

Committee Title Corporate Parenting Board
Date 9 September 2020
Report Title Care Leavers Update report

Choose an item.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education and Early Help

Local Councillor(s):

Executive Director: Theresa Leavy, Interim Lead for Children's Services

Report Author: Kirsten Hallett
Title: Care Leavers
Tel: 01305 228221
Email: kirsten.hallett@dorsetcc.gov.uk

Report Status: Public

Recommendation: For all board members to note content of the report for information only.

Reason for Recommendation:

1. Executive Summary

Corporate parents must ensure that all eligible looked after young people and care leavers over 16 have a Pathway Plan, that the local authority is in touch with care leavers and that they receive the help and support to which they are entitled.

2. Financial Implications

N/a

3. Climate implications

N/a

4. Other Implications

N/A

5. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Medium

6. Equalities Impact Assessment

This report identifies how the team delivering services to eligible looked after young people and care leavers works from the same basic principles in terms of equality and equal opportunity. Whilst each young person is unique with individual needs, the overarching legislative framework and DCC policy ensures all young people are given the same opportunities.

7. Appendices

N/a

8. Background Papers

N/a

9. Care Leavers Services

9.1 Context:

- (i) Young people cease to be looked after at the age of 18, although some looked after children may choose to leave care before this. However, the local authority continues to have responsibilities towards them until at least the age of 25. These duties and responsibilities vary according to the circumstances of the young person and their length of time in care prior to the age of 16. Within three months of their sixteenth birthday (or three months of becoming looked after if they are aged 16–18), each child must have a pathway plan, setting out how they will be supported in their transition to adulthood and based on a needs assessment and their care plan. The pathway plan should also include other plans, health, education and employment, as well as the transition plan for children who are disabled who are subject to an Education, Health and Care Plan.
- (ii) This report will focus entirely on care leavers, that is young people aged 16 and over who have left care with a legal status of Relevant or Former Relevant.

- (iii) We currently have 262 young people receiving an active leaving care services, and we know that this number will significantly increase by end of August 2021 with 91, 16/17-year olds already present in our resident care group. In addition we have 121, 21-25 year olds for whom we have a duty to keep in touch with annually and whom can return to receive an active service should they need support.
- (iv) We therefore have a total of 474 eligible and former relevant care leavers for whom we offer a level of leaving care service

9.2 In Touch:

- (i) We are in touch with most of our care leavers (98%) and during the COVID19 lockdown period were in touch with our care leavers weekly. Of the 262 relevant and former relevant care leavers, we are in contact with 257 (98%)
- (ii) Of the 5 young people we are not in contact with, one care leaver has elected not to have contact with us, 2 care leavers have no right to remain living in the UK (appeal rights exhausted) and have not responded to attempts to contact them and 2 are living with family and don't want us to contact them.
- (iii) The team tries to locate young people with whom we have lost contact by various means. Sometimes parents will pass messages on from us or we locate them through social media or by speaking to other young people

9.3 Accommodation:

- (i) Most of our young people (83%) remained in care until their 18th birthday. However, we know not as many of our young people are benefiting from Staying Put arrangements as we would like. We are looking at how we are supporting foster carers to continue to provide a safe and stable home for our young people after they turn 18 and into adulthood.
- (ii) Whilst most of our care leavers are in suitable accommodation (94%) we know we need to do more to ensure all our care leavers have safe and stable accommodation that meets their needs.
- (iii) Accommodation is generally regarded as suitable if it provides safe, secure and affordable housing for young people and will usually exclude emergency accommodation used in a crisis. Accommodation that clearly exposes the young person to risk of harm or social exclusion by reason of its location or other factors is coded as unsuitable.

- (iv) Our DC in-house supported lodgings scheme currently houses 16 care leavers. We have 25 supported lodgings providers offering a total of 26 placements. 7 of these placements are currently on hold due to personal circumstances of providers.

Recruitment is difficult as young people are staying in the family home for longer due to increases in rent costs and a lack of affordable housing in the rental sector meaning they can't afford to live away from home. The supported lodgings team continues to work with the DC media team to look at innovative ways of advertising, including the use of social media.

- (v) We currently have 20 staying put arrangements, mainly with family and friends carers. This number is set to increase and likely to include a growing number of staying put arrangements with IFA (Independent Fostering Agency) carers.

We have received an increase of Government grant funding for staying put. This increase will address the projected shortfall which is mainly due to the increase in IFA staying put arrangements given that they cost significantly more than in house staying put arrangements.

