



Care Leavers' Service Annual Report

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Laura McLoughlin – Team Manager

April 2021 – May 2022

1. Introduction

1.1 This report covers a period of significant change for Cheshire East Care Leavers' Service but a time during which the team has continued to work tirelessly to meet the needs of care experienced young people, wherever they may be living and no matter what their personal circumstances. We have emerged from a global pandemic which has seen the development of new ways of working and engaging with our young people: we are incredibly proud of the way in which both our Team and our partners in other agencies have risen to meet these challenges, thereby ensuring that we have continued to meet our responsibilities as good Corporate Parents.

1.2 Preparing Cared for Children and Care Leavers for adulthood can be a complex process. As I have written elsewhere, 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. We therefore offer a range of support across emotional health and wellbeing, education, employment and training, accommodation and housing, and finances and benefits.

2. Numbers and Staffing

2.1 At the end of the period our Care Leavers' Service was working with 309 young people; of these 200 were between the ages of 18 and 21, 36 were aged 21+ and 73 were between the age of 16 and 17. These numbers mean that caseloads have been slightly higher than the generally recognised ideal of 20 with some workers being closer to 25 for much of the year. In general terms, we can expect continued growth in the work of the team because of the 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 21yrs of age under the 21-25 duties arising from the Children & Social Work Act 2017. However we now have a plan to address these issues which I will outline further below.

2.2 The most significant staffing change this year was the resignation of Sam Ankers from his post as Team Manager after almost 5 years to move on to the House Project. I would like to publicly acknowledge Sam's enormous contribution to the development of the service during this time and his endless commitment to improving the lives of care experienced young people; it has been a genuine pleasure to work with him and see both his own professional development, and the impact that it has had on both his team of Personal Advisors and our Care Leavers.

2.3 Sam has been replaced by Laura McLoughlin who brings a wealth of experience as a social worker in Child Protection and Education settings. Laura has made a great start to her role, she has immediately established excellent working relationships with both the team and partner agencies and we have every confidence that she will build on the fantastic foundations laid by her predecessor. Laura is joined by a number of new PAs: Carol Holmes came to us from Journey First, Claire Stacey has experience of Care Leaver Services in the independent sector, and Julie Chafe and Nikki Brander both have many years' experience in a range of

social care settings in Cheshire East. They have all settled into the team extremely well and are already achieving some great outcomes for our young people.

2.4 Looking ahead, we will be recruiting 2 additional members of the team and changing the work of the Senior PAs to a more managerial and supervisory role; this will enable us to take over the reviews of Pathway Plans for young people aged 19+ from the Safeguarding & Quality Assurance Service and will enable us to keep PA caseloads to more manageable levels.

3. Review of the Local Offer

3.1 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 well-being and others looked at accommodation and employment and training.

3.2 Each year with our Care Leavers, we hold an event at which we review how we have delivered those pledges, be aspirational for the future, and then update our local offer. The next review will be held in the autumn and already, we are in discussions with a company who will produce an app-based version of the offer that young people can access via their mobile phones; this will be particularly helpful to our UASC population who will be able to access the offer in their own language, and it will also enable us to increase participation through the ability to direct message and ask questions of our young people via the app. In the meantime, the current 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. Emotional Wellbeing and Mentoring

4.1 We have continued our working relationship with Pure Insight who deliver mentoring and well-being support to our Care Leavers via a contract that is currently in the process of being retendered. In January, our work with them was featured in *Children & Young People Now*, a national publication in which I said:

"We're incredibly proud of our 4+ year partnership with Pure Insight 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. Pure Insight's amazing staff are passionate and authentic and never fail to go the extra mile, something that is so important in engaging young adults who may have good reason to be fearful of the involvement of statutory agencies. It's always hard to put a price on some of these softer outcomes but we're confident that the partnership delivers both outstanding outcomes, and outstanding value."

4.2 Highlights from the last few months of their work include:

- Psychological Wellbeing Worker Becky started in December 2021. Trauma informed counsellor Kirsty has been with the service since May 2019
- Training offered to the PA Team
- 17 new referrals to the service
- 11 received 1:1 interventions from psychological wellbeing worker which include; learning self-care coping strategies, learning 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

- 23 receiving a weekly /fortnightly 1:1 intervention
- 11 young people completed resilience circles – identifying sources of support in their existing networks or in the wider community. Also identifies unhelpful/unhealthy relationships
- 2 Supported to reduce substance use
- 10 Supported to retain/secure new or existing tenancy
- 2 supported to make their flat a home (access grant for soft furnishings)
- 7 young people referred into Trauma Counselling since February 2022 – 9 spaces currently being utilised by CE young people
- 8 young people supported to access mental health advice or appointments in last 3 months
- 55 young people members of closed Facebook group – ‘Insight In Mind’
- 9 Supported to engage in activities to support mental health wellbeing
- 3 young people started EET or voluntary work since being picked up by Pure Insight

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

4.3 We also work in partnership with Pure Insight to support our young people who are parents themselves; we appreciate that care experienced young adults can sometimes have genuine reasons for being fearful of the involvement of statutory agencies and therefore need alternative means of engagement and support. We currently have 13 Care Leaver Mums, 2 of whom are pregnant again, 9 Care Leaver Dads and one more who will shortly become a father. The Care Leaver Mums Group meets regularly and recently had a fantastic day out with their children at Wheelock Farm.

