Home Alone
Housing and Support for Young People Leaving Care
Introduction

The challenges facing looked after children have gained renewed prominence amongst politicians and policy makers recently. The DfES green paper Care Matters, and the Next Steps document, set out a range of extremely promising proposals to improve services to young people as they move through and out of the care system.

However, welcome as these proposals are, there is evidence that when it comes to housing support care leavers are not yet consistently receiving the service they are entitled to under current legislation. Poor quality housing was by far the main issue raised by staff during Rainer's consultation around Care Matters and is a major concern for young people themselves.

This short report assesses the scale of the problem and highlights the shocking conditions in which some care leavers are expected to set up their first home. It also identifies the gaps within local authority support, which can be as basic as simply not assessing the accommodation where vulnerable young people are being housed.

Throughout the report it is important to note that local approaches vary enormously across the country. We have tried to highlight promising approaches and examples of successful schemes run by individual local authorities and our recommendations are based on replicating similar approaches and good practice consistently across the country.

Finally, the report sets out a short action plan for government to give housing its proper role in supporting looked after children, ensuring that no young person has to put up with living conditions like those outlined below.

This will be vital if Government is to ensure that the Every Child Matters agenda genuinely applies to children and young people leaving care. After all, what could be more fundamental to Staying Safe than having a stable, suitable place to call home?

From paper. . .

Advances made through the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Homelessness Act 2002 mean that, on paper, no young care leaver should find themselves in unsuitable accommodation. Local authorities have a duty to house 16 and 17 year olds who have already left, or are preparing to leave, care through children and young people's services. Even once these young people become 18 they will still be classed as in 'priority need' by local homelessness services up to their 21st birthday.

In addition, there are clear expectations placed on the type of accommodation that local authorities should be using to house care leavers. According to the Regulations and Guidance to the Children (Leaving Care) Act, the 'suitable accommodation' required by the act includes the following elements:

a) Accommodation which so far as reasonably practicable is suitable for the child in the light of his needs, including his health needs;

b) Accommodation in respect of which the responsible authority has satisfied itself as to the character and suitability of the landlord or other provider; and

c) Accommodation in respect of which the responsible authority has so far as reasonably practicable taken into account the child's:
   (i) wishes and feelings; and
   (ii) educational, training or employment needs.

The guidance goes on to state that: 'As a general rule it would not be sensible for 16 and 17 year olds to live independently and to carry the responsibility of sustaining their own tenancy without appropriate support. Similarly, bed and breakfast accommodation would not be regarded as suitable although very occasionally its use may be justified as a short-term emergency measure.'

The Homelessness Act 2002 also sets out clear standards for suitable accommodation which apply to priority need groups, including older care leavers.

These measures should ensure a network of support around the young person as they make the difficult transition towards independence.

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1 A National Voice (2005). No Place Like Home.
2 Relevant and eligible young people as defined under the Act. A young person must have spent at least 13 weeks in care since the age of 14 to fall within either catagory. This also applies to young people owed a duty under section 20 of the Children's Act 1989.
There are serious problems with drug use amongst the other tenants. It’s hard for Dan as he’s struggled with that in the past and is trying to move away from it.

The room was on the very top floor, up a few flights of steps. It’s really difficult to manage every day with a young daughter and a buggy. There were no cooking facilities, no food allowed in the room.

You have to speak to reception through a metal shutter. It’s not secure there.

There were large amounts of rubbish and discarded food, with flies everywhere.

For too many young people leaving care the good intentions of policymakers and the commitments within legislation are far removed from their day to day experience.

Housing has long been identified as a critical element of the transition out of care. Research for the University of York found that faring well with housing was the factor most closely associated with good mental health.

Yet housing continues to be problematic. Almost one third of rough sleepers have experienced local authority care as a child and 61% of young people have moved more than three times since leaving care. A report from the Children’s Rights Director found becoming homeless was one of the top ten concerns for young people leaving care.

Research into effective support for young people leaving care emphasises the importance of stability and a planned approach to independent living. This is simply not happening for a worrying number of young people.

And in some cases, like those outlined in this report, housing is so unsuitable it can both undermine an individual’s transition from care and have a severe long-term impact on their life-chances. We need to be clear. This is not the experience of all young people leaving care, or even the majority. Rainer found that 16% of care leavers assessed were not in suitable supported accommodation.

