

Beyond care



A guide with key questions for councillors on care leavers' accommodation

Barnardo's is campaigning to improve the accommodation and support given to young people as they leave care across England. The purpose of this briefing is to outline what you can do as a Councillor to make sure that the most vulnerable care leavers in your area can live in safe, appropriate and sustainable accommodation.

Barnardo's knows that many councils are already delivering effective accommodation and support to care leavers. This can be very challenging, particularly with on-going financial pressures. Your commitment to tackle the accommodation and support challenges facing care leavers can be highlighted as part of the **Beyond care** campaign. For more information about how you can help, please see below.

Why this matters:

Having a safe and secure place to live is a fundamental right that most of us take for granted. Research has shown that having good

housing on leaving care leads to better outcomes for young people in other areas of their lives. Young people also say that housing is one of their major concerns when leaving care.¹

Some young people have a poor experience of the care system, with multiple moves, a disrupted education, a limited support network, and leave with few independent living skills and very low self-confidence.² They can find it very difficult to cope with leaving care or deal with the everyday pressures of living on their own when so young. Many have more complex needs, such as poor mental health or learning difficulties, so leaving care is even more daunting.³

Care leavers are by definition left without family to argue their case for them; as a local Councillor, you have an important role to play in making sure that the necessary measures are in place in your area to give these young people the advice and help they need.

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Barnardo's know that the support given to care leavers varies significantly across the country. Some are getting the right help and support, but young people in other areas are not getting the help they need to have somewhere suitable and secure to live. Others may have somewhere appropriate to live but are not getting the support they need to become independent.

We want to help identify what local authorities can best do to support care leavers, and the barriers they face with this, so we've put together a number of key questions for Councillors to ask their Lead Members for Children's Services and Housing. We'd be keen to hear about what your local authority is doing, and if you have any good practice you want to share, or questions you want to raise, please do get in touch.

We've focused our questions into three themes: **Working Together, Finding Accommodation and Keeping Accommodation**. Barnardo's believes that, if local authorities are focused on these areas, they will be well placed to deliver more effective accommodation and support for their care leavers. We will continue to work at local and national levels to help local authorities to find ways to do this.



Working together

Focus on children in care and care leavers

Children in care and care leavers have a unique relationship with the local authority, which has taken parental responsibility for them. Evidence shows that care leavers often have poor educational, health and employment outcomes, and they need extra support as they grow up.

All young people setting up home for the first time need particular support and guidance at this period of transition, especially those who are leaving care and often have little choice or control. Care leavers go from being looked after and having their needs met, to living independently with a whole new set of often overwhelming responsibilities without the family support that most other young people can rely upon. As the corporate parent, local authorities need to do as much as possible to support care leavers to find and maintain suitable accommodation and learn how to support themselves in time.

Some care leavers have particular needs, such as complex health issues, learning difficulties, offending histories or problems with substance use. We know that it can be very challenging to find appropriate accommodation that suits

their needs, and some care leavers will need extra support to keep living independently in their housing. Children who have come to the UK as unaccompanied asylum seekers can also have problems with keeping appropriate accommodation when they leave care.

- Does your council have an elected Member with specific responsibility for championing the needs of looked after children and care leavers?
- Does your Corporate Parenting Board routinely consider the needs of care leavers, including their housing needs and outcomes?
- What support is your local authority offering to young people who are waiting for the outcome of asylum decisions?
- What support does your council give to care leavers who are leaving prison to access suitable housing?

Joint working

Responsibility for care leavers' accommodation is shared between Housing and Children's Services departments in councils. Whilst care leavers may approach the Housing Options team for help, they should also have a personal advisor from the Leaving Care Team who supports them to find and maintain their accommodation. It is essential that Housing and Children's Services recognise the joint responsibility they have for care leavers in their area so that young people are not passed between departments, and opportunities to meet their needs are not delayed or missed.

There can also be cost-benefits of sharing this responsibility, as care leavers can benefit from the support commissioned by Housing to address youth homelessness. Having clear access to a range of accommodation can give care leavers a degree of choice and help them benefit from accommodation that meets their needs at different stages of independence.