5. Support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) & Adults

5.1 Cheshire East Council has continued to take a proactive and humanitarian approach to the plight of migrant young people who arrive in the UK via the south coast but the past year has seen significant changes, largely as a result of the Government’s decision in July 2021 to mandate Local Authorities’ participation in the National Transfer Scheme. This followed the enormous rise in asylum seekers crossing the Channel in small boats which was itself a consequence of the increased security around the lorry terminals in Calais. The NTS now accounts for the majority of our referrals at around one every 3 to 4 weeks although of late, we have also started to see some disputed age claims coming from the Home Office hotels in the Borough that ostensibly house adult asylum seekers.

5.2 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. A few young people are granted leave to remain quickly whereas others are still waiting for a decision after turning 18yrs and beyond, meaning that they cannot work or settle like their peers. As recently as last week, we were contacted by the NW Migration Partnership for a list of delayed cases, and we hope that the extra resources currently being deployed by the Home Office will speed up claims and allow our young people to finally move into independence.

5.3 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.

5.4 Looking ahead, we have secured agreement to recruit 2 social workers to join the Care Leavers' Service who will work with our Cared For UASC and any young person aged 16 & 17 who presents as homeless. The workers have been identified and we believe that this will significantly enhance our work, both in terms of the development of expertise and consistency, and in establishing better transition pathways as the young people turn 18. We also know that many of our migrant young people have fled from war and persecution and that they often have unmet needs around mental health and psychological well-being; therefore Pure Insight's planned development of some specific support in this area and the development of a community café and young people's group will be a welcome addition to our offer.

6. Ignition Panel & Accommodation

6.1 Accommodation is inevitably a key factor in preparing young people for adulthood and in September last year, the Action Plan we had developed from the previous year's Youth Homelessness Focussed Call with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government was signed off as requiring no further follow up visits.

6.2 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 might live in the future. We retain commissioned contracts for accommodation provided by Watermill House in Macclesfield and the YMCA in Crewe; these projects use their own independence programs which prepare young people to move on and be able to live independently.

6.3 At the end of last year we conducted an analysis of the nine cases where our young people had had to access emergency accommodation and the results were encouraging: generally young people were in placements for only short periods of time, and often as a result of actions for which they had had to accept a level of personal responsibility. Nevertheless in five of the cases, the provision actually benefited them in some way: for example one young man who was subject to strict bail conditions was able to remain at college by accessing an emergency placement close by.

6.4 'Staying Put' describes the arrangement when a cared for young person remains with their foster carer post 18yrs. 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 18yrs. Our work with colleagues in the Fostering Service and Independent Fostering Agencies is certainly bearing fruit: in April 2020 we had 13 Staying Put arrangements; at the time of last year's report we had 27 and at the time of writing, we now have 38.

7. Tenancy Readiness Courses

7.1 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 initially imposed by Covid-19. Since the turn of the year, 35 young people have started the course, of whom 25 have completed it. 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 themselves.

8. Independence Packs

8.1 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.

8.2 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.

9. Financial Support

9.1 One of the biggest challenges for our young people 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 are undertaken 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, and we were all incredibly proud when in October last year, Cheshire East became we believe, the only local authority in the country to cover the £20 cut in Universal Credit for 6m to take our young people through the cold winter months.

9.2 The Universal Credit system only pays people 4 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.

9.3 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 four 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. In addition, we always 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.

10. Employment Education & Training (EET)

10.1 We know from all the research arising from the Covid-19 pandemic that young people are likely to be one of the groups who will be disproportionately affected by its impact, particularly in the longer term. We therefore pay particular attention to young people who are not accessing employment, education or training and still have a dedicated EET worker in the Leaving Care Team and a 16-18 EET specialist within the virtual school. These two workers have been joined in the past year by an Apprenticeship Coordinator and they all meet regularly, identify our young people who are NEET and make plans to engage and support them. We are working hard with colleagues across the Council and in other agencies to increase the number of young people who take up Apprenticeships and this has now risen to 9, with a further 28 who are actively engaged in support programmes to get them 'apprenticeship-ready'. We believe that a significant number of these young people will access full-time apprenticeships in the coming months.

10.2 As in previous years, we have again identified groups of harder to reach NEET young people and have run two 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. 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, which for 18-20 year olds is currently running at 33% with a further 3% involved in re-engagement work.

11. Journey First

11.1 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 1-2-1 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.

11.2 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 workers which can spend time building a relationship and be there to support before, during and after starting a new job or new course. This is exactly what Journey First does. 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.

12. 21+ Offer

12.1 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 have over 30 young adults aged 21+ who have been reallocated to PAs and a significant number of others who access the team's help on an 'as and when needed' basis. We want our young people to know that we are there for them and that there isn't a cliff-edge of support that ends either at 18 or at 20; to this end, we are not precious about the duty extending to 25 and will always look to offer help and support to them at whatever age they turn to us for it.