

Case studies

Introduction

In November 2019, the Local Government Association produced a resource pack to support councillors with an oversight role of children's services in their area, for example a corporate parenting panel or scrutiny committee.

Below are case studies taken from the resource pack, from seven local authorities that together demonstrate the impact in the lives of children from good practice as outlined in Appendix 1 of this report.

City of York Council

City of York Council has a strong track record of supporting young people leaving care; a strength highlighted by Ofsted in its report published in February 2017. The inspectors acknowledged that, by listening to care leavers' views and shaping services around them, York now sees the vast majority of care leavers living in accommodation that suits their needs, with low numbers not in education, employment and training, and most making a successful transition to adult life.

This transition starts with developing a pathway plan at the care review nearest the young person's 16th birthday. This gives two years to put the right plan in place – whether that involves staying with a foster family beyond the 18th birthday ('staying put') or moving into independent living, and education, training or employment. Each case is referred to a personal adviser (PA) when the young person is 17. PAs generally manage caseloads of around 21, helping them know each young person well and make sure they get the best possible support to experience a smooth transition into the leaving care service.

The pathway team is well connected with information, advice and guidance services and the virtual school. This has resulted in the proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training being well above the national average. Two new programmes are being introduced to increase this proportion further, improve career information and support care leavers with learning opportunities.

Teaching life skills is a key element of preparing care leavers to live independently. A pathway life-skills toolkit supports carers and key workers to make sure young people get the right level of help to develop those skills; which include saving money, budgeting and cooking for themselves. Young people are encouraged to remain with their foster carers after their 18th birthdays to continue learning life skills with them as part of the staying put programme, while those in

supported housing benefit from personalised support to build their life skills and confidence at a pace that suits them.

Staying put is an option for all care leavers. Those in residential placements outside York are increasingly moved back to the city before their 18th birthdays so that they can take up this option which is part of a strategic initiative to 'Make York Home' for all young people in care. Staying put also includes young people fostered by connected persons or kinship carers, and those placed with independent fostering agencies. Acting on feedback from young people, those who stay put are encouraged to start work, or to get a Saturday job if they are in education, to make life as 'normal' and as like any other family as possible. As one young person commented, "I'm learning to handle money better as I pay board and pay my own phone bills", while another said they enjoyed "feeling part of a family". Those who go to university can return to their foster carer each holiday.

The option of a four-week stay in a 'taster flat' gives care leavers the chance to experience independent living. They know that they have support throughout their stay there as they develop their life skills before returning to their placement to work on any areas of development and consider what to do next. Accommodation options are varied to suit different needs. Some care leavers might choose to go into a trainer flat with support from the pathway accommodation officer and pathway worker. While others who need more support might opt for supported lodgings with charity SASH or permanently-staffed hostel accommodation, where they have a named key worker and access to daily education sessions and independence skills training. This variety of options allows for gradually increasing independence.

The focus on life skills and a careful transition into accommodation is paying off – the vast majority of care leavers are successfully living independently in suitable accommodation, with none in houses of multiple occupancy. Where there are difficulties, regular risk assessments mean that they are caught early, with creative support packages put in place to help the young person to get back on their feet and move forward. Where care leavers aren't keen to engage and things go wrong, emergency accommodation is also provided – there is always another chance available.

Building a programme of support that genuinely works for care leavers has been helped by social workers and support staff who listen to the views of young people. Care leavers told Ofsted that the council listened carefully, recorded their views well and – importantly – acted upon them. As a result, most were positive about the care and support that they received.

David Purcell, Pathway Team Practice Manager at City of York Council, said: "We've made a real effort to learn from our care leavers to make sure that we can give them the best possible transition into adulthood. It's important that each young person in care can work with us to achieve their ambitions, and can do that at their own pace.

"Every child in York deserves a place they can call home, and to enjoy family life wherever possible. As the corporate parents to care leavers, that's what we do our best to give them."

Royal Borough of Greenwich

The Royal Borough of Greenwich has been working with charity MyBnk to make sure care leavers get good quality financial education to help them when they move into independent accommodation. Care leavers moving on to supported housing all attend the week-long accredited 'Money House' programme as part of their pathway, spending a week with other young people in a real flat learning about everything from tenancy agreements and safe borrowing to budgeting and choosing utility providers.

