

People's Scrutiny Committee

# Care Leavers Task Group



Interim Report

18 November 2015

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# Preface

Care Leavers are young people who have been children in care or looked after children and they have reached or past their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The County Council's responsibilities continue until they reach 21 or 25 years if still in education. They will always remain children of Devon just like we are in our own families. What I have learnt is the complexity life throws at these young adults. Despite the best efforts of staff, foster carers and residential workers they don't have the support network of a caring home. It was particularly disappointing as corporate parents that we were overseeing an inadequate service.

The steps being taken to increase members' knowledge and involvement as corporate parents is to be welcomed. The Task Group are pleased with the progress made and councillors increased attendance at the Corporate Parenting Board since May; members now have a much deeper understanding of the challenges facing Devon's children in care.

This initial report only covers part of our work. We are planning to continue our investigation and are yet to hear from the voice of the pre and post care leavers, Cabinet members for Children and Learning and Adult Service, the Leader and Chief Executive, educational providers and those with disabilities.

The Task Group are heartened to see the advances made since May and are keen to strengthen links with our partners to embed best practise established across the County. We should all want the best outcomes for Devon's children in care, encouraging each child to reach their potential, and like a good parent never giving up on them.

Sara Randall Johnson  
Chairman



Councillor  
Sara Randall Johnson

Chair, Care Leavers Task Group, People's  
Scrutiny Committee

# Introduction

The Task Group – Councillors Sara Randall Johnson (Chair), Frank Biederman, Alistair Dewhirst, Richard Hosking, Jill Owen (Corporate Services / Place Scrutiny) and Margaret Squires - would like to place on record its gratitude to the witnesses who contributed to the review. In submitting its recommendations, the Group has sought to ensure that its findings are supported with evidence and information to substantiate its proposals.

At People's Scrutiny Committee on 22 June 2015 People's Scrutiny resolved to undertake a review on care leavers, following Ofsted's May 2015 publication of its latest inspection report on services for children in need of help and protection; children looked after and care leavers in Devon. The Ofsted judgement on the experiences and progress of care leavers was 'inadequate'. Ofsted cited as a priority for immediate action the following relating to care leavers:

1. Review all those care leavers about whom the local authority does not have up to date information and ensure that they are safe.
2. Ensure that care leavers receive high quality services to meet their assessed needs with a specific focus on pathway planning and review processes, risk assessments for all young people living in unsuitable accommodation such as bed and breakfast and access to health histories.
3. Improve the quality of care leaver data and analysis so that the local authority is able to meet its corporate parenting responsibility to this group of vulnerable young people.

The terms of reference for the review were:

1. To understand the County Council's statutory responsibilities, role and function in terms of care leavers.
2. To assess the quality of pathway planning for care leavers and the measures being put in place to improve the quality of the information held on care leavers.
3. To review the role of personal advisors.
4. To evaluate the suitability of care leavers accommodation in particular the use of bed & breakfasts and houses in multiple occupation.
5. To review factors relating to the lower than national average number of care leavers in Devon being in education, employment or training.
6. To report back to the People's Scrutiny Committee on the findings of the Task Group.

Time and resources necessitate that this report provides a snapshot approach to further highlight some of the issues relating to care leavers. This is an early interim report and does not in any way pretend to be an exhaustive exploration of these issues. The Task Group recognise that at the heart of effective scrutiny is the need to embed the voice of the most vulnerable in its work. Members have yet to hear from care leavers and this will be a focus of the next stage of the report from members in early Spring 2016.

# Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

That the arrangements for the preparation to adulthood for care leavers in transition are significantly improved upon to ensure that personal advisors are allocated by the 16<sup>th</sup> birthday for all care leavers.

## Recommendation 2

That the County Council needs to increase to 100% the involvement of care leavers in their pathway planning.

## Recommendation 3

That the County Council work more closely with district, city and borough councils on issues relating to care leavers housing with senior officer attendance at all Devon Homelessness Prevention Partnership meetings.

## Recommendation 4

That the County Council and district authorities continue to strengthen their corporate parenting arrangements and responsibilities.

## Recommendation 5

That the County Council re-examine its commissioning arrangements in relation to supported accommodation, to include the allocation of an officer from social care commissioning to work specifically on care leavers housing with the districts.