This means that almost one in six care leavers assessed were not receiving appropriate support with their housing needs. The severity of some of the examples presented and the enormous costs they represent to the individual young person and to the taxpayer should raise questions as to how the state as a parent is supporting young people to move out on their own for the first time. No young person should find themselves in such poor accommodation.
Staying Safe

The most extreme examples brought to Rainer’s attention raise questions about the safety of young people where they are living. This may be because of the physical quality of the housing, its location or the other residents that care leavers are placed alongside.

“She is an 18 year old girl with a newborn baby and yet she is placed in a room where the window backs onto a flat roof. It’s just not secure."

In this bed and breakfast accommodation, staff were particularly concerned about safety, with high levels of problematic drug use in the surrounding area.

"You get your keys passed under a metal shutter to you. It’s intimidating."

"He felt uncomfortable even using the bathroom to wash. An older resident made inappropriate sexual advances to him and he still received no support. Eventually he was moved after being found unconscious in his room."

"Others in the B&B have clear drug and alcohol issues, mental health issues, some of them get quite violent.” - This was used as housing for a 19 year old young woman with a 10 month old baby, fleeing domestic violence.

In these extreme examples, the common thread seems to be that young people leaving care with high levels of vulnerability are channelled into accommodation for general homeless acceptances. Such accommodation would be unacceptable for anyone, but for young people who may be living on their own for the first time in their lives and may be feeling particularly vulnerable it can be devastating.

"There was frequent harassment and discrimination from other tenants. The worst example saw her burgled and her pets were killed" - speaking of a girl who left care aged 16 after six and a half years as a looked after child.

These placements are not limited to short-term emergency stays. Cases highlighted had been in such accommodation for up to nine months and, in one extreme example for almost two years.

While being housed through general emergency accommodation, care leavers could find themselves housed alongside adult offenders, heavy drug users or sex workers. In fact, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that this is the case. Referring to B&B accommodation used to house fellow care leavers one young woman stated:

"We all call it the crack house because of the amount of drug use that goes on there. And you get people coming straight out of a children’s home to that!"

Staff have also raised concerns about the ‘character and suitability’ of some landlords. There have been cases of staff within B&Bs or hostels making inappropriate advances to young people, in one instance in return for clearing rent arrears.

Again, this is not the experience of most young people, but of a sizable minority. They represent some of the most serious cases raised by staff. Such cases were primarily amongst young people aged 18-21. It is, however, worth considering Research from A National Voice which found that almost 30% of care leavers interviewed did not feel safe where they were living10. It is completely unacceptable for any young person to be put at risk in this way. That this happens at all highlights problems with local inspection regimes and poor planning for the specific needs of care leavers (see recommendations).

Wider Impact

As already noted, safe, stable housing is fundamental to general wellbeing. Problems with housing can undermine progress made in education, employment or other aspects of the individual’s life.

"Food left in the shared kitchen is regularly stolen"

"She has to use a shared kitchen with other residents. She’s very uncomfortable doing that and her health has suffered, she’s reached a very low weight"

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In being moved around so much he had no consistent access to medical care.

Some of these issues can be addressed through providing effective support, others reveal a lack of awareness or planning that is essential to young people successfully becoming independent:

She's 25 miles away from all of her support networks, including the leaving care team and her social worker. She doesn't know anyone in the local area so she feels very isolated.

He couldn't sustain the training placement that he'd won because of where he moved to and the distance involved.

There is a clear legal duty on local authorities to work with young people to plan their transition out of the care system. At the heart of this is the Pathway Plan. This document should build on existing planning whilst in care, incorporate a full assessment of the individual's needs and have their wishes and feelings at its core. Accommodation is one of the central parts of any Pathway Plan and many issues, such as those outlined above, should be identified and addressed well in advance.

Yet in reality, some young people are not receiving this central support. In some areas more than 40% of young people have not had a needs assessment or do not have a pathway plan.

Even when plans are in place, they appear to have little influence over housing departments where there is no specific focus on care leavers' needs. Practice here varies considerably. Some of the best local authorities have a specific approach to housing care leavers, with housing and social services working closely together. This enables the Pathway Plan to have a genuine impact and gives the young person themselves a say in where and how they live.

Promising Approaches - Tower Hamlets
Tower Hamlets Social Services and Housing Directorates collaborate closely in order to provide appropriate accommodation and support for young people leaving care. They have developed 30 units of supported housing specifically for care leavers, including those with additional support needs.