Referrals are all considered individually to make sure needs are understood and catered for on the course, and the young people are all contacted to sort out logistics to make sure they can attend. The results of its first year are impressive:

- 97 per cent felt more confident about their financial situation
- attendees are three times less likely to have rent arrear issues than their peers
- no one who has completed the training has been evicted
- 90 per cent of those who felt their ability to pay rent and keep their tenancy was below average or poor felt that this improved as a result of the course, with 80 per cent going on to rate their ability as good or excellent.

Anneta Corbin, Family and Young People Service Manager at the Royal Borough of Greenwich said: "Money management is a vital skill for young people when they move into their own accommodation. We know from our care leavers that the better the support they receive to build these skills, the more confident they feel about making that move. Feedback from our care leavers on the programme has been really positive, and we've found that those who have been on the course are much more likely to maintain their tenancies when they move on to independent accommodation."

Leeds City Council

A not uncommon challenge faced by young people leaving care and moving on into independent living and setting up their homes for the first time is getting practical support with things like decorating, plumbing in and setting up white goods, putting shelves up, and so on. These are things that many other young people moving on into independence might get support from their families to do. We work closely with our housing services within Leeds to provide suitable accommodation for young people making this first step, though often these tenancies require some degree of decoration and homemaking. Our experience has been that for some young people the condition of their new home can be variable and the desire to settle our young people into a personalised home can mean that we need to identify support to do this.

As a champion authority of the national Care Leavers Covenant, Leeds Care Leavers Services established a partnership with Engie Regen (Places and Communities Division). Engie Regen is the first private company to sign up as a signatory partner to the covenant, to provide a range of practical supports and offers directly to benefit care leavers. They are also long-standing ambassadors of 'Child Friendly Leeds', and have undertaken some fantastic work to support care leavers in Leeds. Such support includes redecoration, donation of paint, garden clearing, plumbing in washing machines, joinery and other practical home making support and DIY projects. ENGIE Regen are on target to complete 12 projects by December 2019.

This project has provided invaluable support to care leavers, allowing some to have their homes decorated to a high-quality professional standard and in many cases has enabled young people to move quicker, feel settled and to feel a real pride in their new homes.

Hampshire County Council

It isn't unusual for a young person to have goals that might seem unachievable. However, as corporate parents, it's important that councils put the views and wishes of care leavers at the heart of their plans, and work with them to progress towards their goals while keeping alternatives in mind.

At the age of 16, Rob was in the care of Hampshire Children's Services. He didn't engage in education, was using alcohol and was working with the Youth Offending Team following an assault charge. He did, however, show a flair for boxing, continuing to attend training even as he failed to show up for education or work. His hobby was supported by his foster carers, social worker and personal adviser. A pathway plan was developed that allowed him to follow his ambition to become a professional boxer, while encouraging him to take up opportunities with local colleges as alternative options.

As Rob started to win more local and UK title fights, his drive and commitment so impressed the children's services team that they sought out ways to acknowledge and reward his progress and encourage him further, as any good parent would do. This included helping with travel costs to fights, allowing him to travel abroad to a training school for a month, and then supporting him when he took the decision to move abroad to embark on a professional boxing career. A weekly allowance was also allowed, and goods were sent to help him set up home.

When Rob showed a desire to further his own education by learning the language of the country he competed in most frequently, Hampshire helped him to pay for a language course; his dedication to learning means he is now fluent in that second language.

Thanks to the flexibility, support and encouragement offered by Hampshire Children's Services and everyone else working with Rob, he is now a professional boxer who no longer drinks or smokes, and is living a successful, independent life.

Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council

Listening to your care leavers is the perfect way to find out what can really make a difference to them – and it isn't always complicated. In Trafford, the care leavers' forum highlighted that their £57.10 per week benefit had one key problem – it left £7.10 each week that couldn't be withdrawn from the cash point. The point was raised with councillors, who agreed that raising the benefit to £60, which could be withdrawn in £10 denominations, made far more sense. It was also noted that the extra £2.90 could pay for two day's gas in a young person's flat, or cover a chip supper treat. Care leavers were delighted with the response, which showed that they were genuinely listened to and that their corporate parents cared about their lived experiences.

