

Corporate Parenting Board

28 May 2025

Care Leaver Service Annual Report 2024-2025

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member and Portfolio:

Cllr C Sutton, Children's Services, Education & Skills

Local Councillor(s):

Executive Director:

P Dempsey, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

The purpose of this annual report is to provide Dorset Council's Corporate Parenting Board with information on the activity of the Care Leavers Service from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. This will ensure that the Board has an overview of the achievements, progress, and challenges in meeting the needs of Dorset's Care Leavers over the last 12 months. The report has been drawn together to highlight key developments and performance of the Care Leavers Service in exercising their duty to our care experienced young people.

Recommendation:

That the Board notes and welcomes the positive outcomes that are being achieved by Dorset's care leavers and the plans of the Care Leaver Service to continue to improve outcomes throughout 2025/26.

For the Board to continue to promote the corporate parenting responsibility across all of Dorset Council.

Reason for Recommendation:

That the Board continues to offer support and challenge to the Care Leaver Service in maximising the offer for care leavers.

1. Background

- 1.1 Protecting and looking after children and young people is one of the most important jobs that councils do when a child or young person, for whatever reason, cannot safely stay at home or with relatives or friends. Being a corporate parent means doing everything that can be done for every care experienced young person to give them the opportunities that other children and young people have.
- 1.2 Despite the ongoing focus within legislation and policy, cared experienced young people have poorer outcomes compared to their peers. For example, care leavers are less likely to be in employment, education, or training post 18, four times more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system and four times more likely to have a mental health condition. It is Dorset's responsibility to ensure all our young people reach their potential and are supported to develop into independent, self-confident adults.
- 1.3 We strongly believe that all care leavers should have a positive experience of leaving care and should continue to receive on-going support based on a model of inter-dependence to assist them to deal with adult responsibilities. We encourage our young people to continue to access the support available to them until they are 25, providing an equitable service meaning that everyone has what they need to achieve equal outcomes by recognising and addressing disparities.
- 1.4 In September 2023, Dorset Council agreed to make care experience a protected characteristic. It's recognition that young people's experience of being in the care system can be a potential source of discrimination similar to other protected characteristics such as race or disability. We continue to work with all our corporate parents and partners to ensure that our young people are supported to achieve, where communities thrive, and families are supported to be the best they can be.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 We have high expectations and aspirations for all our care leavers. When young people are preparing to leave care, we want to ensure that they feel as ready as possible and know what to expect. We recognise they may

not be fully equipped with practical independence skills or have the knowledge to access the range of services that they may need.

- 2.2 Our model of interdependence aims to ensure that our young people have the support of the Personal Advisor (PA) to guide them around key areas including housing, health, employment, education, leisure, benefits, and other community services
- 2.3 Since January 2023 there has been a separate judgement to the framework for inspecting local authority children's services (ILACS) specifically about the experiences and progress of care leavers. Inspections have considered whether local authorities are making good decisions for care leavers and what they are doing to support them into adulthood. The separate focus and overall judgement provides care leavers with a prominent voice within inspections and allows for scrutiny to highlight what is working well and what needs to be a greater area of focus.
- 2.4 The outcome of the recent ILACS inspection (March 2025) is not available at the time of completing this report and is due to be published on 9 May 2025. We welcomed the opportunity to share our progress and the impact of our work on our young people.
- 2.5 **Context**
- 2.6 Care Leavers are young people aged 18 years to 25 years of age who have been in care as a child. There are four different categories, and each category has an associated entitlement status:
 - **Eligible child** - 16 or 17 years old in care and have been in care for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14, will meet the criteria as an 'eligible child'.
 - **Relevant child** - 16 or 17 years old, have left care, but were in care on or after their 16th birthday and have been in care for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14. This applies if they have been part of the youth justice system or hospitalised on or after their 16 birthday.
 - **Former relevant child** - 18 to 21 years old and if they were previously either an eligible or relevant child.
 - **Qualifying child** - 16 to 21 years old and have been in care or, if disabled, have been privately fostered after reaching 16, but do not qualify as eligible, relevant, or former relevant (have spent less than

13 weeks in care). May also qualify if subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) and were looked after immediately before the SGO was made, or, if previously an eligible child, but returned to live with someone with parental responsibility (PR) for more than six months before their 18th birthday.

