respect the roles and responsibilities of the Staying Put Host, the Young Person and the Local Authority. The Policy has revised the "Living Together Agreement" to better support such arrangements.

We have benchmarked the Staying put offer of £230 per week across a number of local authorities. Further work is in progress to consider if the offer can be improved and this requires work with the DWP at a national level to consider if a process can be set up where the Housing element of allowance can be applied without disruption of payments to Staying Put Host.

- 2.8 **Action: Task and Finish Group will be established 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 certificates which evidences that they are tenancy ready.**

The Team Manager within the Transition and Leaving Care Service established a task and finish group in March 2021 and this has continued to meet and has involved service areas within Childrens Social Care and Housing.

The group has reviewed a range of independent living/skills toolkits across other providers and local authorities. The group concluded that the Catch 22 toolkit provides a solid foundation to build from and it is already embedded in practice.

The group has strengthen the Catch 22 tool kit in developing direct work sheets and collating resources which can be tailored to meet the individual needs of young people in preparation for independence. Once a young person is living independently we recognise the need for continued learning new skills in situ is just as important. The service have enhanced the 'tool kit' which covers the main aspects of living independently and focused on the following areas,

- What are your choices? (rights, entitlements and housing options)
- Life - what is all about? (isolation, social relationships, being a good neighbour and citizen)
- Staying Well (health and wellbeing)
- All things Money (managing money, paying bills and budgeting)
- Let's Cook
- Can you do it (basic DIY skills and what do in an emergency)

We have also developed a rolling programme which we will be delivered in group sessions either face to face and/or virtually. This can also be undertaken individually. The will be led and delivered by our Personal Advisors and Housing Support Workers in conjunction with colleagues from Health, DWP and Housing etc.

We aim to focus on building resilience and good support networks and awareness of how to manage living alone, reducing isolation and resolving problems. There will also be a focus on accommodation options, understanding the tenancy, being a good neighbour, paying bills etc.

Young people will be able to develop a portfolio of achievement which evidences their progress and support them in their future Housing applications

The programme will be held at the TLC Hub but can be delivered virtually for those young people who live out of borough or are unable to attend in person.

Our programme commences on 3rd March 2022, we will measure the impact by asking our young people to complete an evaluation after each session.

We will further consult with our Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Forum to involve their contribution ensure that the programme is tailored and can be adapted as required. We will continue to reflect on our learning and evaluate the impact.

- 2.9 **Action: 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.**

Update: This Audit was completed in March 2021 and identified improvements in our assessments, supervision and support for young care experienced parents. The recommendations of the Audit were presented to the Directorate's Performance Board in April 2021 and these have now been implemented.

One of the key recommendations was to strengthen support and in conjunction with the Daisy Team a bespoke offer has been developed which can be tailored to the needs of the individual young people.

- 2.10 **Action: 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.**

Update: We have jointly developed information about the range of Housing options and we are working with colleagues to ensure that these are reflected on our website. A key part of this work is the development of the website so that children in care and care leavers can access key information easily.

We have sought feedback from young people on how best to information is set out and there is ongoing consultation on the look and feel of the information shared with young people.

A separate report on the progress of this work is being considered by the Board.

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

Update: Joint workshops were held between Children's and Housing staff following the Audit in February and March 2021. There has also been ongoing joint work to progress the actions below.

We now have regular networking meetings across both services and use these sessions to share good practice, where we have worked well together as well as to reflect when we could have worked better. As new staff have joined these network meetings have helped to induct staff and build relationships.

2.12 Actions:

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

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.

Review and streamline the processes in the WHG Young Person's Scheme to ensure that young people are not disadvantaged

Update:

The above three actions are inter-linked and co-dependent.

Since February 2021 operational managers from the Transition and Leaving Care Team, Money, Home Job and WHG as well as our commissioners have worked closely together to review the processes and forms needed to progress a referral and /or an application for housing. Alongside this we have reviewed our transition arrangements between social workers and personal advisors. This now ensures that where appropriate housing colleagues are involved in the care planning meetings earlier.

As part of this work we have simplified and streamlined forms which have been agreed with our housing providers. We now have one form which is completed at the point of referral, the information is shared appropriately and there is no duplication. In addition we have reviewed the Triage documentation pack and this is now more reflective of the needs of care leavers, and though this remains lengthy to meet statutory requirements there is a greater understanding of what information is legally required by all agencies, why this is needed and that it is secured in a timely way.

We have developed a flow chart to help staff understand the pathway and their responsibilities. The process is reviewed at Housing Pathway Panel Meetings in respect of individual young people and where there are any issues or barriers these are addressed and resolved.

We have further clarified the Duty to Refer mechanism with all staff and the importance of triggering this with our Housing colleagues if someone is threatened with

homelessness. However the usage of this mechanism is limited as both teams work well together seeking to resolve the issues.

The Housing Pathway Panel provides a forum to identify any young people at risk of homelessness which ensures that wherever possible we are developing contingency plans for young people living in Walsall. The Duty to Refer mechanism is more likely to be used when young people live outside of Walsall.

This has culminated in a single pathway and all young people are now supported by the Young Person's Team who receive referrals directly from Personal Advisors/ Social workers; the young person themselves or via the Housing Pathway Panel. This includes young people leaving Custody

This piece of work has been time consuming but very positive and we have been able to measure the positive impact of the changes and strengthening of the relationships across the services.

- 2.14 **Action: 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.**

Update:

We have reviewed the processes for care leavers leaving custody and as a result of this our pathway is that we work with the Young Person's Team who are able to pull on any resources from the wider service if this is required. Our Rough Sleepers worker are also involved in the pre-release support and planning for young people leaving custody.

The Young Person's Team have a good understanding of the needs of care leavers. Managers and Personal Advisors take an active lead in ensuring that the Offender Management Unit in prisons and probation officers are agreed well in advance to ensure there is an accommodation plan in place prior to release. Personal Advisors will ensure that planning meetings involving Housing, Offender Manager and Probation to ensure that accommodation and support plans are in place to reduce the risk of reoffending behaviour.

The Housing Pathway Panel will consider those leaving custody to monitor pre-release planning and support.

Although, there is good joint work to identify suitable accommodation prior to release from custody, for some young people there can be challenges in securing appropriate accommodation as their risks cannot be managed safely. This can result in some young people being accommodated out of the Walsall area.

- 2.15 **Action: 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**

Update: This has been reviewed by the Group Manager and on balance there was agreement that the access was proportionate.

- 2.16 **Action: Revised Joint Housing and Children's Services Housing Protocol**

Update: There has been a delay in revising the joint protocol due to capacity issues. There has been considerable work has been undertaken to address the processes, roles and responsibilities based on the best practice guidance produced in 2020 by the Homelessness Advice and Support Team (HAST) within the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), and with the Department for Education (DfE), to support the development of joint protocols. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-housing-protocols-for-care-leavers/joint-housing-protocols-for-care-leavers-good-practice-advice>.

The draft protocol is in progress and will be completed by end of February 2022 for wider consultation, including advisers from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.