The approach was developed through high-level commitment from senior staff and members across both areas of responsibility and falls under a wider corporate parenting approach across the authority.

More frequently, leaving care teams express frustration at the barriers placed in their way by local housing departments and worry that poor housing too often undermines a young person's attempts to achieve in other aspects of their life. This view is shared by young people themselves. Thirty-two percent of young people surveyed felt that their accommodation did not meet their needs.

Structural Problems

One of the biggest fault-lines within the system lies between the housing department and social services/children's trust. For 16 and 17 year olds the method through which support is provided depends on their legal status in relation to leaving care. 'Relevant' and 'Eligible' young people access housing primarily through the duty owed to them as care leavers. They do not receive housing or financial support through the mainstream benefits system (though housing costs are paid along with an allowance which should be no lower than comparable benefits). Once they turn 18 this distinct administrative approach ends. Important as this dedicated support is, there can be some pernicious effects.

Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.
National Leaving Care Advisory Service, internal research 2006.
As defined in Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.
Specifically:

- Confusion between the housing department and social services department as to what support a young person should receive. This can delay or disrupt the planning process and, in the worst cases, can see young people’s applications bounce back and forth between departments. The Social Exclusion Unit’s report into the needs of young adults\(^{15}\) found that a young person presenting as homeless is rarely assessed holistically and few housing departments see it as part of their role to signpost young people onto other services not directly related to their housing need.

- A lack of co-ordination between departments can cause serious problems at the point where the young person’s legal status changes (for example when they turn 18).

Again, much depends on where in the country you live, with considerable variation in practice.

"There is just no planning and co-ordination with the housing department, especially around those young people with high support needs or vulnerability."

"The local housing department wouldn’t let Paul bid on a property until he reached 18 but he had to move out of his 'moving on flat' before his 18th birthday. So he had to move into temporary accommodation - a hostel - while they sorted things out. This was a major backwards step for someone who was doing well at living independently. The hostel was also in a different town which jeopardised his employment."

"Housing tend not to do anything until the last minute and the young person now doesn’t believe anything will be done at all. It’s hugely stressful for them with a baby on the way."

Effective local authorities have clear joint assessment processes in place to prevent claims 'ping-ponging' between departments and to ensure that the full range of a young person's needs are met. Similarly, high-level co-ordination between social services and housing means that support can be planned across legal definitions.

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Promising Approaches - Hull. Young People's Support Service

Hull provide a single referral point for all young people in need of accommodation support through a drop-in service designed with the needs of young people in mind. This combines assessment of housing and support needs through a multi-disciplinary team, including a housing options worker.

The team commissions specific housing provision for 16 & 17 year old care leavers and also operates a joint referral process with supporting people. They also wrote the section of the local supporting people strategy relating to children in need and young people and maintain strong links with the housing department. This provides a planned pathway from one category of support to the next as young people reach 18.

"We have great links with the housing department in terms of policy and practical decisions. We disagree sometimes but we have an open, honest and frank relationship which makes things much more effective." Daemon Cartwright - Accommodation Services Manager

The team has arrangements in place allowing them to support care leavers to bid through the local Choice Based Letting scheme and all care leavers automatically fall into a higher band, ensuring they have a good chance of appropriate accommodation and preventing them from becoming involved in the homelessness system.

We need to ensure that every local authority closes the gap between departments and that a staff at all levels are clear on what needs to be done. This should stretch to Director and lead-member level and should be reflected in the local homelessness and housing strategies (see recommendations).

One final area where these gaps are exposed is inspection regimes. As noted above there are clear expectations as to what 'suitable housing' for a young person leaving care should entail. Yet the role of ensuring these standards apply falls across or between a number of different teams depending on the local authority\(^{16}\). Some authorities place greater emphasis on physical conditions, others prioritise the support needs of the young person. A number of authorities interviewed acknowledged that the inspection used was ad hoc.

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\(^{15}\) SEU, 2005. “Transitions. Young Adults with Complex Needs,”

\(^{16}\) Survey of local authority leaving care teams - see methodology section.
Assessment of accommodation varied dramatically according to housing type. Supported lodgings schemes were overseen by social services, social housing was inspected by the local housing department or by supporting people teams. The most lightly-regulated area appears to be private rented accommodation which were only subject to Houses in Multiple Occupancy accreditation. Yet, with the growing demands on social housing this is an increasingly common form of provision.

