

Education Committee Inquiry: Children's Homes

Submission from: National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, Catch 22

Date: April 2021

About the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum:

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF) has a large and active membership of 121 Local Authority leaving care teams. The aim of the forum is to stimulate and disseminate best practice on a national scale to improve outcomes for Care Leavers. At the heart of the forum is the Young Person's Benchmarking Forum, with the voice of Care Leavers shaping the direction of the forum and integral to the forum's events and work. The NLCBF is run by the charity Catch 22 and funded through membership fees from local authorities.

The main activities of the forum include:

- Specialist peer learning and development events for Leaving Care managers and practitioners throughout the year
- Opportunity for care leavers in member Local Authorities to join the Young Person's Benchmarking Forum and attend Celebration events
- Influencing Leaving Care policy and practice through regular consultations with DfE, DWP, MHCLG, OFSTED, HMPPS etc.
- Membership website with regular policy and practice updates, online peer enquiry forms, leaving care resources
- Developing bespoke leaving care resources for members such as Local Offer Toolkit.
- Promoting the latest research around leaving care.

How this Evidence was collated:

This evidence has been collated in consultation with:

- Danni, Care Leaver aged 20, currently living in supported accommodation and about to move into her own property. Danni previously lived in unregulated private accommodation. Quotes are in italics
- Umar, Care Leaver aged 25 who has his own property having moved on from Supported Accommodation. Quotes are in italics.
- Leaving Care Manager, Newcastle City Council – It is clear that this local authority benefit from a large portfolio of accommodation options, which many of our local authority members would not have, and there are some examples of good practice outlined.
- Darren Bishton, National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum Practice Lead, who has over 20 years frontline experience working in Leaving Care.

Key Messages for the Inquiry:

- a) Availability of local children's homes, where children and young people can easily keep in contact with family is vital and this needs to include secure units and step-down provision. As well as enabling young people to keep in contact with their family, friends and local culture, it also offers opportunities around 'staying close' support post-18, whether that is a formal or informal arrangement.
- b) Relationships between young people and Children's Homes staff are key and young people do well when there is 'stickability' or commitment to keep getting alongside the young person and a commitment to going the extra mile from staff.
- c) Where staff from Children's homes and unregulated accommodation are proactive around education, this leads to positive outcomes around young people's engagement.
- d) Having a large portfolio of accommodation options is very positive and unregulated accommodation can be a positive option within this for some young people, depending on the provider. In some cases, unregulated accommodation offers a flexible/bespoke service that is not available from regulated providers, and can extend post 18. There is a role for commissioning and the new Standards here to ensure quality of unregulated accommodation.
- e) The private sector has an important role to play within the care system in providing care for the most complex young people but they also need to offer value for money, provide stability, security, effective preparation for independence and support young people toward reunification with families, where appropriate.
- f) Planning for accommodation post 18 needs to start earlier, involving the Care Leaver, their Personal Adviser and any support workers they have.
- g) Preparation for independence needs to be improved across accommodation providers for young people as they prepare to leave care. This could include the use of training flats.
- h) Care Leavers face significant barriers to engaging with employment while living in Supported Accommodation, post 18 due to Housing Benefit / U.C. arrangements around payment of the rent – the Care Leaver will be better off through being employed as rents for supported accommodation are so expensive.
- i) Some Supported Accommodation options place Care Leavers post 18 at greater risk of exploitation and substance misuse, so we need to ensure there are a good range of accommodation options for Care Leavers with different needs.
- j) UASC young people are often dealing with their families being in difficult situations as well as their own trauma, and this impacts their emotional wellbeing. Living in supported accommodation, with its barriers to employment can exacerbate this as they are not able to send money back to families in difficulty.
- k) *"This system needs some injection and this injection is called 'Care.' The people who built this system, need a Care Leaver at the table with them."*
Umar – Care Leaver

1. Educational outcomes for children and young people in children's homes, including attainment and progression to education, employment, and training destinations.

Re. Barriers to employment & supported accommodation:

“They need to cover bills a lot more in their training plans – I didn’t know how many bills I had to pay. Most people end up in supported accommodation which are £900 and they need to avoid them for Care Leavers, because if someone wants to work they can’t at all and because they can’t work, they don’t have enough of a budget to pay their bills, do their shopping, pay their bills and have a comfortable life to live after that.