- 2.7 From April 2018 the Children & Social Work Act 2017 introduced a new duty on local authorities, to provide Personal Advisor (PA) support to all Care Leavers up to age 25 (if they want this support). Under previous legislation, local authorities were required to only provide Care Leavers with support from a PA until they reach age 21, continuing up to age 25 only if a Care Leaver was engaged in education or training. We are actively supporting 84 care leavers age 21-25 which is around 30% of our overall active care leavers.
- 2.8 Dorset Council has a corporate parenting strategy which is for all our care experienced children and young people. The strategy includes a focus on young people who are preparing to leave care between the ages of 16 and 17, or who have already left care and are between the ages of 16 and 25.
- 2.9 Various legislation and policies have influenced the development of this strategy, including the Children Act (1989), Housing Act (1996), and the Children and Social Work Act (2017). The strategy outlines several outcomes to improve care leavers' lives:
- **Outcome 1:** Enhance access to education, employment, and training.
 - **Outcome 2:** Ensure care leavers experience stability in their lives and feel safe and secure.
 - **Outcome 3:** Improve access to health support.
 - **Outcome 4:** Help care leavers achieve financial stability and independence.
 - **Outcome 5:** Foster strong family networks and support them in reaching their full potential
- 2.10 We strongly believe that it is everyone's responsibility to help those who have been in care to overcome the difficulties that they experienced in their childhoods, so that they can lead successful adult lives. Dorset Council aims to provide care leavers with the same level of care and support that other young people receive from their parents. The goal is to

ensure services are “good enough for my child” and to be the best Corporate Parents in the country.

- 2.11 We are partners with Bright spots, together with 7 other Local Authorities, to deliver the New Belongings programme. The survey allows us to better understand what makes life good for care leavers and how we can improve our support by co-producing solutions with them. Our most recent Bright Spots survey was completed in February 2024 with the findings delivered in February 2025. Alongside our care experienced network, we have identified priorities and developed an action plan for improvement. This is overseen and monitored from our Corporate Parenting Partners Delivery Group (CPPDG) which reports to Corporate Parenting Board.
- 2.12 The Bright spots survey was completed by 79% of care experienced young people.
- 99% found it was easy to contact their PA (personal advisor)
 - 91% felt involved with pathway planning
 - 95% had access to the internet with 97% having a smartphone.
- 2.13 The survey has identified the area’s we need to strengthen and through the care network and participation we have been able to agree the priorities for 2025-2027 which include:
- Increasing housing options for care leavers
 - Ensuring that all care experienced young people know the reasons why they were in care and have details of their own care histories.
 - Support all our young people with staying in touch with the people who are important to them and help them to build their support networks.
 - Support care experienced young people to feel positive about their future- to have employment and training opportunities, be financially independent and to be happy with themselves.
- 2.14 The care leaver team works closely with the Youth Voice Team, who use a variety of tools to hear feedback from young people. They continue to explore and check the inclusivity and accessibility of this. There is not one preferred way for young people to share their voice and so a range of options is required. The team have several tools that help with digital

interaction and undertake 1-1 phone calls or in person visits where this is preferred. The Head of Service for care leavers also attends at least 3 networking meetings a year which allows for discussions and opportunities for young people to share their views and thoughts and to be updated on progress made with the priorities.