The most common approach saw responsibility rest with the leaving care team and the individual's personal advisor visiting the accommodation to judge suitability. However, given that many of the examples of poor housing quality in this report have been provided by personal advisors it is not clear what power they have to effect change where housing is deemed inappropriate. In fact, advisors report significant frustration with general housing policies as well as individual decisions.

Promising Approaches - Lancashire
Lancashire use a checklist-based inspection which has been adapted from that used by university student unions. It goes well beyond the Homes in Multiple Occupancy standards to check on the suitability of the accommodation for young people.

Responsibility for carrying out the checks rests with the individual personal advisor who also took photographs of the accommodation. As with other Promising Approaches, this is supported by relationships at the strategic level between social services and housing.

Having a variety of implementation methods is not necessarily a problem, so long as the core standards are being met and so long as relevant teams within a local authority are clear on where responsibilities lie. However, the evidence seems clear that there is currently no guarantee that this is happening.

Intentionality

One exception to a local authority’s duty to house young people (including priority groups such as 18 - 20 year old care leavers) occurs where those young people are deemed to be 'intentionally' homeless. 'Intentional homelessness' is a legal definition, with a range of procedural checks in place to ensure it is used appropriately.

However, in practice, intentionality is a regular barrier to young care leavers accessing suitable housing. The ambiguity around what might or might not be considered 'intentional' homelessness undermines young people's confidence in dealing with the housing system, and personal advisors can be equally frustrated by the rules.

In almost every example surveyed for this report the young people did not feel they had any choice about accepting the accommodation offered to them. In the majority of cases the main reason, either implicit or stated by housing staff, was that the applicant would be deemed to be intentionally homeless if they refused the accommodation. This related particularly to interim decisions where young people were placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation.

More generally, while applications are supposed to be judged on individual circumstances, young people can find themselves deemed intentionally homeless because they fall within one category or another (those young people who leave a tenancy unexpectedly, young people who have spent time in custody, young people with significant rent arrears). Yet these are exactly the sorts of problems that young people leaving care are more likely to encounter.

"She was told the council thought she might be intentionally homeless so they wouldn't re-house her. They postponed the final decision and she was left in limbo in emergency accommodation"

And once labelled intentionally homeless it can become almost impossible to find suitable accommodation or the support a young person needs, exacerbating the challenges they may be facing still further.

As the Social Exclusion Unit found17, the transition to adulthood is not a linear, straightforward process. Many young people fall back upon parents or family for support as they encounter problems. Similarly, leaving care should be seen as a process, not an event, and local authorities, including housing departments, should continue to play the role of corporate parent in supporting young people into independence. The current use of 'intentional homelessness' rulings run entirely counter to that. Young people are effectively punished for the first mistake they make or the first time they refuse help with the prospect of further support cut off.

17 SEU 2004.
“Things got so much more difficult for her once she was regarded as intentionally homeless. She’d worked incredibly hard to clear her rent arrears and felt really disappointed not to receive help. There are so many factors in young people’s lives that things will go wrong at some point.”

For some young people, evictions or decisions about intentionality may follow from incredibly challenging behaviour. Rainer does not expect local authorities to condone severe anti-social or criminal behaviour and neither do the young people we support. However, this does not mean that care leavers who have spent time in custody should be further punished by being denied access to housing, particularly when stable accommodation can reduce re-offending rates by up to 20 per cent.

The criticisms in this section also apply to a much broader set of circumstances where the use of ‘intentional homeless’ decisions can have a long-term impact on young people’s lives. As the corporate parent, local authorities must develop a more appropriate response to care leavers housing needs. It is particularly important that decisions about intentional homelessness are applied fairly and proportionately to care leavers (see recommendations).

**Care Matters - Next Steps for Housing**

The Care Matters Green Paper presents an enormous opportunity to improve the life chances of young people in or leaving care. Specifically, the proposals to give young people a veto over leaving care too early (including remaining with foster carers up to the age of 21) could make a genuine difference to those young people who want to extend the transition from successful placements. In addition, the specific proposals to expand housing options (through a capital fund and dissemination of best practice in supported housing) are welcome.

