

31 July 2024		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key	
Report of: Peter Doherty, Head of Housing Operations Luke Froment: Service Manager, Children Looked After and Aftercare		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director of Children's Services		
This report is Public		
Version: Final		

Executive Summary

This report sets out how the Local Authority meets its statutory duties and responsibilities to young people leaving care to support them into independent living as adults.

Protocols should clearly lay out the processes followed by Local Authorities that support Care Leavers to transition to independent living and avoid homelessness.

The joint protocol is updated annually and has been reviewed between Housing and Children Social Care. The protocol has been most recently updated in March 2024 there is also an initial draft Impact Equality Assessment awaiting sign off alongside the protocol:

- to ensure a smoother application journey
- to avoid care leavers being at risk of arrears and reduce risk of eviction.
- to ensure that the position of our young people vulnerable to homelessness is clear and arrangements for emergency accommodation are in place.
- To ensure that matters raised by officers are resolved quickly and joint meetings are used for continuous improvement.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 **For the Committee to note the statutory duties of the Local Authority to support young people in obtaining suitable accommodation and how we plan to meet these duties.**

1.2 For the Committee to have oversight of the joint protocols and to be involved in the ongoing review of delivery across Children’s Services and Housing Services.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1. Local Authorities have a responsibility for developing and effectively delivering a joint protocol setting out how the authority will deliver the local accommodation offered to Care Leavers and prevent homelessness.

2.2 The Homelessness code of guidance was revised in 2018 to reflect changes introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act. Chapter 22 of the Code focusses specifically on Care Leavers. The Code outlines the importance of joint working when planning housing options for Care Leavers and states that:

By working together, Housing Services and Children’s Services can better ensure that as a corporate parent, the appropriate accommodation and support is available to Care Leavers. (Homelessness code of guidance -Chapter 22: Care Leavers).

2.3 Furthermore, the guidance also advises that authorities should have in place joint protocols which clearly outline jointly held corporate parenting responsibilities for Care Leavers. Joint protocols should cover:

- arrangements for achieving planned, supportive transitions to independent living
- identifying homelessness risk early and acting to prevent it
- providing a quick, safe, joined up response for Care Leavers who do become homeless

2.4 A copy of the updated Joint Housing Protocol is appended to this report in Appendix One for members’ reference. Key changes are:

- Early alert for arrears so support can be put in reduce the risk of eviction.
- Clarification of Thurrock Council’s position on care experienced young people vulnerable to homelessness or presenting as homeless.
- Amendments to Procedural aspects and the Pathway Plan to reduce administration
- Updated escalation process

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 The Joint Housing Protocol has been reviewed and updated for the financial year 2023/24. The following sets out its operational impact and highlights the effect the changes are having. It reflects the current effective joint work between Housing and Children’s Social care. Joint meetings between housing and after-care teams at an operational and strategic level are held so that there is regular

oversight of young people's progress to being allocated a Council property. Working relationships are effective and these forums work to address needs.

3.2 Prior to being offered a Thurrock Council Property, young people must demonstrate a readiness for tenancy. This is an objective of the Pathway Planning process alongside joint work from the Personal Advisor and Housing Officers. The Pathway plan should identify what the post-18 arrangements are and young person's readiness to live independently in line with their wishes. It's recognised that for some young people, they will not be ready to live independently at 18 and there are a range of alternative provisions to support them.

- Remaining with their Foster Carer under a 'Staying Put' Arrangement
- Living in semi-supported accommodation
- Living in 'Head-Start Housing'
- Choosing to live within their own family
- Attending university
- Supported by Adult Services in a CQC registered home or Shared Lives arrangements (for young adults with significant additional needs)

3.3 Housing Officers and Personal Advisors support young people through the application process and offer training on tenancy maintenance. This supports young people with the information and advice they need to obtain and maintain a lease.

3.4 In April 2023 the oversight of the HeadStart housing management function was transferred to the AHH directorate (now the Place directorate) to be placed within the Tenancy Management service. This approach ensures that the property management and compliance functions are aligned with current housing best practice, and benefit from the regulatory & operational frameworks within the housing operations service.

3.5 As part of the transfer of service, one HSH officer has moved to the Tenancy Management team and one officer remains within the Aftercare service.

3.6 The HSH officer role is focused on the housing and tenancy management function within the service. Ensuring that properties are safe and compliant, that lettings and move-on's are managed effectively, that rent due is being paid or benefit payments are being managed, that residents are complying with the terms of their license that related to looking after their property and being a good neighbor.

3.7 The role within the Aftercare service has recently been refocused. The new Housing Specialist role sits within the aftercare service and seeks to act as a bridge between aftercare and housing.