- 2.15 Over the last 12 months the network has been instrumental in developing and continuing to shape the service and support for our young people. We have heard about the importance of access to driving lessons and other financial support- so we have reviewed and updated our financial offer, policy and procedures and heard about their views regarding having the right people to help and support them and started the process of developing our training and competency framework.
- 2.16 Dorset Council make a promise to all care leavers to share responsibilities by working with people who can help make a difference to the lives of care experienced children and young people. Details of the promise can be accessed via the internet: [The Dorset Promise - Dorset Council](#)
- 2.17 We have consulted with care leavers and stakeholders and also developed a 'local offer' which provides detailed information about the service and support available to care leavers, including information about both their statutory entitlements as well as any discretionary support we provide. This is provided to young people leaving care at age 16 and can be accessed via the internet: [Local Offer for care leavers - Dorset Council](#). This is reviewed and updated regularly to meet the changing needs of our young people.
- 2.18 The local offer highlights our equity of support with a focus on fairness and recognising individual need. Equality of services is important to treat everyone the same however we understand that our care leavers have different needs, and we want them to have access to what they need to achieve equal outcomes, even if that may be that some of our young people get a different service and approach than others.
- 2.19 In January 2025 we launched the Graduating Care Southwest (GCSW) app which provides information on regional and local offers for care experienced young people, enabling information to be accessible to all our young people.
- 2.20 Our service is needs led with a strength in our relational practice, emphasising that effective relationships between our PAs and care leavers are fundamental to positive outcomes.

- 2.21 At the end of March 2025, we had 558 care leavers in our family. 300 were former relevant care leavers (aged 18-25 and previously an eligible child) and were receiving a service.
- 2.22 The role of the PA (Personal Advisor) in Dorset is to complete timely pathway plans, co-produced with young people and review every 6 months (or more depending on need).
- 2.23 Our young people have told us that pathway planning is an area of strength (A Bright Spot of Practice) and enables discussions between the young person and PA to focus on key areas of need and agree actions, goals and review achievements.
- 2.24 We continue to review our progress and performance in this area. In March 2025 we had completed 92% of pathway plans within timescales, with plans in place to ensure there is no drift or delay in those that are outside the timescales. We know our young people well and will always update their pathway plan when there is a significant change in their circumstances. It's important that the plans are collaborative and purposeful and centred around the individual needs and aspirations of our young people.
- 2.25 Keeping in touch with our care leaving young people is a key part of the PA role. By maintaining relationships and communication we can ensure our young people have access to all relevant services, that we can continue to support them in preparing for adulthood and independent living, access suitable housing, support them with their finances (and budgeting) and access (or maintain engagement with) Education, Employment or Training.
- 2.26 We are in touch with 99.33% of care leavers (17-25) which is above our target of 93% and shows the commitment we have to building and maintaining significant relationships with all of our young people. The Head of Service reports monthly to the Senior Leadership Team to identify those care leavers who are not in touch with the service and consider creative ways we can re-engage.
- 2.27 We continue to contact all our care leavers at least annually to share information on what they are entitled to and the support we are able to offer them, at any point until they are 25.
- 2.28 We encourage and support our young people to develop their own networks and keep in touch with significant people in their lives. This is

supported through our staying close and mentoring programmes, both of which are funded through the DfE. We have secured funding for the programmes to continue throughout 2025/26. We employ 2 care experienced young people as co-ordinators which has been impactful in increasing the number of young people engaging with both programmes.

- 2.29 Over the last 12 months we have been able to provide mentoring support to 42 care experienced young people. This has been either through a 1:1 mentor or within our pathway to employment team- depending on the needs and wishes of the young person.
- 2.30 Lifelong links enables young people build and maintain positive support networks throughout their lives. It connects them with important people such as family members, previous foster carers, residential carers, teachers and other significant adults. This fosters lasting relationships and ensures a sense of belonging.
- 2.31 We remain committed to supporting our young people to have a positive support network that extends beyond their time in care and into adulthood. We have started work with our partners to consider how we can best support young people to identify people who are important to them and strengthen the work of family group conferences for children in care and care leavers. This is identified as an area for further development over the next 12 months.
- 2.32 Personal Advisers are secondary allocated to young people as soon as possible after their 16 birthday, to provide a smooth transition from their social worker to the Care Leaver Service once they are 18.
- 2.33 The Personal Adviser works alongside the young person's social worker, building a relationship before they "leave care". This enables us to support young people so that they feel ready and confident with the plans and know what to expect as the milestone of leaving care approaches. Most young people have the stability of their PA from 18 to 21 or 25 if this is what they want/need offering the stability of 1 worker for up to 7 years of their adult life.
- 2.34 Where it is appropriate we are able to continue to offer advice and support to care leavers beyond 25, offering opportunities to meet with PAs in the hub and seek advice through our duty service. This is to acknowledge that for some young people they are still needing and wanting to maintain a link to the service beyond 25.