- (vi) A total of 110 care leavers live in independent rented properties. This is a mix of private and local authority housing. However, affordability is a key issue as benefit housing element rates have not kept pace with rent costs which landlords can charge in the current private rental market. Supply and demand has driven costs up. Letting agent's fees are also prohibitive. An additional risk is that the private rental sector has no security of tenure and landlords are at liberty to end tenancies when they want their properties back.
- (vii) To date we have no local authority housing allocation from our Dorset housing providers and we need to drive this work forward to secure affordable long term housing for care leavers.
- (viii) Work is ongoing with Adult services to reconfigure the former young people's supported accommodation contract. This is a former Supporting People budget which could be combined with existing spend on care leaver accommodation to increase purchasing power. There is now a sub-regional framework for supported accommodation for care leavers.

9.3(a) Unsuitable Accommodation:

- (i) 16 out of 262 care leavers are living in unsuitable accommodation. 2 in custody, 2 residence not known, 8 in emergency and B&B accommodation placed through Homelessness legislation, 4 are in unstable accommodation staying with friends.
- (ii) Short term use of bed and breakfast provided by the Housing Department to exercise their duties under the Homelessness legislation to avoid homelessness is generally considered suitable.
- (iii) For the 8 care leavers who have been placed in emergency accommodation, including B&B, under the Homelessness legislation, PA's work closely with the Housing officer and care leaver to help them move on as quickly as possible into secure affordable and suitable housing.
- (iv) One of the major challenges due to COVID19 has been a delay for move on within both the private rented and home choice housing sectors.
- (v) Limited private rented properties were advertised during this time and there were also COVID19 restrictions in place which prevented moving.
- (vi) The home choice bidding system was closed temporarily due to COVID19, preventing any bids on local housing association properties until this re-opened mid July 2020.
- (vii) The impact of these delays and other emergency measures taken during COVID19 includes a current processing time of up to 16 weeks for housing register applications meaning that new applicants are unable to access the home choice system until their applications are completed.
- (viii) The impact of COVID19 delay will begin to reduce as colleagues in our Housing Departments are able to catch up with volume of work and demands, and the private housing sector become more confident to advertise properties once again.

9.4 Pathway Plans.

- (i) The statutory requirement is that the Pathway Plan should be reviewed at least every 6 months. Personal Advisers work with a

significant caseload of up to 30 care leavers and have found it difficult to keep on top of Pathway Plan reviews. Plans are a significant piece of work and are not always prioritised, particularly when there are conflicting pressures on time.

- (ii) It is the intention of the team to review the pathway plan document which is a significant document to be more succinct, clearer and therefore more relevant for our care leavers
- (iii) It is also anticipated that caseloads for PA's will reduce following the successful recruitment of an additional 3.5 FTE PA's which in turn will increase capacity to complete reviews on time.

9.5 Education Training and Employment:

- (i) Despite being in touch with most care leavers, we are not supporting enough of our young people to be in education, employment or training, with 49% of care leavers accessing education, employment or training.
- (ii) This is area where we need to strengthen practice and we will be working with our partners to improve our offer for young people leaving our care. It is accepted that the number of care leavers who are NEET is high.
- (iii) This reflects a diverse group of young people whose needs are complex due to a number of factors including disability, mental health, use of substances which disrupt opportunities in terms of education, employment or training and coming late into care due to family breakdown having already disengaged from formal education.
- (iv) There are achievements to celebrate. We currently have 31 care leavers at University and we currently have 2 dedicated PA's working with care leavers who are studying at University to ensure that our under graduates maintain their places in their education settings.
- (v) We have recently successfully recruited additional PA's to the team and once in post, we will be able to increase our capacity to support care leavers at University, strengthen practice and improve our NEET offer to care leavers.

- (vi) All looked after young people and care leavers who apply for DC apprenticeships are guaranteed an interview, and the team have very recently collaborated with DC Highways and supported 3 care leavers to achieve an interview for a Highways apprenticeship.

9.6 COVID-19:

- (i) In response to the DfE Social Care Guidance, our Personal Adviser's are continuing to provide a good level of support to our care leavers through the current pandemic crisis:
- (ii) All leaving care PA's are actively working from home and have been visiting care leavers in the community observing social distancing guidelines.
- (iii) In the first weeks of the crisis, PA's were in contact with every care leaver on their caseload at least weekly, using a variety of contact methods including WhatsApp, Facetime, Skype, Messenger and phone call.
- (iv) Every care leaver was sent a weekly text from us via GOV.UK Notify reminding them to keep in touch, let us know if they become unwell or need us to help them in any way. The messages varied week to week from text to infographic to try and reach as many care leavers as possible.
- (v) We have a spreadsheet with details of care leavers who are reporting they are feeling unwell or who are socially isolating due to their own or a members of the household being vulnerable. These care leavers received a phone call asking what the PA can do to support them eg shopping, medicine, but also to ensure they get medical advice if they need it.
- (vi) We secured 10 reconditioned mobile smart phones from our IT department for vulnerable care leavers to enable them to keep in touch with us and family. PA's also purchased sim cards and bundles to ensure that care leavers can keep in touch with the people who are important to them.