However, it is questionable whether these initiatives alone will close the gaps within local authorities, particularly with the growing pressure on the availability of suitable housing.

Measures clearly set out in the Children (Leaving Care) Act are still not being met in parts of the country and Rainer’s concern is that young people leaving care will continue to be placed in unsuitable, sometimes dangerous, housing.

With the attention and political momentum that Care Matters has generated Government should take additional steps to ensure that safe, suitable, supported housing is available for all young people leaving care.

**Recommendations**

- Local Authorities should include a specific section on housing for care leavers within their housing and homelessness strategies and their Children and Young People’s Plan. These should be agreed jointly between the Directors of Housing and of Children’s services (Director of the Children’s Trust where these are in place). Strategies should cover the range of accommodation from high-support to independent living.
- The new DCLG guidance for co-operation between housing and social services should include explicit guidance on Pathway Planning for accommodation and ensure flexibility in homelessness guidance to accommodate care leavers.
- There should be a presumption against declaring any care leaver intentionally homeless. This should only be done in cases of serious antisocial behaviour or other extreme circumstances.
- Similarly, young people should be able to veto housing that does not address their needs as set out in their Pathway Plan.
- Local Authorities should maintain a list of approved properties for use in housing care leavers up to the age of 21 (including temporary and emergency accommodation). To qualify properties should:
  a) Meet the suitable homes standards, even where they are within the private sector
  b) Have undergone a full assessment as to suitability and the level of support it can offer to young people. Properties housing adults with high support needs should automatically be deemed unsuitable.
  c) Have CRB checks for any staff regularly on site

Only properties on this list should be used to house care leavers.

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18 Rainer internal interviews 2006.
19 Defined as “relevant” or “former relevant” young person.
There should be good practice guidance available to local authorities to assist them in assessing the suitability of accommodation and support. This should apply across registered social landlords and voluntary and private sector agencies.

Finally, these commitments, particularly those around suitable accommodation and intentionality, should be summarised and made explicit as part of a local authority’s ‘pledge’ to young people in care. This would remove some of the apprehension that care leavers face about housing and clarify what they should expect from housing departments.

**Conclusion**

The difference between the support that care leavers receive on paper and in practice may be the main reason why they still face so many considerable barriers compared to their peers.

This difference is particularly problematic in relation to housing support, partly because of the enormous pressures on suitable housing places and partly because of the fault line that still exists between the housing and social services departments in some local authorities.

Rainer was encouraged by the approaches and commitment displayed by some local authorities. In putting these recommendations forward we hope to see this standard of support mainstreamed across the country.

If Care Matters is to move beyond legislation and go on to change practice, Government must drive good practice and equip local authorities with the tools and examples to overcome the current gaps between support services. This must be backed up with practical measures to ensure housing for care leavers meets the standards and expectations that any parent would have for their child’s first home of their own.

**A Note on Methodology**

All quantitative claims within this short report are based on relatively large-scale samples from original research by Rainer or by other organisations as footnoted. The finding that 16% of care leavers are not in suitable supported accommodation is based on a sample of 1,244 young people in contact with leaving care teams. Suitable accommodation was defined as:

- Supported shared housing - Registered social landlord or private rented
- Supported self-contained accommodation - registered social landlord or private rented
- Local authority accommodation
- Bed and breakfast with support
- Family home with support
- Family home assessed as supportive
- Friend/Relation home with support
- Friend/Relation home assessed as supportive

As made explicit throughout the report, the qualitative claims and quotes illustrate examples of poor housing as presented by support staff and young people from across Rainer services. Summary statements about these cases are based on an analysis of 16 detailed examples submitted in February 2007 and interviews with staff and young people.

Finally, analysis of local authority inspection regimes is based upon comparisons of publicly available homelessness strategies and short questionnaires with 16 local authorities cross England. This was supplemented with individual interviews with local authority housing and social services staff.

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20 Rainer welcomes the commitments within the DfES and DCLG around good practice guidance for supported housing for care leavers and for linking social services and housing more effectively. This recommendation could be a key part of that work.
Our thanks to staff and young people for their support, hard work and advice in producing this report.

David Chater, Head of Policy and External Affairs

Rainer is the national charity for under-supported young people.

We work with young people who are living on the margins: in or leaving care or custody, involved in or on the fringes of crime, out of work, struggling at school, homeless or facing young parenthood without the safety net of a supportive family.