

Preparation for Adulthood Report

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Introduction

This report replaces the 'Care Leavers Annual Report' that has been presented to committee in previous years. It is aligned with the Corporate Parenting Operational Group and its Subgroups; 'Preparing for Adulthood' is subgroup 5 and meets bi-monthly with a range of representatives from Children's Services, Safeguarding, the Childrens Society, Housing, the Participation Team, Youth Support Services and the Fostering Service.

The purpose of the subgroup is to ensure that all Cheshire East cared for children and care leavers are supported with the transition into adulthood. It ensures that Preparation for Adulthood is on the agenda for our services at all times. We aim to improve our young people's independence skills, increase their preparedness for adulthood and to embed any changes in our services across the partnership.

Preparing cared for children and care leavers for adulthood can be a complex process. The average age at which young people in the UK now leave home for good is approaching 28: for our cared for children, early childhood experiences which affect their readiness to be independent and challenging timescales mean that most care experienced young people are faced with the pressures and responsibilities of adulthood at a much earlier age than peers who live with their families.

Background

In last year's report Cheshire East Council was supporting 269 care leavers, a number that has now risen to a total of 337. This increase is a function of the significant rise in our population of cared for children during the past five years, many of whom are now turning 18; we are also continuing to see care leavers returning for a service post 21 years of age under the 21-25 duties arising from the Children & Social Work Act 2017.

It scarcely needs to be stated that the past year has been like nothing that we could ever have imagined in our lifetimes and keeping services for vulnerable young people and adults up and running in the midst of a global pandemic has inevitably seen multiple challenges. We are incredibly proud of the way in which both our team and our partners in other agencies have risen to these challenges and adapted their working practices to ensure that the needs of our care leavers have continued to be met, and to fulfil all our responsibilities as good Corporate Parents.

Review of the Local Offer

In July 2018 some of our care leavers met with their Corporate Parents to produce the local offer; people attended from the council, voluntary organisations and major employment firms in Cheshire East. They each wrote a pledge about what they would offer our care leavers in the future; some of the pledges included prioritising emotional health and wellbeing and others looked at accommodation and employment and training.

Each year with our care leavers, we hold an event where we review how we have delivered those pledges and our aspirations for the future before we update our local offer. The most recent review was held on 17 March 2021 and was attended by care leavers, Councillors, local employers and a whole range of organisations who are in a position to offer advice,

guidance and practical help. To see what's changed, please visit the [local offer on our website](#).

Independence Packs

Our Gold, Silver, Bronze and Platinum Independence packs are well established and are used routinely throughout the local authority. Social Workers, Personal Advisors and Foster Carers complete them regularly with their young people to increase their knowledge and experience of self-care and independence tasks. The aim is for young people to start working on their bronze pack from aged 14 and up; the tasks are achievable for that age group and difficult though it may be for teenagers to have to start thinking about independence, preparation for adulthood cannot wait until the young person becomes a care leaver.

There is now twice-yearly training around independence for our foster carers. Feedback from the training has been hugely positive and it is run in partnership between the Care Leavers Service, Safeguarding and the Fostering Service. In the past year we have also extended the training to include families in Independent Fostering Agencies.

Tenancy Readiness Courses

The Care Leavers' Service and our colleagues in Housing have continued to run the Tenancy Readiness Course although it has been taken online as a result of the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Fortunately (thanks to the support provided by Personal Advisors) the pandemic has not had a significant impact on completion rates with 19 care leavers finishing the course in the first six months of the business year and a further 7 undertaking it at the time of writing. Like so many aspects of our lives that have changed, many young people report that they actually like the online course as they can complete it in their own time and to suit them; as a result and given that there is a cost with the current provider, we are currently developing our own version of the course.

