



# **Care Leavers' Service Annual Report 2024**

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## **1. Purpose Of This Report**

1.1 This report highlights the progress since the Ofsted inspection which concluded in March 2024. The findings of this inspection have been accepted in full and focussed work is continuing to address the areas of practice identified by Ofsted that require improvement. It is clear that improvement in some areas will take concerted effort over a sustained period of time before these are embedded in the service.

## **2. Executive Summary**

2.1 There has been progress and improvements in several key areas:

- Sufficiency of accommodation for 16–25-year-olds.
- Local Offer.
- Contact and services to care leavers over the age of 21.
- Creation of Care Leaver Hubs.
- Improved Support for Care Leavers not in education, employment and Training.
- Securing DfE funding for the Staying Put Project.
- Development of the Care Leaver App- Junction 16plus
- Free bus travel for Care Leavers aged 16 to 21.

There continues to be challenges in managing caseloads and ensuring that there are sufficient staff in post to meet the needs of all our young people. Recruitment is underway and further work will take place over the next three months to ensure that services to care leavers meets identified needs and national standards. This includes developing consistency of good practice, quality of plans and impact of management oversight and supervision.

## **3. Engagement of Young People and the ‘Local Offer’**

3.1 There is good engagement with care leavers and the service benefits from an effective participation team. A number of care leavers are supported to be Care Ambassadors and they lead a very well-attended and impactful Local Offer event on 13 November 2024.

3.2 Care leavers were clear that they require more from the service including support out of hours, increased and flexible visiting from Personal Advisors (PA) when they are in crisis and specific support around budgeting, cooking, the benefits system and housing. Following the feedback on 13 November 2024 work is underway to develop the ideas and views of care leavers into a revised local offer.

3.3 The two Care Leaver Hubs that have opened are a positive and provide the base in which to respond to the needs of care leavers and provide support around the things that they have requested. However, there is more to do to maximise their accessibility and ensure that all care leavers can access the Hubs and that those who are not geographically near have an alternative provision and opportunities.

3.4 There is more to do to ensure that the new version of the Local Offer is representative of the needs of our young people. This includes ensuring that services not run by the Council are fully utilised and accessible. It is also recognised that there is more work to do with Housing colleagues so that Care Leavers get the maximum support to secure tenancies in public housing.

The current Local Offer can be seen at:

<https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/livewell/care-and-support-for-children/services-from-childrens-social-care/local-offer-for-care-leavers.aspx>

#### **4. Care Leaver Accommodation**

4.1 The provision of a suitable and affordable range of housing options for our care experienced young people is a significant challenge. The provision in place currently is not sufficient to meet current needs. Extensive work is now underway with colleagues in the Commissioning Team, Housing and Adult Services to put together a new commission for a range of 16-25 accommodation. There are now more options for care leavers in crisis and the additional three beds mean it is far less likely that unsuitable accommodation is used to meet emergency need. Commissioning colleagues continue to work hard to secure further accommodation, and nine additional beds will be available in January 2025 through expanding partnerships with the YMCA.

#### **6. Tenancy Readiness Courses**

6.1 The Care Leavers' Service and our colleagues in Housing have continued to run the Tenancy Readiness Course and since the turn of the year, 20 young people have started this journey towards securing a place of their own. However, we also know that there is enormous pressure on our housing stock with as many as 10k+ live applications on Cheshire Homechoice at any one time.

#### **7. Emotional Wellbeing and Mentoring**

7.1 The Local Authority commission a local charity to deliver mentoring and well-being support to our Care Leavers. This is a 6+ year partnership with them and it represents an essential cornerstone of the Local Offer to our Care Leavers across emotional well-being and psychological support, mentoring and support to young parents. In 2023/24, they supported 144 of our care leavers.

7.2 In August last year we submitted a joint funding bid to the DFE with our colleagues in Halton and Warrington to extend Pure Insight's work which was successful in bringing in additional funding to extend the mentoring offer to our young people.

If any officers or members would consider becoming a mentor please email [ce@pure-insight.org.uk](mailto:ce@pure-insight.org.uk) or check the website [www.pure-insight.org.uk](http://www.pure-insight.org.uk)

#### **8. Financial Support**

8.1 Care leavers remain under significant pressure in respect of their financial security. This is a threat to them achieving the right outcomes in life. The cost of housing is high, employment for too many is low paid and there is a gap between rents and the amount paid in benefits for those in education or are unable to work. Whilst budgeting and practical skills will assist, there is more to do in considering what other assistance can be provided.

## **10. Employment Education & Training (EET)**

10.1 The EET Team has been created this year to offer support Care Leavers with Education Employment and Training. The team is made up of an EET manager, an EET adviser and an Apprenticeship Co-ordinator. Time has been spent establishing the team and working together with Social Workers and PA's in the wider team to offer an extra level of support in this area to ensure that young people have the right support and skills. There is more work to do in this area and this includes continuing to develop an apprenticeship/work experience model for our young people.

We are introducing Corporate Parenting Champions across all departments in the Council to increase awareness and support for Care Leavers including apprenticeships and work experience opportunities.

## **11. Support for Migrant Young People (or Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) & Adults**

11.1 This year there has been a fall in our UASC population, caused almost exclusively by the temporary closure of the four Home Office adult asylum hotels in the borough and the subsequent drop in age-disputed referrals.

11.2 The Cared For population of under 18s has now dipped below 40 from a peak of over 60 last year, and whilst Care Leaver numbers are currently high in the mid-80s, they will also fall as young people turn 21.

11.3 However, in the last two weeks, two of the four adult asylum hotels have reopened, and we have already seen an increase in referrals through the front door whereby individuals claim that the Home Office has made the wrong decision about their age, and this then falls to the Local Authority in which they live. The other route into our care will be through the National Transfer Scheme at a rate of between 4-8 young people per annum and the increasingly rare occurrence of spontaneous arrivals in the borough via the M6 corridor.

## **12. Staying Close**

12.1 In May of last year we were successful in applying for £1.2m of additional DfE funding as part of the next stage of the roll out of Staying Close. This is a scheme that essentially seeks to replicate the core benefits of Staying Put but for young people who have either grown up in residential care or been placed in 16+ semi supported accommodation. Our project targets 25 young people in each of the first two years with a core offer of 'a trusting relationship and somewhere to live' with workers then building on this to address EET, emotional health and wellbeing and family reunification.

12.2 Our Staying Close project became operational on 1<sup>st</sup> November 23 and at this time we:

- Recruited a team manager and 4 Personal Advisors
- Identified the Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts
- Established a Steering Group chaired by the Director of Children's Social Care
- Developed a Staying Close policy document and guides for both professionals and young people

12.3. We now need to ensure that we consider the sustainability of the project with the end of DfE funding on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, fast approaching.

### **13. Next Steps**

13.1 Following the review of the Local Offer on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2024, we will produce a Service Plan for 2025/26 which will outline our key priorities over the coming year and beyond.

13.2 We will continue to work with our colleagues in Commissioning to mobilise our accommodation plan.

13.3 The Head of Service responsible for the Care Leaving service will work with key managers in the service to ensure that all relevant Care Leavers have an allocated worker and that individual needs of young people are met.

13.4 The Care Leaver Hubs are continuing to expand, and we want to extend the times they are open and increase the offer and range of activities for young people.

13.5 We will continue to develop our EET support and apprenticeship opportunities.

13.6 We will continue work with our Care Leaver Ambassadors ensuring they are involved in all aspects of service delivery and improvement.

13.7 We will introduce Corporate Parenting Champions across the council.