- 2.35 Our care leavers who were unaccompanied children in care has risen over the last 12 months, from 49 in March 2024 to 81 on 31 March 2025. This is an area of our care leaver family we know will continue to increase over the next 12 months. We now have 4 PAs who work directly with our unaccompanied children in care and care leavers providing a consistent support throughout their lives.
- 2.36 When our young people become or are an expecting parent, we take on the role of “corporate grandparent”. We are supporting 28 care experienced young people who are pregnant, expectant or parents. The PA role is to support with attending appointments, engaging with health services and other professionals who may be involved and ensure that our young parents are aware of the local family hub offers.
- 2.37 PAs help young people to navigate the complexities to employment, benefits, housing and the impact of changing relationships and the wider support network. Our aim is to help young people to trust those around them and to be reassured that we understand that becoming a parent for some, can be overwhelming. We will increase our visits, contact and communication to a level that is right for the individual that supports but does not provide over-dependence. We can provide financial support with clothing grants, support to purchase new baby items and we personally deliver a new baby box of essentials.
- 2.38 We are in the process of exploring what our care experienced parents would like to develop to increase the support we offer and to utilise the spaces in the hub for groups or activities.
- 2.39 A key priority for 2024/25 has been around increasing Education, Employment and Training (EET) opportunities for our care experienced young people (active aged 18-25). There has been significant progress in this area with the development of an apprenticeship scheme, structured support and mentoring, a programme of pre-employment for those needing additional steps and mentoring support to increase confidence and wellbeing.
- 2.40 Working closely with our pathway to employment team and having 2 senior PAs within the service has helped us to increase our overall EET rates from 54.39% (March 2024) to 73.03% (March 2025). This is above the council target and higher than good+ statistical neighbours.
- 2.41 We currently have 11 young people in Council apprenticeship positions with recent agreement and commitment for a further 10 apprenticeship

posts over the next 12 months for care experienced young people, who are not in education, employment or training currently and who have successfully engaged on the pre-employment programmes. This is a significant achievement and shows the commitment of Dorset Council to our care experienced young people. The apprenticeships available across the council provide flexible and nurturing employment we know our care experienced young people need.

- 2.42 Our pathway to employment for care leavers has grown significantly over the last 12 months and we are now supporting over 40 young people at different levels to meet their needs. This focusses on building confidence, relationships as well as delivering pre-employment training programmes
- 2.43 Our offer to support young people with Higher Education is considered a strength. We have 23 young people who are at university, 1 completing a PHD and another a Masters. We provide additional support through the PA as well as a bursary and support for accommodation/housing over the holiday periods, if they are not able/don't wish to remain at University.
- 2.44 Of the 300 active care leavers aged 18-25 as of 31 March 2024 we had 45 young people in full time training, 37 on a part-time training programme & 89 young people accessing education.
- 2.45 We have a protocol in place with two of our Job Centres Plus which provides co-ordinated support to engage young people into Education, Employment, Apprenticeships, Voluntary Work or Training, an early entry system and a smooth transition for those young people leaving care and needing to claim benefits and prompt and accurate payment of benefits where these are required.
- 2.46 Personal advisers help care leavers to access education, employment, or training. When young people are not engaged, they have input from the headteacher of the virtual school and from other agencies. Young people are encouraged to undertake other educational activities while looking for employment or waiting for the academic year to begin. Strong collaboration between partner agencies ensures that young people are tracked and monitored so that they can be supported to make future choices that are right for them.
- 2.47 Our aim is to ensure that young people are empowered and enabled to gain sustainable paid employment through individual routes.