- How are Housing and Children's Services working together to meet the accommodation needs of young people, including care leavers?
- Does the Lead Member for Housing or a senior official attend your Corporate Parenting Board?
- What information does your Lead Member for Housing and/or Children's Services receive from your authority about the number of young people who leave care each quarter and the accommodation they move to?

“North Yorkshire County Council, in partnership with the seven district Housing Authorities and the Voluntary Sector, have spent the last two years reconfiguring our provision of accommodation and support. We agreed shared priorities and invested to prevent the incidence of homelessness amongst all 16 to 25 year olds.

Accommodation options include: 36 supported lodgings provided by Barnardo's; foyer type provision, via the YMCA; supported housing units and floating support to dispersed accommodation. Local provision is overseen by a county strategic group which has also partly funded Staying Put arrangements for care leavers.”

Howard Smith, Team manager, Leaving Care, North Yorkshire County Council



Finding accommodation

Suitable accommodation

When young people leave care, the local authority is responsible for helping them find somewhere safe and suitable to live. No matter what type of housing this is – private rented, a house-share, supported accommodation or a council flat – the care leaver should expect support from their personal advisor or social worker to check it is appropriate, meets their needs and is affordable. The Government's guidance defines what counts as “suitable accommodation” and sets out what checks should be made.⁴

Due to the cost of renting in some areas, care leavers often have little choice about where to live and can end up in poor quality housing or in an area where they feel unsafe or are far away from friends and family. Councils should be challenging this practice and only placing care leavers in accommodation that is appropriate and suitable.

- How many of the care leavers in your area are housed in “suitable accommodation”?
- How stringent are the checks that your authority makes on care leavers' accommodation?
- Does your social housing allocation policy prioritise care leavers, including those who have been placed in care out of your area?

Use of B&Bs and unsuitable emergency housing

If a care leaver becomes homeless, local authorities need to have a range of appropriate emergency housing options in place. However, some care leavers are placed in B&Bs or

unsuitable hostels which are often poor quality or dangerous places to stay, where other residents may have threatening behaviour or use drugs or alcohol. Although B&Bs or similar accommodation may occasionally be necessary as a last resort, in some cases young people can stay in these situations for far longer than needed to resolve their immediate housing need. Worryingly Barnardo's recent freedom of information request showed half of councils are placing care leavers in B&Bs for longer than 28 days and 46% are using them as repeat placements.⁵ B&Bs and inappropriate hostels are not the answer to accommodation crises, as they provide no support and can raise significant safeguarding risks.

Department for Education guidance states that B&Bs are not suitable accommodation for care leavers.⁶ Councils need to prioritise having sufficient youth-specific emergency accommodation that is more appropriate for care leavers and other young people in a housing crisis. This might include crash-pads⁷, short-term supported lodgings, Nightstop⁸, or emergency beds in youth-only hostels or foyers.

- How many care leavers in your area have spent time in a B&B or all-age hostel during the year?
- How many B&B placements have been for an emergency (only a few days)? Were any for longer than 28 days?
- Which departments in your council are placing care leavers in B&Bs and other unsuitable emergency housing?
- Are there any approval procedures in place to assess the safeguarding or other risks of emergency accommodation?

“B&Bs can be dangerous and scary places for care leavers to live, some as young as 16. Some councils have been working hard to put other options in place, like supported lodgings, so that young people have somewhere safe to stay in an emergency.”

Manager of Barnardo's advocacy and participation service, South West

“The leaving care team works closely with each of the district hubs and there is a shared confidence that each will support the other. This has resulted in a reduction in care leavers being evicted and those that need to move on are still able to access alternative provision. Care leavers in North Yorkshire are given gold band status when bidding for choice based lettings.”

Howard Smith, Team manager, Leaving Care, North Yorkshire County Council



Keeping accommodation

Managing tenancies

Once care leavers have a tenancy, they can find it difficult to keep their independent accommodation. Many are not properly prepared whilst in care for the realities of managing their own household budget, dealing with neighbours or handling negotiations with a landlord. Others may have extra challenges if they have specific health needs or learning difficulties.