Mentoring

We are proud to continue our working relationship with Pure Insight who deliver mentoring and wellbeing support to our care leavers. It is an outstanding service whose workers regularly go above and beyond any reasonable expectations to ensure that young people can access support in ways to which they feel able to respond, particularly when times are hard. Highlights from the last few months of their work include:

- Psychological Wellbeing Worker (PWW) Ami started in August 2018; Trauma-informed counsellor Kirsty started in May 2019.
- 15 new referrals to the service in the most recent quarter (4 picked up by PWW, 5 picked up by the counsellor and 6 remain on waiting list for a PWW offer to become available).
- In total 31 are receiving a weekly or fortnightly 1:1 interventions from the Psychological Wellbeing Worker which include learning self-care coping strategies, self-regulatory skills, understanding trauma and the impact it has on physical and emotional wellbeing, understanding their own story and what impact that has on them now.

- 31 young people completed resilience circles to identify sources of support in their existing networks or in the wider community and which also helps identify unhelpful/unhealthy relationships.
- 3 Supported to reduce substance use in last 3 months.
- 4 Supported to retain/secure new or existing tenancy in last 3 months; 5 supported to make their flat a home (access grant for soft furnishings through Pure Insight).
- 5 young people referred into Trauma Counselling since Feb 2021 – 12 spaces currently being utilised by Cheshire East young people.
- 12 youngsters supported to access mental health advice or appointments in last 3 months.
- 65 young people are members of a closed Facebook Group – ‘Insight In Mind’.
- 17 supported to engage in activities to support mental health wellbeing.
- 7 young people started education, employment or training or voluntary work since being picked up by Pure Insight between February and April 2021.
- 20 young people currently have active mentoring relationships.
- 13 have ‘progressed’ mentoring relationships which have exceeded two years duration.
- 45 young people are currently engaging with the team in work to get ready for a mentor or in stabilising their situations.

If any officers would consider becoming a mentor please email ce@pure-insight.org.uk or check the website www.pure-insight.org.uk.

Support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) & Adults and Helping them Prepare for Adulthood.

The past year has seen a continuing pattern of stability in our population of asylum seeking young people and at the time of writing, the council has 14 cared for children and 33 care leavers who have arrived in this country unaccompanied. Because of growing pressure in the port authorities, we accepted two young people under the National Transfer Scheme in December and as recently as last week, we had two more spontaneous arrivals from Sudan who were discovered close to the M6. The Home Office is currently consulting with local authorities nationally in an attempt to ensure a fairer distribution of young people from Portsmouth and Kent and our feedback was submitted as part of the overall response of the North-West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership. If all councils can be persuaded to accept the proposals and work collaboratively, we will not see any increase in the number of young people that we take into our care in an average year.

The offer to our UASC is the same as for any other cared for young person or care leaver although planning can be more difficult as the support we offer can change, depending on the outcome and timeliness of their asylum claim with the Home Office. Some young people are granted leave to remain quickly whereas others are still waiting for a decision after turning 18 years and beyond, meaning that they cannot work or settle like their peers. Inevitably, the pandemic has seen these delays only worsen although we are now seeing the first Home Office assessment interviews conducted virtually.

We have an excellent accommodation offer for our UASC’s within Cheshire East with emergency provision available for the day they arrive and then more independent shared accommodation options available once assessments of their needs and abilities have been completed. In the past 12 months a number of young people have successfully obtained

their own tenancy via Cheshire Home Choice and are making roots, connections and friendships in the borough. This has followed a path of supported accommodation and advice and assistance from their Personal Advisors to make sure it will be a success.

Ignition Panel & Accommodation

Accommodation is a key factor in preparing young people for adulthood and is discussed in the subgroup as a standing agenda item. In December, Cheshire East received a Youth Homelessness Focussed Call from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and this has resulted in the production of an action plan for partner agencies which we have adopted in the group.

Moving into independence is an anxious time for cared for children and changes in placement need to occur at the right time and to the right home for our young people. To facilitate this, the Ignition panel has been running since 2017: the monthly panel brings together what is available locally so that our young people can make an informed choice about where they live in the future.

We retain commissioned contracts for accommodation provided by Watermill House in Macclesfield and the YMCA in Crewe after a successful re-tendering exercise. These projects use their own independence programs which prepare young people to move on and be able to live independently.