- 2.48 We know that housing is a priority for our young people and for us as a Council. We need to have a variety of housing options to meet the diverse needs of our care experienced young people.
- 2.49 We are able to evidence that our care leavers are benefiting from a focused management and corporate approach to ensure that they live in suitable housing. Very few live in unsuitable accommodation and if, (or when) they do, there are systems to ensure that additional management oversight is in place. This helps to ensure that more appropriate housing is provided as quickly as possible.
- 2.50 We have consistently been at 100% for supervision every 4 weeks for those young people in unsuitable housing over this reporting period.
- 2.51 We continue to seek the views of our young people and understand the needs of those approaching 18 through our sufficiency strategy to ensure we can develop housing to meet the needs of our future care leavers. There is an estimated need for housing for young adults exiting supported accommodation of 50 places per year (25-30 for care leavers and 20 for vulnerable young adults at risk of homelessness).
- 2.52 The chart below shows the breakdown of the different housing arrangements for our young people as of 31 March 2025.

Type	Number
Independent living	140
Semi independent	70
Supported lodgings	14
Staying put	32
With parents/relatives	29
Community Home	09
Unsuitable	06
Total	300

- 2.53 We have increased local and affordable housing for up to 21 young people over 3 different properties. Clarence is a shared house for 3, Leon offers

suitable housing for 6 care leavers who were unaccompanied children in care and Kirtleton offers a range of shared and individual accommodation as well as a short-term “crash pad” as an alternative to temporary or unsuitable accommodation.

- 2.54 Within the care leaver service there are now 2 housing officers who, along with their PA, support our young people to maintain their tenancies within Clarence, Leon and Kirtleton, support with move on and to ensure the homes and buildings are maintained to a high & safe standard.
- 2.55 Our relationships with landlords in the private sector has increased over the last year and we have been able to secure accommodation for 9 of our care leavers. This ranges from a 3-bed shared house, 2 bed shared flat and individual flats, all within the BCP area and close to college and support and community networks.
- 2.56 Staying put, supported lodgings and supported housing options for care experienced young people remains an area of focus and whilst this has also increased, we are ambitious that we will be able to provide more supported housing options across and outside of Dorset in the future.
- 2.57 On 31.03.2025 we had 32 young people staying put with their previous foster carers. We have reviewed the procedures to bring clarity to the process and oversight through our resource panel so there is equity and suitable challenge and accountability.
- 2.58 There has been a significant improvement on the stability and suitability of housing for our care experienced young people since March 2024 with 97.7% of young people having safe and suitable homes.
- 2.59 We currently have 6 young people in unsuitable homes, compared to 9 in March 2024. The 6 young people include 3 in custody, 2 in B&B in Scotland (after they left their homes in Southampton to relocate) and 1 young person who is currently homeless having left his supported lodgings arrangement and has not taken up the offers of over 6 suitable homes in the last 5 months.
- 2.60 Improved relationships and joint working with partner agencies alongside working agreements with housing services and organisations means that our young people receive timely services should they become homeless or at risk of homelessness.

- 2.61 Supporting our young people to have positive physical and emotional health continues. We have the continued support from a dedicated nurse for care leavers and are working with our health partners to explore ways we are able to increase capacity within this area of demand and need.
- 2.62 Young people leaving care have a “health passport” which enables our young people to communicate their needs clearly to health professionals. This also prevents the need for repeated conversations and sharing of information which we know can be a challenge for many young people.
- 2.63 All of our young people are registered with a local GP and through our partnership with our health colleagues we have been able to develop access to a dentist in the Weymouth area for those who are unable to register with an NHS dentist.
- 2.64 Over the last 12 months we have strengthened our collaboration with adult mental health services, having dedicated PAs linked with the health community hubs that have developed across Dorset. This has increased our knowledge of available mental health resources to meet the varying needs of our care experienced young people and support them to access local services.
- 2.65 We are working with Coram Voice and our care Network to develop emotional wellbeing indicators through the “Ask me what matters” programme. This will enable us to identify the individual emotional health needs of our young people and respond individually and as a service to meet need. We will be able to develop performance indicators and report to corporate parenting board on the identified needs and impact of our services and support on outcomes for our care experienced young people.
- 2.66 The care leaver team has had a fairly stable workforce. We have been able to recruit to PA vacancies and we have continued to support our young people where there have been periods of extended sickness within the service.
- 2.67 We continue to strengthen our reflective supervision so our PAs know their young people well and can talk confidently about the work and expected outcomes for care leavers. Supervision frequency and quality of recording has continued to improve over the last 12 months.
- 2.68 Our performance in March 2025 showed that 95.95% of young people had supervision every 8 weeks which is an increase from 91.39% in March 2024. Following observations of supervision and quality assurance we are