- 3.8 HSH, Housing Solution and the Aftercare team are committed to working together to achieve the shared outcomes of providing the best opportunity to care leavers to gain independence, living sustainably in safe and secure accommodation.
- 3.9 Both services have been working in partnership to deliver effective processes to enable the timely move on of Care Leavers from pre-18 supported accommodation, into a HSH property and then onto a permanent housing solution in social housing or other areas of choice.
- 3.10 For its part, HSH accommodation should be housing care leavers for 6 -12 months whilst they gain capacity to move-on to permanent independent living.

Priority areas:

Move-through rates:

Move-through rates need to be sufficient to support the timely progress of young people who need to move on from their pre-18 placements. Current move-on rates are not at the required levels and a new process has been agreed to provide a basis for a more robust approach.

We are embedding a new process for on boarding and ongoing review for residents in HSH. This approach identifies key touch points where we will be checking in with the resident on progress against key milestones that will have been agreed at the on-boarding and sign-up meeting.

These milestones will include personal progress measures as well as key actions such as getting registered on the Thurrock Council housing register and actively bidding for properties

HSH officers will work with Care Leavers and Personal Advisors to encourage, support and challenge young people in HeadStart Housing to make decisions and to become independent, resilient, and self-reliant; to move closer to employment or training; and ultimately move-on to settled accommodation by arranging removals, accessing funding, and providing settlement support in their new accommodation.

The exception to this will be if the Care Leaver is a former relevant Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Child (UASC) and they do not currently have immigration status. The lack of status means they do not have a recourse to public funds and no right to social housing or private rental accommodation.

This presents a risk as we are unable to move the former UASC Care Leavers on until their immigration status is resolved. In these cases, the Home Office is the lead agency and current capacity in these services do not allow for timely outcomes to applications.

Housing stock and growing capacity:

The current portfolio of HSH properties cuts across private sector leasing arrangements and use of Thurrock Council Housing Stock.

There are currently 58 bedspaces:

Accommodation Type	No of Bedspaces	Location	
		In Borough	Out of Borough
Private Sector Lease	25	25	0
Thurrock Council Housing	24	24	0
Supported Housing	9	9	0
Total	58	58	

A key strategic priority was to bring all bedspaces into the borough – this was achieved in Q4 of 2023/4.

Current budgets do not allow for the further leasing of private rental HMO properties from local landlords or agents.

The strategic aim is to grow the available stock for HSH within the Council Housing stock – this also forms part of the Housing Strategy.

Current pressures on Thurrock Council housing stock from increased homeless presentations, reductions in social mobility, and the decant of the Blackshots tower blocks means that this has been delayed. However, the housing strategy provision shows the commitment to supporting the sustainability of the HSH portfolio in the medium term.

Income management:

HSH budgets set an income target for Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Element receipts.

Income in the year 2023/4 was £146,000 against an annual budget income line of £35,057. This was substantially ahead of target.

To ensure that we are maximising income levels we are moving all rent accounts onto the NEC/Northgate housing management system. This will allow greater oversight of all accounts and will identify where there are rental liabilities from working residents who are not in receipt of housing benefit or universal credit housing element.

- 3.11 In recent years, one difficulty which has been experienced by young people who have experienced care has been that they have been unable to make an

application for housing prior to their 18th birthday. Work has been undertaken with Housing colleagues to ensure that such applications can be taken, and preparations made for assessments prior to that birthday occurring, to speed up the process once the majority has been attained.