# Summary

Young people leaving the care when they reach 18 years must be given limitless opportunities to adjust to their emerging adult life. The County Council needs to continue its leading role to provide support services and through its corporate parenting role to ensure its partners are also fully engaged in getting the best possible outcomes for care leavers.

Work needs to be undertaken with the district housing authorities to smooth pathways into appropriate housing for care leavers and address the gaps in the availability of accommodation. It is in no way helpful to a care leaver's outcomes where they are housed significant distances away from their families and friends. Legislation highlights care leavers as being a priority group not just for the County Council but also for the districts, city and borough councils. To date the County Council's lack of attendance at senior officer level, at the bi-monthly Devon Homelessness Prevention Partnership meetings has resulted in less than satisfactory decision making for the care leaver requiring accommodation and arrangements across Devon remain disparate. There are also issues about the recording of data and the way in which information is communicated between the County Council and the districts, which has a detrimental impact on the pre-planning pathway process for care leavers.

With regards to a young person's preparation to adulthood, personal advisors are not being allocated at 16, but much later resulting in a transition period of just a few months. While the County Council is able to evidence becoming more stringent in terms of social worker practice standards in relation to care leavers, outcomes will not improve sufficiently until the issues with personal advisors is resolved.

The County Council needs to take more responsibility for this cohort of vulnerable young people. There needs to be some remodelling of the service to ensure the County Council is suitably robust, and more consistent in its offer. The lack of clear data on the number of intentionally homeless by area also significantly undermines the County Council's and district partners ability to hold each other to account to get positive outcomes for care leavers in Devon.

The Task Group welcomes the recent appointment of a permanent senior manager for fostering and adoption and hopes this will help to forge the necessary relationship with the districts to progress the issues flagged up in this interim report.

## Inadequate Ofsted Judgement

In May 2015 Ofsted judged the experiences and progress of care leavers in Devon as 'inadequate'. The following comments were made in relation to the County Council's services and support of care leavers:

- The need to know where care leavers are, and to ensure that they are receiving appropriate support.
- Review all care leavers we are 'Not in Touch' with and ensure they are safe.
- Bed & breakfast use in emergencies (24 hours only) lack of risk assessments in place by housing and childrens social care
- Data was not accurate and up to date
- Managers footprint and formal sign off of pathway plans not evidenced
- Personal advisor's completing pathway planning reviews with no management oversight
- Outcomes for care leavers are poor
- Contact with birth family is not supported to ensure links are maintained where appropriate
- Re-assess have birth family improved, and whether a young person can safely go home
- Social workers, personal advisors and managers need to be clear about what outcomes they are seeking for care leavers.

## Good Ofsted Judgements

Common features of a local authority which performs well:

- A clear commitment to corporate parenting across the partnerships for care leavers.
- Effective, stable support from personal advisers.
- Good support is given to care leavers in further or higher education.
- Robust planning for young people future which has high aspiration for young people
- A strong commitment to take account of care leavers wishes and feelings and give them a voice.
- Good access to a range of suitable accommodation.

## Auditing Care Leaver Records

A programme of auditing and analysis of care leaver records is ongoing in response to the latest Ofsted inspection. The overarching aim of the audits is to improve the quality of practice and outcomes for children and young people. The audit considers the quality of the information and recording on the young person's file, the decision making process, risk assessment and analysis in discussion with the social worker.

### **Audits completed as at 14th October 2015**

- 336 care leavers have been audited against the quality framework standards
- 120 audits (35.7%) have scored below the overall average score of 3.0 and 3 are no longer recorded as children in care
- 113 (33.6%) audits are for care leavers categorised as having a disability.

# Key Issues

## County Council

### **For All 700+ Care Leavers as at 31 March 2015**

- 'In touch' was at 75.2%
- Suitable accommodation is at 71.6%
- Care leavers in education, employment or training is at 34.4%.

## **Corporate Parenting**

The term 'Corporate Parent' means the collective responsibility of the council, elected members, employees, and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by Devon. Elected members need to fulfil their corporate parenting mandate and meet the requirements in term of the actions of a reasonable parent. As a corporate parent, the County Council needs to recognise the importance of not solely judging young people by their mistakes. Rather than focus on young people's weakness, the culture the County Council creates must be one where staff work to their strengths to support them.