now ensuring that all supervision records are written to the young person which is further evidence of our reflective practice and young person-centred discussions.

- 2.69 The Business Intelligence Dashboard is embedded into management practice with the leaving care team being the 2nd highest user across children's services. This is used daily to review areas of practice including suitability of accommodation, education, employment and training and activity status, but also to support with caseload allocation and management, monitoring of timely/completed supervision rates and pathway plans.
- 2.70 We provide monthly performance oversight to the executive and corporate directors through performance board, performance reports to CPPDG (Corporate Parenting Partnership Delivery Group) and monthly reporting on exceptions to corporate parenting board. There is appropriate challenge from our members and young people. The high level of scrutiny and oversight enables us to quickly spot areas where greater focus or support is required so that we are able to maintain our continuous improvement journey.
- 2.71 Our vision for the next 12 months is to:
- Ensure that care leavers have access to the right support whether they live in or outside of Dorset. This includes financial support and exemptions such as Council tax up to the age of 25.
 - We want to increase the number of care leavers engaging with a council apprenticeship- up to 10 with the PA mentoring support in place to enable them to maintain and be successful in employment.
 - We want at least 60% of our care leavers (18-25 active) to be engaged with meaningful education, employment or training.
 - We want to increase the provision of high-quality accommodation that feels safe and is affordable in Dorset.
 - We need to work with colleagues and partners to support our care leavers with their mental health and emotional wellbeing and to develop the "Ask me What Matters" programme through our care and pathway planning.

- We will develop a lifelong links strategy to support more care leavers to reconnect with people who are important to them or meet new people who could be supportive.

2.72 Despite the number of care leavers increasing, we have continued to strengthen the service and support we provide. The chart below indicates the distance travelled over the last 12 months for our key performance areas.

Indicator	March 2024	March 2025	DoT
Total care leavers	539	558	↑
% care leavers in touch	96.03	98.00	↑
% care leavers 19-21 suitable accommodation	90.70	96.00	↑
% care leavers 17-25 EET	57.62	77.00	↑
% care leavers 19-21 EET	51.20	68.00	↑
% care leavers (active) 8 weekly supervision	91.39	95.95	↑

2.73 As a care leaver team, we know the strengths and challenges of the service well. We have focused on improving the help and support that our care leavers receive. These improvements are underpinned by our ongoing consultation and engagement with care experienced young people. We continue to ask and listen to young people about their experiences and act to improve practice and services.

3. Financial Implications

There are no financial implications from this report, and all have been provided within budget of the service.

4. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

There are no environmental factors to consider other than young people living out of the area, Personal Advisors meeting face to face with young people requiring at times long travel times.

We as a service try reducing our carbon footprint by using trains and linking Personal Advisors to young people near one another reducing the number of Personal Advisors traveling.

5. **Well-being and Health Implications**

Not applicable

6. **Other Implications**

Not applicable

7. **Risk Assessment**

7.1 **HAVING CONSIDERED:** the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: **Low**

Residual Risk: **Low**

8. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

There are no Equality implications for this report

9. **Appendices**

Not applicable

10. **Background Papers**

Not applicable

11. **Report Sign Off**

11.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)