

Title of the Report:

Housing and accommodation needs for Care Leavers

Executive Summary

This report provides information about the statutory requirements on the Council to ensure that older children in Care and Care leavers have suitable accommodation and support to live independently.

The report highlights the legal framework which informs how the local authority's Childrens and Housing departments work together.

It set out the proposed review of joint housing protocol for care leavers and the Local Offer.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board

To inform the Board of the proposed review of joint housing protocol for care leavers 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.
- The findings of the audit and the revised joint Housing Protocol and the Local Offer be presented to the Corporate Parenting Board for their scrutiny and approval.

Background papers:

None

Resource and legal considerations

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

Children Act 1989
Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000
Children and Social Work Act 2017
Homelessness Act 2002
Homelessness Reduction Act 2017)

Council Corporate Plan Priorities

- Children have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.
- Communities are prospering and resilient with all housing needs met in safe and healthy places that build a strong sense of belonging and cohesion.

Citizen impact

Looked after children and care leavers are citizens of Walsall and as Corporate Parents we have a duty to look after them as we would our own children and prepare them for adulthood so they can fulfil their potential and play a full and rewarding part in their communities.

Environmental impact

None

Performance management

Corporate Parenting Board ensures everyone works together to fulfil the corporate parenting role and to hold each other to account for making this happen.

- it acts as the visible organisational champion for looked after children and young people and care leavers, promoting their rights, entitlements and aspirations;
- the mobilisation and optimum use of resources available to get the best chance of success for children in care and to support care leavers to positively transition to adulthood and independence.

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

The views of young people will be ascertained as part of the audit which will be undertaken in August and September.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The role of the local authority as a corporate parent means that meeting the accommodation needs of care leavers requires partnership working across departments and agencies. The housing needs of care leavers must be addressed before they leave care and the planning for all children in care needs to consider their most appropriate accommodation options as they leave care. There is a range of factors that should be considered when assessing the accommodation needs of care leavers and include:

- the particular accommodation and support needs of the young person
- the young person's wishes and feelings.
- the personal characteristics and experiences of the young person
- the risks to the young person if s/he becomes homeless

1.2 Young People leaving care have a range of accommodation options

- Staying Put- We encourage young people to remain with their existing foster placement until they are ready to live independently.
- Supported Lodgings - These can be provide both in a family home setting and provides the young person with a safe place to live with support
- Supported accommodation - Some care leavers remain living in semi-independent accommodation beyond their 18th birthday. At the current time these are exclusively Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and during this time the costs of this accommodation is met wholly by the Local Authority.
- Assisted Living arrangements or Shared Lives provision for adults with additional needs.
- Privately rented or Social Housing
- Walsall Housing Group Young Person's Housing Scheme
- Return to their own family network
- 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.

1.3 Young people in residential and supported accommodation are reviewed through the External Placements Panel chaired by the Director of Children's Social Work or the Housing Pathway Meeting, chaired by the Head of Service.

- The External Placements Panel includes representation from the Clinical Commissioning Group, Children's Commissioning, Adult Mental Health and Social Care Managers as well as operational managers from Children's social care.

- The Housing Pathway Meeting focuses on all young people aged 16 and 17 years where housing accommodation will be required. The Housing Pathway Meeting includes representation from Money, Home Job, Walsall Housing Group, Children's Commissioning Team and operational managers from Corporate Parenting and Transition and Leaving Care teams.

These meetings are held fortnightly and ensure that there is robust oversight of young people's planning to support a smooth transition to adulthood.

- 1.4 For many young people, there is a transition period between children's home or foster care and taking up their own tenancy. Some young people will either "stay put" until they move into their own accommodation or live in semi-independent or supported living accommodation.
- 1.5 In 2019, Children's Services commissioned 16 units from the WHG Young Person's scheme and this has enable us to secure housing accommodation for young people before their 18th birthday, based on an assessment of their needs. The support that the young person needs to develop sufficient independence skills and become tenancy ready is then spot purchased. The level of support can range from 24 hours a day at the beginning of such an arrangement, to 5-10 hours per week as a young person approaches 18 years of age and this can be extended post 18 based on the young person's needs.
- 2.0 **Joint Housing and Children's Service Protocol / Local Offer for Care Leavers.**
- 2.1 **Legal Framework:**

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Homelessness Act 2002 (HA 2002) are designed 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 have priority need status.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 placed new duties so that everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness will have access to help 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.

- 2.2 The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) published the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities in February 2018, which sets out how local authorities should exercise their homelessness functions under Part 7 of the Housing Act, as amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
- 2.3 In order to ensure that the housing and children's services of Walsall Borough Council each play a full role in providing the required resources and support to care leavers, a joint housing protocol was developed and agreed by the Executive Directors of Children's Services and Resources and Transformation in 2018. The protocol aims:
- To ensure the effective discharge of corporate responsibilities between Walsall's housing and children's services by jointly addressing the diverse accommodation needs of young people leaving care.
 - To prevent care leavers becoming homeless, thereby avoiding the need for care leavers to enter the homelessness system.
 - To support young people to become responsible and successful tenants.
- 2.4 Our Local Offer sets out how we will provide care leavers with suitable accommodation to live taking into account their needs and wishes. In respect of the Housing accommodation our current offer includes:
- Care leavers receive council tax relief irrespective of whether they resided in Walsall or out of the Borough. The latter was approved by the Council in March 2020.
 - Care leavers have priority status for Housing in Walsall and secure "Gold" banding at 18.
 - Walsall Council has a zero tolerance for bed and breakfast accommodation.
 - Money, Home and Job Directorate and Children's Services will work together to reduce the risk of young person becoming intentionally homeless.
 - Care leavers in foster care are offered the opportunity to remain with their foster carers until the age of 21.
 - Care Leavers are supported by their Personal Advisors and Housing Officers to maintaining their tenancy, including paying rent, council tax and bills.

- There is a range of housing accommodation and supported accommodation provision in the Borough and care leavers are offered some choice but this could be improved.

- 2.5 Leaving home is a challenging time for all young people, whatever their circumstances. Children and young people with care experience come from a range of backgrounds, and like all children and young people, are individuals with their own unique strengths and needs. 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 on is imperative.
- 2.6 Research consistently highlights that care leavers are more likely than other young people to become homeless or experience housing instability. Early life experiences, and often multiple placements during childhood impact on their readiness and often they will leave care earlier than other young people. Unlike many of their peers, some care leavers will not have the option to return to their care setting if their housing situation breaks down or they need additional support for a period. These factors combine disproportionately to increase the risk and occurrence of homelessness.
- 2.7 The joint housing protocol developed in 2018 was put in place 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. For some of our young people there have been challenges in supporting them through that transition period, at the same time there have also been very positive outcomes for other young people with effective joint working with Housing and one of our social landlords.
- 2.8 We are reviewing our joint working arrangements and as part of this we will be undertaking a joint themed audit to understand the experiences of young people leaving care or who have left care in the last 12 months will be completed by Children's Services and Money, Home, Job. As part of the audit we will be seeking the views of young people. The audits will be completed in August / September and will inform the revision of the joint housing protocol and how our Local Offer can be improved.

It is proposed that the findings of the audit and the revised joint Housing Protocol and the Local Offer will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Board for their scrutiny and approval