I said to my U.C. coach, as soon as I get that flat sorted I want a full time job, I don’t care what it is. It’s so mentally draining after this lockdown. They’re saying ‘let’s do that’ and I’m still sat here and I can’t do anything because I still don’t have the money for it and I never did. They’re all going out, going to work and I still feel like I’m in that lockdown.” Danni

“Care Leavers I know got an interview date, but they couldn’t go for it because they are in supported accommodation. One young person went ahead and got the job and now they have about £4000 in arrears with the supported accommodation and the supported accommodation has told them to wait for a court date.” Umar

Re. UASC young people in supported accommodation and employment

“Don’t forget that they have families back home who are struggling, if they are in the supported accommodation, they are not able to work and they are not able to support their families back home and this is affecting them emotionally.” Umar

Leaving Care Team, Newcastle:

- Where children’s home staff go the extra mile and take a young person to college, make sure they have lunch and items they need for the first few days – this can make a massive difference. ‘
- High number of UASC young people – and there is good provision to access ESOL classes, they are well supported by residential providers to access this.
- A barrier around education/employment – young people who have been exploited are often getting a lot of money through this and can be difficult to motivate to engage with education/employment.
- Role of the virtual school is critically important in making sure that the educational needs of the young person are understood, and their needs are met by existing and new providers if and when the young person moves to new accommodation.
- Newcastle Council offer priority interviews for Care Leavers for apprenticeships

- Leaving care team run a Jobs Club with incentives to attend and offer taster courses etc.
- Work closely with Newcastle and Gateshead college around Further Education – the social experience, environment and support offered there is vital

Accommodation stability is a critical consideration regarding the educational outcome for young people. Those young people who have stable long-term homes benefit greatly from this stability and the support of carers and other professionals around them.

Those young people who are in residential or secure accommodation may have educational support on-site. This is a real positive experience for the young person as they may have experienced several school moves in the past, and may have had a consistent educational placement. The importance of a consistent educational experience for the young person cannot be underestimated. To help monitor and support this, this will allow for a consistency in educational progress for the young person.

Residential staff should be encouraged to also attend school / college social events with the young person thus allowing them to have someone in the audience or in the crowd on sports day to cheer them on.

We also recognise that young people come into the care system at different stages in their life and may be involved in exploitation in its many forms, which may impact on their ability to maintain an educational package of support. A variety of accommodation options is then required to help meet the needs of this complex group of young people.

2.The quality of, and access to, support for children and young people in children's homes, including support for those with special education needs, and the support available at transition points.

Re. Preparation for independence and transition to new accommodation:

“When you’re 17, you move into your own starter flat and you get support but it’s not enough, they don’t tell you how to pay your bills, council tax. It’s literally like cooking skills and cleaning skills – they think that’s the priority but it isn’t. The relationship with my support worker was fine, she was lovely but the support plan was the massive issue because obviously she couldn’t go beyond the plan.

I got kicked out of that accommodation when I was 18 even though they didn’t find me a place to go after that – it was like ‘you’re 18, contracts done see you later’ and I was homeless. I think there needs to be a lot more planning about moving that person on.” Danni (talking about private unregulated accommodation provider)

“When they turn 18, we are just damaging them. We are taking them to the supported accommodation, we think they are preparing them for independence, teaching them how to cook – Rubbish – what’s happening there is that young people because they are vulnerable – it’s easier to get drugs, drug dealers are living in the same building, thieves are living there – easier to get your stuff robbed. We have responsibility for the Care Leavers, but we are damaging them in supported accommodation.

I was scared about when I left for supported accommodation – no-one is going to care about me. I have some friends who were there who are damaged, because they have taken a lot of drugs, but I don’t blame them.

If I was in charge, none of the Care Leavers will go through the homeless process. I would make sure when they turn 18 they get a key for their own property and I would make sure that this young person is prepared properly – next year you are going to get this key, this property. There are some things that you need to go through – bills, council tax, electric, this is how you find it cheaper, prepare them for when they go. The Care Leaver can then go straight into work and education, it’s linked to so many wellbeing things – because they have somewhere safe to live.

I think every local authority is struggling with the housing and the workers are also struggling because of how the systems and government policy is built. The local authority as a corporate parent, they want to support the young person, they have to go through the homeless system – it’s the same local authority but they don’t work together so have to go through the homelessness system to get priority.

And if they leave supported accommodation, they will drop from the priority bands and have to wait for a long time for a property. Why are we having to go through the homeless process as a corporate parent to get priority for a property?” Umar

Re. current supported accommodation:

*“These past 2 and a half years I have felt like I haven’t had a home and I know that is sad but it’s true and I don’t feel like I can call anywhere else home because I can’t paint the walls, have candles or make it my own.”
Danni*

Leaving Care Team, Newcastle:

- Good planning and reviewing plans regularly – identified as a strength of Newcastle approach

- For those young people who meet the threshold for adult support in Newcastle their care home placement can continue until adult services have completed their assessment and take over the responsibility for the cost of the home.
- If young people have not met the threshold for adult care, then Newcastle have alternative provision through the use of supported lodgings. This is used to help delay the move into independence until the young person is ready to live independently and is achieved through the staying put scheme
- Transition at 18 – Your Homes Newcastle will start working with young people aged 17 ½ and support young people around gaining skills for independent living. This is really positive and support continues as a young person takes on a property.
- Important that the accommodation, building design, interior decoration and furniture is of a high standard and ‘good enough for my child.’