- (vii) We purchased and distributed 30 new smart mobile phones which were supplied to care leavers with DC Daisy Sim cards providing them with free calls and texts with up to 10GB of data per month. The cost of these Sim cards to the team are low (£3 per card) and this is something the team aspire to include in our finance policy so that every care leaver can benefit from the means to keep in touch with us, family and friends.
- (viii) DC IT provided 60 reconditioned laptops which PA's distributed to care leavers to avoid isolation during COVID19 lockdown.
- (ix) 34 Laptops and 62 routers were provided on loan to care leavers procured from the DfE offer of IT equipment to enable care leavers to access education
- (x) Every PA has an AllPay card which they can use to purchase emergency/essential goods, but also purchases to help care leavers who are socially isolated. Whilst the large supermarkets were fully booked in terms of delivery slots, PA's are using Snappy Shopper and other App's to arrange for food and essentials to be delivered to care leavers who can't get out.
- (xi) The PA's know the care leavers they are most concerned about, perhaps due to poor mental health, and are ensuring regular contact with them but also signposting them to reputable online support such as Kooth.
- (xii) Friends of Dorset Care Leavers organised weekly activities through the Zoom App including quizzes, bingo, competitions, challenges, a book club and a Netflix watch party. The charity has also provided "summer essentials packs", rainbow craft packs, face coverings, premium memberships to the Breethe App, These have proved extremely popular with care leavers. Now that we can meet in small groups of up to 6 households, the charity have a social distanced paddle boarding event taking place in early September
- (xiii) A Web page entitled "Coronavirus information station for Dorset care experienced children and young people" has been produced by the

team with the support of Louise Drury and Claire Ryan East. This has links to useful information about Covid-19.

- (xiv) The PA's have ensured that care leavers at University have somewhere to stay if they want or need to leave their Uni accommodation. Our facilities colleagues were approached to see if property owned by DC could be used for 2 care leavers, but they made their own arrangements, so this wasn't required. Useful contacts were made though.
- (xv) Equilibrium approached us and have offered an online listening ear support for care leavers via Messaging.
- (xvi) Examples of practical support provided – PA's have purchased additional data to enable a care leaver to access Smart TV, provided online grocery deliveries to care leavers who were shielding, other PA's have purchased access to the internet and paid for phone top ups. Most of these purchases are low cost at £10-£15 but make a huge difference to the lives of care leavers. Boredom has been an issue and purchases have been made via Amazon, delivered direct to the care leaver for activity and craft materials. We've paid £20 for a Play Station controller which provides contact with the outside world.
- (xvii) There have in fact been some positive lessons learned from the COVID19 experience. We have learned as a team that engaging with care leavers through social media appears to resonate with their lived experiences and is a successful way of engaging with care leavers.

9.7 New Belongings:

- (i) We are partners with Coram Voice, together with 7 other Local Authorities, to deliver the New Belongings programme. This has been developed from the successful Bright Spots programme and included undertaking the "*Your Life Beyond Care*" survey, developed with care experienced young people, which measures the subjective wellbeing of young care leavers.
- (ii) We are awaiting the results of the "*Your Life beyond Care*" survey, which are anticipated to be received towards the end of August.

- (iii) We have undertaken a detailed self-assessment of our services with our partner agencies as part of New Belongings to identify priorities for action.
- (iv) Our New Belongings action plan is to be drafted at the next New Belongings meeting on 23rd September, coproduced with our care leavers.
- (v) Through New Belongings, managers and PA's have opportunities to come together with other Local Authority managers and PA's to benefit from peer and practice learning.

9.8 Staff Team and Recruitment:

- (i) The recent reorganisation in Dorset has taken place and the Care Leavers Team now sits under Adolescent Services, managed by Simon Fraiz-Brown
- (ii) The Care Leavers team consists of 2 Team Managers, a Supported Lodgings Team (comprising of 1 supported lodgings Co-ordinator and 1 supported lodgings officer), and we have recently recruited 3.5 FTE PA's to increase our team of PA's from 9 FTE to 12.5 FTE. This equates to 17 part time and full time PA's in the team.
- (iii) There are currently the following vacancies within the team: Care Leavers Team Manager, Supported Lodgings officer, Homelessness Prevention worker
- (iv) No member of the team has been unwell due to COVID19, however if an allocated PA does become unwell and unable to keep in contact with their care leavers, the TM would ask the duty PA to step in.