## **Missing Care Leavers**

It would appear that since the last Ofsted inspection in May 2015 the County Council is holding more sophisticated data on care leavers, but there is still work to do to understand the data better. Ofsted had found that

*the authority does not know what, if any, support is being provided to the remaining 301 care leavers for whom it has corporate responsibility. These care leavers may be receiving services from other parts of the local authority, such as Learning Disability Services, but the authority is unable to verify this through accurate performance data.<sup>1</sup>*

There is now just a group of 26 care leavers who the County Council are not 'in touch' with, and work continues to find them. Some of these young people have deliberately disengaged, while for others it remains unclear as to what has happened to them.

Officers of the County Council reported that from a practice perspective there are instances where care leavers are being made intentionally homeless by the districts. It appeared to the Task Group that there are issues about how accurately the district housing authorities and the County Council are recording this information. In order to understand the specific nature of the problem, the County Council must be able to access data on intentionally homeless care leavers in each district ideally through Care First.

## **Personal Advisors**

Statutory guidance states a social worker should see a young person every 3 months. The Task Group applauds the County Council's decision to reduce this figure to 6 weeks in order to provide a more flexible approach which will better suit and help the young people concerned. Caseloads for social workers and personal advisors are reasonable when benchmarked with other authorities,

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<sup>1</sup> P.33 **Devon County Council - Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection; children looked after and care leavers in Devon (Ofsted, May 2015)**



however the County Council employs slightly more social workers, and has less personal advisors than needed.

As part of the transitions to adulthood from age 16 young people should have a personal advisor working with them alongside their social worker until the social worker ceases their involvement at 18. The problem in Devon is that late allocation of personal advisors results in an inadequate transition period of just a few months. There are also no personal advisors linked into the disability service.

## Pathway Planning

All young people need to be involved in their pathway planning. Currently only 43% of care leavers participate in their plan. Officers are undertaking some intensive work on care planning which should also help to improve placement stability. The establishment of a more stable workforce not as reliant on agency staff will also help this process. Data should start to show these improvements in the system by the start of 2016.

The educational element of the Pathway Plan is being revised to bring it more in line with the expectations in the pre-16 Personal Education Plan. Careers South West (CSW) has also now been commissioned to track the destination and engagement of all care leavers up to 21, or 25 for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and this will be reported back to the Virtual College (for post 16 young people). CSW did not previously know as a matter of course as to whether a young person was a care leaver; however a common list is now in place. It was however reported to be a frustration for the districts authorities that the County Council has refused them access to young people's pathway plans.

The Virtual School has been restructured to address a lack of capacity among other issues. It has been expanded from early years to 25. Agreement has been secured with further education colleges to provide the Virtual College with termly progress reports for all care leavers.

## Preparing for Adulthood (Transitions)

Preparing for adulthood - Year 9 (age 13/14) to age 25 - is a complicated time for young people where they are at their most vulnerable in terms of their development. Currently adult social care is not involved early enough in the process to help shape good outcomes for young people. Adult social care is being reorganised to improve transition arrangements. Currently, unless the young person concerned has profound needs the appropriate transitions work is not being undertaken early enough within the system.

There are in the region of 280 young people a year in transition, but it is unclear to adult services how many of these are also care leavers, as they are at present reliant on a children's services spreadsheet being passed across to them, rather than sharing access to a live database, this can result in potential gaps. Work with Ellen Tinkham Special School revealed that there were children missing from the data sets held at County Hall.

There should be increased focus while young people are still in their foster placements on the transition to supported lodgings and independent living. One of the difficulties in terms of preparing for adulthood is the high level of support some young people have prior to 18, which make the transition to the much lower level of adult support all the more difficult. Far more young people are also presenting with mental health issues, which makes it hugely problematic when there has not been adequate planning on their transition.

When a young person is in a successful fostering placement between the ages of 16-18 it greatly aids their preparation to adulthood. There is also now an agreement relating to the Permanence & Transitions Team that at 18 they will continue to support young people. There are currently over 70 young people *Staying Put*<sup>2</sup> and this number is rising.

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<sup>2</sup> *Staying Put* is when a young person remains with their foster carer after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday up to the age of 21.