On another occasion, a care leaver raised with Trafford Council that it didn't feel fair for him to search for work or training while his fellow care leavers could still get their benefits without making the same effort. The council therefore decided that the importance of getting care leavers into education, employment or training made it worth providing an incentive. The Corporate Parenting

Board agreed an incentive of up to £30 a week for care leavers who were actively engaged – which could cover anything from work experience, to visiting a job centre, to working with their personal adviser. They could also get a free weekly bus pass to help them carry out these activities. The overall package was worth more than £100 to care leavers who actively worked towards improving their own outcomes, and has proven extremely popular. Seventy per cent of Trafford care leavers are now in education, employment and training – higher than

London Borough of Islington

Islington's leaving care service, Independent Futures, works with care leavers and 16 to 17-year-olds in care to provide a holistic service that prepares and supports them as they move towards independent living. The service has sought innovative ways to help care leavers to make sure they're in a strong position when they leave care. Support includes establishing support networks, providing mental health support, and helping with finding further education and employment.

A key concern of young people when they leave care is around the support networks they will have when they are no longer 'looked-after'. The Grand Mentoring Scheme pairs care leavers with a 'grandparent' who mentors the young person, and provides support and guidance as they move into adult life. This gives them someone independent from the council that they can rely on for help, and who they can build a stable relationship with as they take on greater independence.

Independent Futures has also teamed up with a wide range of local partners from the public, private and charity sectors to give care leavers access to employment and training opportunities. We have an enhanced offer that enables those who wish to attend university to be able to do so with the support of services and additional financial allowances. The variety of partners reflects the range of young people looked-after by the council, providing a broad spectrum of possibilities to show them how much is possible.

The council also works closely with partners in the arts and performance sector to give young people a way to develop their sense of identity and personal achievement, promoting the confidence and resilience that they'll need as they move into work, as well as raising aspirations.

Supporting the physical and mental health, and wellbeing of care leavers is paramount. Well-used weekly drop in health sessions make sure care leavers can get advice when they need it, while free counselling and advice commissioned from a local mental health charity allows them to get support quickly if they find themselves struggling with mental health difficulties. We have also recently embedded clinicians within the service and introduced a specialist mental health social worker within the service in recognition of the level of need some of our young people present with. Regular liaison between CAMHS and adult mental health services ensures continuity of provision for those care leavers who have specific emotional health needs. Where young people need to visit specialists, young people's advisers offer to attend with them for moral support and to make sure they can attend the appointment. We are keen to offer early intervention and encourage young people to make use of personal health budgets (Choice and Control) to improve their mental wellbeing.

Councillor Kaya Comer Schwartz, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families, said: "Young people when discussing their care experience, have told us that forming and maintaining relationships is important to them and we are committed to being their lifelong champions. We work hard to ensure that we reduce any barriers to them being involved and

achieving their full potential. Our revised offer to care leavers reflects this as well as the passion and commitment we as a council have for our care leavers.”

East Riding of Yorkshire Council

When Ofsted rated support for care leavers at East Riding of Yorkshire Council as ‘outstanding’, it confirmed one of the pathway team’s core beliefs – that getting the basics right, and really understanding what works, are key to making sure that care leavers have a positive experience and make good progress.

Staff working with care leavers know the importance of stability and relationships to children in care, so the pathway team starts working with them in Year 11 to carefully manage the transition from looked-after child to care leaver. Care leavers also work with several members of the team to make sure there is always someone who they can talk to, and who knows them well enough to provide the right kind of support.

Each member of the pathway team has an average caseload of 15, giving them the time to dedicate to each care leaver, while managers work hard to make sure staff have all they need to do the best possible job. This includes an excellent range of training to cover the types of issues young people may face, including the dangers of radicalisation and self-harm.

East Riding has also set up a post-16 subgroup of the virtual school to make sure care leavers’ needs are being met and to raise aspirations among both the young people and the service providers. The group is chaired by the pathway team manager, and includes further education colleges, training providers and Jobcentre Plus. Care leavers are given highly supportive mentoring and specialist advice about their potential options as they progress into further or higher education, training or employment. This strong partnership working at all levels has led to the authority having 69 per cent of care leavers engaged in education, employment or training, higher than similar authorities and the national average.

Pathway Team Manager Sue Smyth said: “One of the most important things that we do is to gain care leavers’ trust, and show them that we’ll support them, no matter what. We’re always keen to try new ideas, but we make sure those basic relationships and core support are never compromised, because they’re the foundations for a strong service. Our care leavers tell us that they feel safe, and that they wouldn’t be where they are now without our support – and that’s the most important thing for all of us.”