9.9 Challenges:

- (i) Universal credit comes at a cost to the local authority in that no payment is made for the first week of the claim. This results in our having to pay rent and living costs for care leavers who are entitled to welfare benefits. The delay in payment of up to 6 weeks is also unhelpful as we have to subsidise rent and living costs until Universal credit starts to be paid. As payment is made direct to the care leaver, there is little chance of reimbursement from them once the back payment is made into their bank accounts.

- (ii) The number of care leavers suffering significant mental health problems, but lack of access to services at the point they are ready to access them continues to be an issue. We estimated when Ofsted asked the question that approximately 30% of our care leavers had a mental health problem which had an impact on their day to day lives.
- (iii) Use of substances, cannabis, legal highs and alcohol is prevalent in care leavers and almost accepted by them and their peers as a normal activity. Although there are services available to help care leavers reduce their reliance on substances, most do not view their use of substances as problematic and do not want to stop.
- (iv) MOSAIC reports have improved, and we are also awaiting the publication of a new Care Leavers Report which aims to provide a clear and succinct overview of our activity. There is however some data we are unable to record or retrieve. For example, we can only establish how many care leavers have mental health issues by asking the relevant 16+ workers.
- (v) A nationwide shortage of local authority housing means that private tenancies are often the best chance of securing housing for care leavers. This is an expensive prospect as private landlords often use letting agents who charge administrative fees and the cost of reference checks, along with one month's rent and one month's rent in advance

10 Our Successes:

- (i) 9 care leavers have just graduated from their studies at University. Their success was celebrated at a virtual Graduation Party on Thursday 20th August.
- (ii) 2 care leavers were recognised for their entries into the Coram Voice #Voices2020 competition. Their work won 1st prize and a commendation for sharing their thoughts and feelings during COVID19
- (iii) We have in July set up a fortnightly virtual "drop in" on Microsoft Teams, where we are joined by our link workers/SPOC from health, education, housing and benefits. This format enables care leavers to virtually join the meeting and to talk on a one to one basis with specialists in different areas to resolve any issues they may have. Each drop in has been attended by care leavers, and we intend to

continue these sessions as part of our local offer beyond COVID19 restrictions.

- (iv) We are considering how best to promote and advertise these sessions which we anticipate will provide a clear pathway of engagement for our older care leavers to meet the extended duty to care leavers up to the age of 25 years.

10.1 Areas of focus for the next 6 months:

There are several areas of work acknowledged for the service:

- (i) Successful recruitment of a Team Manager, Supported Lodgings officer, Homelessness Prevention worker
- (ii) Personal adviser caseloads have been high and it is anticipated that caseloads will reduce once the recent PA appointments start with the team.
- (iii) Once the new PA's are in post it is anticipated that every eligible care leaver (aged 16-18) will become allocated a PA who will give advice and guidance to the SW / young person, attend the final 2 LAC reviews and use the transfer checklist to keep track of essential tasks before the young person is 18 and transfers to the PA.
- (iv) This will be monitored through the step up, step down and step across procedure of locality line of sight meetings to support a smooth and well managed transition to Leaving Care services. The allocated social worker will attend the Locality Line of Sight meeting when the child is between the age of 15 ½ years and 16 years.
- (v) The Care Leavers Team are supporting the Virtual School with the organisation of the Dorset Council Star Awards for Children in Care and Care Leavers which is taking place virtually on 10th October 2020. Nominations are currently being received from Social Workers and PA's
- (vi) New Belongings action plan is to be created at the New Belongings meeting on 23rd September.
- (vii) The Care Leavers finance policy has been drafted and work is to be done to seek approval of the budget and then publishing this policy. The experience of COVID19 has provided us with opportunities we would aspire to extend to all care leavers for example the provision

of a phone and Daisy Sim card so that every care leaver can benefit from the means to keep in touch with us, family and friends.

- (viii) Continued work on improving our Local offer Pathway plan review document to be revised to provide a more meaningful review process for care leavers. Currently MOSAIC provides a combined needs assessment and pathway plan document which should be completed within 3 months of the eligible care leavers 16th birthday and replaces the care plan. MOSAIC does not have a separate review pathway plan document
- (ix) The Care Leavers accommodation project in Weymouth area could see the creation of up to an additional 12 bedded provision for care leavers

Data taken from MOSAIC reports 21.08.2020 (not comparable with CIN census)

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.