## **Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETS)**

Those young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) represent a huge concern. The Head of Education and Learning is working with Careers South West to ensure they are focussing on the most vulnerable young people. Work is underway through the Virtual School to try to ensure that education pathways are also employment pathways, which will hopefully realise a reduction in the NEET numbers. The Task Group is pleased to report that the County Council now has 4 care leavers in post undertaking apprenticeships, although this initiative was only put into place following Ofsted's last inspection. Districts should also be willing to offer apprenticeships and job opportunities to care leavers.

## **Drugs & Alcohol**

Officers try to put plans and support around young people involved in drugs and alcohol. Often these young people lack positive role models, and instead will use role models entrenched with bad behaviour. Loneliness and emotional instability may lead to a young person connecting with the homeless community. This is particularly apparent where a care leaver has had to move away from where they lived previously due to a lack of available accommodation, and are removed from friends and family.

## **Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)**

Increased vulnerability is a national issue with young people, as is complex mental health issues. The issue was reported to be markedly worse in Devon than in many other parts of the country given the difficulties accessing CAMHS. CAMHS also will not support young people with a drug or alcohol issue.

## **Private Sector**

The County Council in its role championing care leavers needs to be looking for creative solutions wherever possible to ensure these young people have the best possible outcomes. Waitrose in Leeds were asked by their local authority to help support care leavers, and now donate kinship flats for free. In response to this the County Council's Leader and the Chief Executive will be seeking to work with local businesses to try to encourage private investment.

# **District, City & Borough Councils**

## **District Housing Authorities**

The Task Group was grateful to the district authorities involved in the review process to date: East Devon, Exeter City, South Hams, Teignbridge & West Devon. It is however evident, particularly given the number of authorities who choose not to engage in this review process, that the relationship between the County Council and the district authorities needs to be strengthened to ensure care leavers receive the best possible support. There were a number of concerning areas that the Task Group were made aware of where the County Council and districts have not been working together ultimately to the detriment of care leavers and young people in Devon.

The bi-monthly meetings of the Devon Homelessness Prevention Partnership for 16/17 year olds and care leavers provide an excellent platform to discuss policy, procedure and joint working with the district housing authorities; however officers from the County Council are attending without the sufficient seniority to make decisions which is a significant issue. There should be an officer in a senior management position to help to create a much tighter link between the districts and the County Council. The districts also feel that the high staffing turnover at the County Council makes the building and maintaining of relationships with joint working more of a challenge than it should be.

The joint protocol for care leavers is being revised as it was out of date and was not being adhered to in terms of the Devon Homes Choice system. Information, advice and guidance has not always been provided 6 months in advance. By not working early enough with these young people, many present at 18 at the districts believing they will immediately get their own flat.

It was reported that at present the unhelpful default position for districts to go through to seek advice from County Council colleagues is the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). While the MASH was reported to have improved significantly, the district councils are frustrated by the difficulty to get through to a duty social worker. The MASH still is not providing feedback, which is another frustration. It was reported by the districts to have been more effective when there was a dedicated Care Leavers Team with whom districts could readily liaise with on housing issues. In Exeter, the Delivering Integrated Care project is helping to bring about better working together at all levels but this model is not replicated across the County.

## **Suitable Accommodation for Care Leavers**

There is a spectrum of options available for care leavers in terms of their accommodation including hostels and supported lodgings, it was however reported to the County Council's Corporate Parenting Forum in October 2015 that only 59.7% of care leavers are in suitable accommodation.

In some districts finding suitable accommodation can be difficult and may be exacerbated where property prices are high and they are bordered by unitary authorities. The options of accommodation for those young people who are most chaotic are not always ideal. Historically there was County Council practice of housing young people in bed & breakfasts (B&Bs) but officers were able to evidence to Ofsted that this had not happened in the previous 12 months or in the period since the last inspection. While care leavers are not placed in B&B's by the County Council, young people may be picked up by a district authority and housed in B&Bs. In terms of the actions of a reasonable parent, a child should not ever be placed in a B&B. Also there is a significant concern with the volume of care leavers accommodated in hostels at St David's Hill in Exeter.

It was reported to the Task Group that there have been instances in the last 6 months of care leavers under 18 sleeping rough. Where meetings have been arranged between the County Council and district colleagues to tackle issues of intentional homelessness it was claimed that there have at times been issues with social worker attendance. The joint funding between East Devon and the County Council for a Homelessness Prevention Worker, employed via Young Devon, has been successful in preventing most cases of potential homelessness for young people, including care leavers but unfortunately has not been rolled out across the other districts.