There is ongoing work by our Housing Department to work with our Social Landlords throughout the borough to dispel myths and give them a greater understanding of care experienced young people. The work has been positive with many Social Landlords changing the way they work. Although the work with landlords is ongoing the conference with Social Landlords planned for July last year had to be postponed because of the pandemic. Even with these challenges however, we have still had many care leavers move into their first home across the borough and our use of emergency accommodation is essentially close to zero.

‘Staying Put’ describes the arrangement when a cared for young person remains with their foster carer post 18 years. It is an option that we actively encourage as staying with a family in a settled and safe environment can only help a young person achieve and fulfil their potential. It also gives them the opportunity to progress to independence at a stage they choose rather than something that is forced upon them. To try and increase the number of staying put placements we offer training and have a Staying Put champion in the Fostering Service. Foster carers can be anxious about the changes from caring for a child to an adult and also any financial implications so we try to iron these out well before the young person turns 18 years. Our work with colleagues in the Fostering Service and Independent Fostering Agencies is certainly bearing fruit: when we last reported to the Corporate Parenting Committee in April 2020, we had 13 Staying Put arrangements which has now increased to 27.

The past year has been a time when our young people have been under pressure like never before and inevitably this has occasionally led to difficulties in settling in their accommodation, whatever the provider type. Nevertheless, there has been only minimal use of emergency placements (hotel, hostel, B&B) for care leavers and only one young man has found himself in such accommodation for more than a few days.

Financial Support

One of the biggest challenges for our young people moving into adulthood is financial security and having the ability to live independently and manage this on a small income. Education and activities in relation to budgeting happen with all our young people via independence packs as described above and ASDAN modules. The reality of what a non-working care leaver will receive on Universal Credit is stark when one takes into consideration what they will need to purchase from this, albeit that the £20 increase arising from the pandemic has provided some welcome additional support. In Cheshire East we always try to support and encourage our young people into work to increase their income and offer financial incentives for those who may not be ready for work but are in a position to do some volunteering.

The Universal Credit system also only pays people four weeks in arrears, meaning that when they make their application they have to wait four weeks for their first payment. They can get an advance however this means that they are immediately in debt with the DWP and their payments are decreased for the following 6 months. We do not want our children in debt so continue to offer financial support until they receive their first payment. We are only one of a handful of Local Authorities that offer this.

We have made good links with our local DWP centres and have a joint working protocol between our services which has been in place now for almost three years. This ensures that the job coaches are aware of our young people's needs and that they will be in communication with each person's Personal Advisor. We have seen a reduction in benefit sanctions and fewer challenges having to be made to the DWP in the past 12 months.

Employment Education & Training (EET)

It has been stated widely since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic that it is likely that young people will be one of the groups who are disproportionately affected by its impact, particularly in the longer term. We have therefore seen some young people become more disillusioned about their life chances and perhaps less able than in ordinary times to engage with services. As a result, the number of our young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is higher than we would wish, although not as high as we originally feared a year ago. We remain aspirational for our children and want them to be able to make the most of their potential in whatever field they choose. We have a dedicated EET worker in the Leaving Care Team and a 16-18 EET specialist within the Virtual School. These two workers meet regularly, identify our young people who are NEET and make plans to engage and support them. We are also working hard with colleagues across the Council and in other agencies to increase the number of young people who take up Apprenticeships and have a specific action plan in this regard.

As we are emerging from lockdown, we have again identified a group of NEET young people and are currently running an internal 12 week program to build on their confidence and resilience and to make them aware of local opportunities in both the employment market and in further education and training. Following the conclusion of the last course, 7 of the 9 participants either found work or continued onto a work placement or are volunteering. The 12 week program not only looks to make the young people work-ready but it helps with life skills and communication, thereby facilitating their preparation into adulthood. There is no

doubt that it is one of the factors that has contributed to declining NEET numbers for care leavers in recent months.