- 3.12 Care experienced young people are awarded priority banding (Band 3) on the housing register once the Registrations Team are advised that they are ready to leave semi-independent living and live independently. Forms are completed and then colleagues from Registrations and Aftercare communicate to ensure appropriate information is shared to inform future offers.
- 3.13 To provide some context in relation to the rate of re-housing, which is evident for Care Leavers at present, we can confirm that, at the end of 2023/24 financial year, there were 40 Care Leavers active on the housing register, and in that year, 27 such individuals were re-housed into social housing in Thurrock. At the end of June this year, there continued to be 40 individuals active on the Register, and six had received offers. This demonstrates that last year's average re-housing rate was around two offers per month, and this continues this year, despite reductions in stock and increasing demand from other sectors. It should be noted, however, that numbers of Care Leavers needing re-housing is not reducing, and the rate of offers is unable to keep up with this demand at this time, and so consideration of a broader offer for these individuals is likely necessary this year and has commenced.
- 3.14 There are a number of young adults already living in secured tenancies with Thurrock Council. Housing Colleagues have developed a pre-eviction process and identify young adults who are Care Leavers so that they can be jointly supported to avoid eviction. The Joint Housing Protocol has been updated to ensure an 'early alert' when Care Leavers with Thurrock Council tenancies are showing arrears. This is so financial advice, support from a personal advisor and intervention if required can be offered to a young person well before the arrears become overwhelming. Close joint working has been effective in stabilising tenancies.
- 3.15 Thurrock Council has continuing responsibility to support young people leaving care up to the age of 25 and we have a clear expectation that no care experienced young person eligible for After Care Services should be left street homeless. To this end, existing resources have been jointly pooled to provide a shared budget from which emergency accommodation can be provided to those over 21 years to the age of 25. This provides a safety net whilst their housing needs are assessed and plans for further accommodation are agreed whatever their entitlement.
- 3.16 There have been two external reviews examining support for Care Leavers in Thurrock in June 2023 and February 2024. On both occasions there was positive feedback in relation to the offer of accommodation for our young people and highlighting the effective joint work between Children's services and Housing colleagues.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To inform members of and invite members comments on, the work being carried out jointly between Children's Services and Housing to meet the housing needs of Thurrock's Care Leavers.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 The protocol will be shared with Care Leavers and the Children in Care Council and their comments invited which will be incorporated into subsequent reviews

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1. Young People who have been in care of the Local Authority are a corporate responsibility and will have an impact on wider corporate policies and performance.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Sima Khiroya**
Assistant Director, Financial Management

This report sets out how the local authority can meet its statutory duty and responsibility to young people leaving care to support them to live independently as adults.

There is a limited availability of properties within the housing benefit element that do not require social care top-up for young people transitioning to independence. This lack of suitable housing options has created challenges for Children Services, as young people turning 18 are not being accommodated by Headstart Housing due to capacity constraints. To address this issue, Children Services is collaborating with Housing colleagues to assist young people in bidding for suitable properties and prioritise those who are actively waiting or bidding.

There are no additional costs associated with this proposal, and all costs should be met from within existing Children Services budgets for 2024-25 in cost centres CA064; with a total budget of £1.098m.

The total HSH budget for 2024-25 is £0.851m.

The expected targets for recovery of Housing Benefit and Universal Credit income have been set for 2024-25, with a total budget of £0.045m. Ensuring care leavers are active on the housing register as early as possible and stabilization of tenancies will be critical in income maximization, and therefore cost recovery.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by:

Urenna Nwulu
Safeguarding Solicitor – Team Leader

Godwin Mangse
Interim Principal Lawyer – Housing & Litigation

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Homelessness Act (2002) require Local Authority Children's Services and Housing departments to develop joint housing protocols and procedures to ensure that each department plays a full role in providing corporate parenting support to Care Leavers and to ensure the accommodation needs of Care Leavers are met.

The Local Authority must have regard to the Corporate Parenting Principles in Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 in the exercise of functions in relation to Looked after, relevant, and former relevant children.

The Local Authority is required under section 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 to publish a local offer, which sets out the services and the support available for care leavers.

The local offer should include information on how care leavers are supported to access suitable accommodation, including the support available from housing services. Joint housing protocols should be aligned with the local offer and can help to ensure that the commitments to support Care Leavers to access and sustain accommodation are met. Local Authorities should consider providing a link to the joint protocol within the local offer so that Care Leavers, advocates, and other professionals can have access to the document.

The Housing Act 1996 as amended states that a Young Person who is threatened with homelessness, has a priority need for housing if they are a person:

- under 21 who was (but is no longer) looked after by the Local Authority between the ages of 16 and 18.
- A person 21 or over who is vulnerable because of being looked after.

The Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) places a new duty on Local Authorities to help prevent the homelessness of all families and single people, regardless of priority need, who are eligible for assistance and threatened with homelessness.

The legal implications have also been reviewed from a housing perspective and there are no further implications to be added than those already stated.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Community Development and Equalities

The Services are committed to practice, which promotes equality, diversity and inclusion and will fulfil duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Public Sector Equality Duty and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy and is committed to support all children in council's care to be safe and well and to achieve their potential.

A Community Equality Impact Assessment has been prepared for the Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers and will be subject to ongoing review and update to ensure that plans are in place to mitigate the risk of disproportionate negative impact for protected groups and all other communities the process considers. Opportunities to maximise positive impact will also be considered through the assessment process.

The Anti-Racist Practice standards set by Thurrock Children's Services are applicable to this report and service.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) i.e Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

None

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Report on Housing Options for Care Leavers:

<https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/documents/s37878/Housing%20Options%20for%20Care%20Leavers.pdf>

9. Appendices to the report

Joint Housing Protocol 2023/24

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