## Supported Accommodation

It is rare for a young person to move from care to their own accommodation, where this does happen they are unlikely to be able to maintain their flat either through falling behind on rent payments or anti-social behaviour and as a result they become intentionally homeless. As data is not currently available by district boundaries on the number of care leavers being made intentionally homeless, it was suggested to the Task Group that Exeter City Council has probably about two intentionally homeless care leavers a month, while the numbers were felt to be less in the other districts.

A young person's inability to live independently is a common factor in the failure of first-time tenancies. District housing officers reported that as social housing providers they are more tolerant than the private sector market, and will work hard to support a young person's housing placements. Where a tenancy is not working then a young person should have a step down into supported accommodation. The idea being that the young person is not penalized for any issues they might have had but instead have their confidence built up so that they are better equipped to cope on their own. There are different types of supported accommodation available including 24 hour support for those with the most complex needs. There is a range of housing options available, but there is not always enough thought given to the individual concerned as to the package of support which they might require within the context of their transition to adulthood. Adult services are trying to sort out sufficiency issues which will help in terms of finding places for young people in supported living and different support options as the young person moves.

The supported accommodation contract commissioned by the County Council, commenced in April 2015 and it was reported to the Task Group that this was without the involvement of the districts. There was not a proper mapping-out exercise of the support which is needed, Support is commissioned for 5.5 hours a week, which is not adequate to meet the young people's needs.

## Life Skills

There is a cohort of young people whom the districts do not have responsibility for as they are deemed to have made themselves intentionally homeless, but the County Council still has responsibility for them. Often these young people may not have an understanding of the consequences of their decision making as they have not been sufficiently prepared for adult life. There are a number of young people with limited basic life skills, who may not have been taught to respect property and are not equipped to cope in the private housing market, even in supported accommodation. Young people are now required by the district authorities to complete a modular programme of practical housing units to support them in budgeting and domestic arrangements. There is also a training flat in where young people can try out independent living but this is only available in Exeter.

*Copies of this report may be obtained from the Democratic Services & Scrutiny Secretariat at County Hall, Topsham Road, Exeter, Devon, EX2 4QD or by ringing 01392 382232. It will be available also on the County Council's website at:*

[http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/councildemocracy/decision\\_making/scrutiny/taskgroups.htm](http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/councildemocracy/decision_making/scrutiny/taskgroups.htm)

*If you have any questions or wish to talk to anyone about this report then please contact:*

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## Contributors / Representations to the Review

The Task Group met and received evidence on **28 July 2015**, **2 October 2015** and **27 October 2015** from the following in the order that they appeared before members:

<b>Witness</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Robina Khan <sup>3</sup>	Senior Manager Permanence and Transitions, Fostering and Adoption Services (Interim)	Devon County Council
Dawn Stabb	Virtual School Headteacher / School Improvement Strategy Manager	Devon County Council
Liz Wood	Locality Operations Manager Exeter/East	Devon County Council
Nicola Forsdyke	Joint Housing Needs Lead	Teignbridge District Council & Exeter City Council
Isabel Blake	Housing Team Manager	South Hams & West Devon District Council
Sophie Cobbledick	Housing Advice Team Leader	South Hams District Council
Rachel Gillott	Senior Manager Fostering and Adoption	Devon County Council
Jennie Stephens	Strategic Director People	Devon County Council
Fiona Fitzpatrick	Head of Children's Social Work Service & Child Protection (Interim)	Devon County Council
<b>Written Representations</b>		
Andrew Mitchell	Housing Needs and Strategy Manager, Housing Services	East Devon District Council

<sup>3</sup> Robina Khan left her interim post with the County Council in October 2015.

## Bibliography

- Devon County Council - Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection; children looked after and care leavers in Devon (Ofsted, May 2015)
- Devon Children's Improvement Plan 2015/2016 (DCC,2015)
- Care Leaver Strategy (HM Government, 2013)
- Care Leaver Strategy: One year on progress update (HM Government, 2014)
- 10 Questions to ask if you're scrutinising services for looked-after children (Local Government Association/Centre for Public Scrutiny, 2015)
- Safeguarding Children (Local Government Association/Centre for Public Scrutiny, 2015)