Young people with complex needs do need additional support and that this should be identified in the care and placement plan. It is sometimes difficult for the home to meet these needs unless a team around the young approach is used.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people also have the extra challenges such as dealing with their immigration claim being processed, language barriers, settling into a new culture and dealing with the effects of emotional trauma due to their past experiences or possible exploitation. It was recognised that a range of professionals, such as CAMHS support is important when meeting the needs of young people. The importance of ongoing emotional health support from the home into the community is also critically important and this can sometimes be difficult to achieve as age barriers and waiting list may impact on the services that are available.

As with social work and personal advisors, the stability of the work force is an important element in establishing a positive relationship with young people. This relationship and the ability to provide a bridge between services will help to prevent young people falling through the net.

3.The use and appropriateness of unregulated provision.

Leaving Care Team, Newcastle:

Newcastle local authority have 8 unregulated providers and work closely with 2 of these, with the quality of support varying between the providers. In particular one excellent provider offers 15 flats with floating support for UASC young people with a ‘menu of support’ that the local authority can choose from, according to the needs of the young person.

Whether the accommodation was regulated or unregulated, the most important factor was the relationships built, staff that are happy to go the extra mile and ‘stickability’ with the young people

Young people were able to continue living in 2 of the unregulated providers post 18 (funded initially by Children's care until Adult services takes over) and this continuity has been positive.

It is difficult to challenge practice when the provision is unregulated and there is insufficient good provision to avoid using the poorer provision. A combination of developing commissioning strategies and assessment and enforcement by Ofsted may be a way forward

4. Any comments you would like to make about 'Rates of criminalisation of children in children's homes'.

Leaving Care Team, Newcastle:

Children homes can be vulnerable to gang exploitation. The location of the home is critical in helping to protect young people e.g., not locating a home in an area where the cost of housing is low. Good Children's homes also have clear safeguarding procedures and strong relationships with safeguarding organisations to help protect young people.

5.The sufficiency of places in children's homes, and the regional locations of homes.

Leaving Care Team, Newcastle:

Newcastle explained that they feel well served by the amount and variety of accommodation options available to them both within the city and in the immediate wider area. They have a secure unit close to them (Kylloe House, operated by Northumberland Council with 3 x 6/8 bedded units) who will provide support directly to young people from the local area and has a step-down secure unit in the same grounds. It was agreed local provision was very important for the young person and the family when maintaining relationships through the ability to visit on a regular basis. This was also a factor in preventing young people going missing and becoming more vulnerable.

The importance of finding step down provision in the local area was highlighted by Newcastle. This allowed the young person to visit their next home to prepare for the move, it also allowed staff in each of the homes to share and understand the needs of the young person. It also meant that young person could, within boundaries, maintain some type of on-going relationship with staff from their previous home. This was particularly evident in young people who moved from a residential provision into independence. These relationships would last a long time and young people might visit later with their own children. This was a type of staying close relationship (without being a formal staying close arrangement) and was seen as important.

The need for 'Exit strategies' for young people leaving secure, residential placements was highlighted as 'we don't want it to fail.' There can be challenges where residential homes prefer to accept more settled young people. In one instance a young person had to move to 'step-down' accommodation in Scotland as this was the only place available.

Newcastle Council operates in-house children's homes which they felt made a difference, in particular an increased sense of belonging, better support, and living with other young people from Newcastle was identified as being helpful. They do also have to use externally operated children's homes and said that there can be a challenging mix of young people from around the country in these homes.

Some young people had been placed with private/external providers out of area but this had significant implications in terms of maintaining contact with family and had led to significant additional costs for the local authority to arrange for the young person to be brought to a family event or for the family to visit – At the time of placement, these additional costs could not be looked into as it was essential to place the young person quickly, so the role of the commissioning team is critical in establishing and maintaining the standards of care for young people, while offering the local authority value for money.

There is a risk with private providers that there is 'almost a drive that the young people stay in place,' and this can affect the level of support provided around possible reunification with family, where it is safe to do this. It was felt there were 'more successes with our own residential provision.'

6. Any comments you would like to make about 'The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, including the extent to which this might increase the numbers of children's homes places needed'.

Not applicable

7. Any comments you would like to make about 'The support available for kinship carers, and for children in homes to maintain relationships with their birth families'.

We have covered this in our response to question 1 & 5.

8. Any other comments you would like to share?

Leaving Care Team, Newcastle:

Newcastle highlighted challenges around:

- a) a lack of mother and baby provision within their area. It was confirmed that provision was needed that offered general support as well as assessing safeguarding issues.
- b) Supporting and finding appropriate accommodation for challenging young people who have extremely high levels of risk

Re. Idea of training Flats:

“A training flat could work for a year, but what’s going to happen when they turn 18 in a year because the PA is struggling and the young person is struggling. I am sure that the Housing officer and the PA want to do something to help but they can’t due to the system. If she could help, she would, it’s the system.” Umar

“I do think that training flats are genuinely a good idea but they only put them from 17 and a half and I don’t think 6 months is enough to grasp everything you have to do when you turn 18 – not at all, You get a minimum amount of effort from them and then you’re on your own. If I didn’t end up in supported accommodation I would have been screwed.

Even if it was possible to go to the training flat for a few weeks, then back to the foster carers for a few weeks.” Danni