Journey First

Cheshire East and other pan-Cheshire Local Authorities (Cheshire West and Warrington) were successful in obtaining funding from the European Social Fund to support people into employment or training. This project is called the Journey First programme and provides intensive 1:1 support for young people and adults across Cheshire and Warrington. The dedicated team can help participants to identify their skills and reach their goals, whether that be support with job searches and employment or access to further education or training.

The Care Leavers Service has their own dedicated Journey First Work Placement Officer embedded in the team. They have been in post since April 2021, and they are currently actively working with 34 young care leavers. Our care leavers need consistent support, and our Journey First worker spends time building a relationship, and is there to support before, during and after starting a new job or new course. Our worker is a corporate parent who is there to call our young people in the morning to encourage them to work and to celebrate their first days with them.

In the past week our dedicated worker has helped three care leavers into full-time employment, two into College and one young person to access a local Construction Skills Certification Scheme from making a partnership with a local training provider.

21+ Offer

The Children & Social Work Act 2017 introduced a new duty on local authorities to provide Personal Advisor support to all care leavers up to the age of 25 should they wish to receive it. We recruited two additional Personal Advisors to meet our obligations in this respect and we have recently taken part in a 'deep-dive' of our offer with the DfE who were interested in looking at the extent and variation of the support we now provide; this will hopefully have a positive impact on continued funding for our workers. Some anonymised examples of the sort of work that the 21+ Offer encompasses are provided below:

1. Tom is 22 and used to be in foster care; he is a vulnerable young man who now lives in his own accommodation in nearby Stoke-on-Trent. He struggles to understand complex issues and requires a great deal of support in dealing with professional agencies. Tom is involved in a Child Protection process in relation to his 11 month old son in another area and sadly like many care leavers, he has experienced this somewhat negatively. We have supported him on over 30 occasions in the past year after he was reallocated to a Personal Advisor in December 2020; this has included help with accommodation, dealing with rent arrears and other financial matters, reaching out to family members to try to extend his support network, advising him about his Parenting Assessment, accompanying him to sessions, advocating for him when dealing with Telford Social Workers and meeting jointly with his legal representative. Contact with Tom has been at least weekly, sometimes with multiple contacts and phone calls throughout many days. Young adults like Tom often don't meet the threshold for support from Adult Services and in effect, their Personal Advisor can often become the de facto 'Adult Social Worker'.

2. Marie is 23 and is part of a large family with multiple relatives in care either now or formerly. She has learning needs and requires support in dealing with many of life's day to day matters; most notably she has a 3 year old daughter who was adopted and lives in another area far away. We have supported her over 20 times in the past year with issues including general support and providing a listening ear, help with financial matters, budgeting, food parcels etc, relationship advice, and facilitating contact with family members.
3. Paul is 24, has undiagnosed learning needs and served a custodial sentence as a teenager for sexual offences against children. He has previously been the victim of a social media 'campaign' in the local area in which fake Facebook profiles were used to spread untrue stories about him, thereby placing him at even greater risk. Paul contacted us last year when he started a new relationship with someone who has young children; it was obviously good that he felt able to reach out to the service in these circumstances. Since that time, he has been provided with regular support and advice around Children's Services and the assessment process; we have also advised him when he has been feeling down and drinking too heavily. We have helped Paul with practical issues including accommodation, helping him to move house and supporting him with contacting the Police when his flat was burgled.
4. Mohammed is a former UASC from Afghanistan who now has indefinite leave to remain; he is settled in Stoke-on-Trent and has recently had an arranged marriage and become a father. We have continued to support him in relation to Housing and financial advice and he was thrilled to receive a laptop from the DfE. Considering his life experiences, Mohammed is a remarkable young man who has adapted to life in this country amazingly well; he works in the Asian fast-food businesses of Shelton where he has developed a good support network for himself. Nevertheless, he remains confident about approaching the service for help and advice whenever he needs it.

Next Steps

We have produced a Service Plan for 2021/22 to indicate our priorities over the coming year.