Support from a personal advisor is essential but some care leavers need additional help. One option is specialist floating support, providing practical and emotional help through regular visits from people who are knowledgeable about care leavers and understand their needs. Care leavers can also be helped to maintain contact with adults who were supportive during their time in care. Leaving care and living alone can be an opportunity for care leavers to start rebuilding their lives, putting down roots for the first time after multiple moves whilst in care.

Local authorities can also help care leavers in practical ways, like exempting them from paying council tax to help ease the transition to living independently, or giving them priority for help through schemes like discretionary housing payment.

- What support does your council offer to young people as they leave care to live independently?
- What continued support does your council have in place to help care leavers manage their private or social tenancies and move towards independence?
- Are there exemptions to council tax for care leavers?
- Are care leavers given priority for discretionary housing payment in your area?

Homelessness

Care leavers can be vulnerable to homelessness, particularly when they struggle to maintain tenancies. They can often find it difficult to budget or to realise the consequences of not paying rent and so in some cases can face eviction. When they then apply as homeless to their council, they can be found to be intentionally homeless and so don't get support. This is devastating for any young person, but even more so for a care leaver if they are turned down by their corporate parent.

The number of care leavers being accepted as homeless is low but is gradually increasing across the country.⁹ Even when they are accepted as homeless, young people can struggle to find appropriate housing that meets their needs and is affordable. Wherever possible, care leavers should be protected from having to make a homelessness application, such as through better, timely support from personal advisors, more leniency from landlords and having additional floating support to help them manage tenancies.

- How many care leavers make a homeless application in your area and how many are accepted? What support is available for those who are not accepted?
- How many care leavers in your area were found to be intentionally homeless last year?
- What procedures are in place to help keep care leavers away from having to make a formal homelessness application?
- Do care leavers have easy access to the services and support available for young homeless people in your authority?



How our Beyond care campaign can help

Now you've read about the issues that care leavers can face, we'd like you to join Barnardo's campaign to champion the accommodation and support needs of care leavers. Taking these few steps will help you understand what your authority is already doing or identify any gaps to make sure care leavers are being considered in your authority's planning. It will also help you to raise the profile of care leavers locally.

- Talk to your Lead Members for Children's Services and Housing, using this briefing to guide your discussions.
- Sign up to the following statement to show your commitment to care leavers, **'I support Barnardo's Beyond care campaign. I will work to make sure that our local authority takes the necessary steps so that care leavers in our area have better accommodation and support.'** To show your commitment please email campaigns@barnardos.org.uk – we will be listing all councillors supporting our campaign on our website.
- Tell us what your authority is doing and if you'd like to be involved in future work please let us know.

Finally, we want all care leavers to be given the right foundations to succeed whichever area they are in; with your help we will move closer to this.

References

- 1 Barnardo's, *On My Own: the accommodation needs of care leavers in England*, 2014
- 2 C4EO, Prof. Mike Stein, Knowledge review: Increasing the number of care leavers in 'settled, safe accommodation', 2010
- 3 C4EO, Prof. Mike Stein, Knowledge review: Increasing the number of care leavers in 'settled, safe accommodation', 2010
- 4 The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers (October 2010)
- 5 Barnardo's Freedom of Information requests to all English Local Authorities, May 2014, 100% response rate
- 6 The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers (October 2010)
- 7 Barnardo's crash-pads are short-term, emergency supported lodgings. They are temporary forms of accommodation with placements lasting up to eight weeks. Crash pads provide specialist support to young people who need to somewhere to live on a short term basis.
- 8 Nightstop – emergency accommodation for 16 to 25 year old young people in homes of approved volunteers. Placements generally last one to three nights.
- 9 Department for Communities and Local Authorities, Statutory homelessness in England: January to March 2014 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-january-to-march-2014>



To show your commitment please email campaigns@barnardos.org.uk – we will be listing all councillors supporting our campaign on our website.