

Thurrock Joint Housing Protocol

CARE LEAVERS

Housing Protocol for Care Leavers who are in need of housing and tenancy related support

Effective from:2019

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INTRODUCTION

1. PURPOSE OF THIS PROTOCOL

Many young people worry about leaving care. Some are anxious about where they will live, some are nervous about living on their own, and some are afraid they will feel lonely.

No single agency has sole responsibility for care leavers.

Children's Social Care and Housing Service have statutory duties to these young people, and other statutory and voluntary agencies provide a range of services to them.

The purpose of this Protocol is to ensure that, in Thurrock, partners work well together to provide an effective, consistent and co-ordinated response to care leavers in order to meet their housing and support needs and help them get the best start in life.

As well as setting out the roles and responsibilities of Children's Social Care and local Housing Authorities, this Protocol will help promote and safeguard the wellbeing of young people, prepare them for independent living and ensure that, when their housing needs are met, care leavers have the skills, help and support to sustain their tenancies.

2. YOUNG PEOPLE AFFECTED BY THIS PROTOCOL

This protocol affects young people who are owed a duty by Thurrock Council under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

The purpose of the Act is to ensure that young people do not leave care until they are ready and that, when they have left care, they receive the support they require.

Under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, Children's Social Care has a duty towards 'eligible', 'relevant' and 'former relevant' children (see **Appendix A** for definitions).

In Thurrock, around 80 young people, aged 16 or 17, are accommodated by Thurrock Children's Social Care who are eligible for a care leaving service and will require accommodation at the age of 18. There are also a number of young people (living in independent or supported housing, or remaining with foster carers under a Staying Put arrangement) who are aged 18 – 25, being supported by Children's Social Care and will, at some time, require their own home.

3. SIGNATORIES TO THIS PROTOCOL

This Protocol has been developed and agreed by Thurrock Council Children's Social Care and Housing.

It describes the joint working arrangements that have been agreed by the signatories to ensure that, in Thurrock we provide a consistent and co-ordinated response to care leavers, including Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), who are in need of accommodation and tenancy related support.

4. A CONSISTENT, CO-ORDINATED RESPONSE

It is essential that Children's Social Care and the Housing Service play a full and active role in assessing, assisting and supporting care leavers, and that the housing needs of care leavers are addressed before the young person leaves care.

In order to meet care leavers' housing and support needs, Children's Social Care and Housing Services must work collaboratively and proactively with housing and support providers to ensure an adequate range and supply of accommodation to meet the assessed needs of relevant children and other care leavers.

Children's Social Care will actively encourage young people to remain in a care setting until they are ready to live independently and will ensure that, by the time the young person is ready to leave care, they have acquired the vital skills and provided with additional support to successfully manage tenancies and live independently.

The objective is to find the most suitable accommodation for Care Leavers. This includes confirming that it is appropriate to each individual circumstances and needs and ensure that if social rented housing is required, the young person is supported to submit a housing application early enough to be offered housing when they are ready to leave care.

This Protocol aims to build upon existing good practice and will:

- Improve working relationships between organisations and assist their understanding of one another's roles and responsibilities
- Improve the way in which care leavers are referred to, and access, housing and support services and clarify where they will be accommodated while they await permanent rehousing
- Ensure that Thurrock Council meet their statutory duties towards care leavers;
- Standardise processes and procedures that are easy to follow
- Achieve greater consistency with support plans and access to services
- Fully utilise the skills, knowledge and resources of Children's Social Care and Housing Services in order to deliver effective and sustainable solutions for care leavers.

5. PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THIS PROTOCOL

All of the signatories to this Protocol have agreed the following principles:

- The safety and welfare of the young person leaving care is paramount
- Every effort will be made to prevent homelessness, wherever possible, through early intervention and effective multi agency working
- Agencies will work together to assess and meet the needs of care leavers, and they will share information effectively

- Young people leaving care will be kept informed of all progress and decisions made
- Where a care leaver is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, a lead professional will work with them. This will be their personal advisor.
- Bed and Breakfast accommodation will not be used to house any 16 and 17 year olds. Children's services have a duty alongside housing and will therefore ensure they are provided with suitable accommodation that meets their needs.

6. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND REVIEW OF THIS PROTOCOL

To ensure that it remains relevant and effective, this Protocol will be reviewed 6 months after the date that it comes into effect, and then annually.

The After Care Team will initiate the review and will be responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of the Protocol. If there are any changes to roles and responsibilities, the Protocol will be reviewed, amended and agreed by all parties.

Organisations and services involved with this Protocol are asked to provide feedback and performance information that can be collated and shared to improve services and inform and support collective commissioning intentions in Thurrock.

The Protocol can also help gather evidence to show, for example, the number of care leavers in Thurrock who are homeless or in need of housing, and the number of care leavers whose tenancies break down. This evidence may highlight the need for new services and/or the remodelling or replacement of existing services.

7. WORKING TOGETHER TO ASSESS AND MEET THE HOUSING AND SUPPORT NEEDS OF CARE LEAVERS

The success of this Protocol is dependent on the efficient and effective sharing of information between organisations.

In order to accurately assess and meet a young person's needs, information relevant to their housing and support needs must be shared between Children's Social Care, the Housing Service and housing and support providers.

The young person's written permission must be sought before the exchange of information can take place and this permission should be obtained at the earliest opportunity and forwarded to the Housing Service for their records.

Not all of the information in the young person's Pathway Plan is relevant to their housing application. However, it is expected that the care leaver will give their permission for all **relevant** information to be shared.

Children's Social Care will share information about all care leavers for the purpose of identifying and referring those young people and facilitating the subsequent joint assessment of their accommodation and support needs. Children's Social Care and the

Housing Service will share general information in order to support the review and evaluation of the effectiveness of the Protocol.

Although all care leavers must be asked for their permission to have their details shared – and may withdraw their permission at any time – all staff need to be aware of their information sharing obligations in relation to the safeguarding of young people, and be familiar with national guidance.

All information sharing must comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2000, Thurrock Council's Information Sharing Protocol and the relevant Housing Service procedures in respect of confidentiality of information.

8. THE PATHWAY PLAN

The young person's Pathway Plan will identify their housing and support needs and what action is required in order to prepare the young person for independent living.

The Pathway Plan must reflect the young person's current circumstances, provide a clear analysis of the needs of the young person and set out how these needs will be met.

When Children's Social Care completes the Housing Referral Form (see **Appendix D**), it will attach a copy of the relevant section(s) of the Pathway Plan and work collaboratively and proactively with the Housing Service to ensure that the young person's needs and circumstances are fully understood and reflected in the Housing Needs Assessment.

The information in the Pathway Plan and Housing Needs Assessment will inform the multi-agency approach that Children's Social Care, the Housing Service and housing and support providers will adopt in meeting the young person's housing needs.

This multi-agency assessment will identify the specific needs of the young person and will be informed, as appropriate, by meetings with all parties including the young person.

PREPARING CARE LEAVERS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

Children's Social Care will actively encourage young people to remain in a protective environment until they have developed appropriate life skills, at their own pace, and move to more independent accommodation when it is appropriate, rather than at a specific age.

Some young people will want to move on from a care environment when they are approaching, or achieve, the age of 18. Others will want to stay longer.

There is a lot that can be done to prepare young people, emotionally and practically, for independence and managing on their own. Social Workers and Personal Advisers will help young people to make informed choices about the type of accommodation that is best suited to them and the nature of the support they will need in order to sustain it.

The Social Work and After Care Teams will work alongside each young person to help them plan for their future, help them develop confidence in their ability to live independently, and help them develop the skills required to successfully maintain their own tenancy. This work will be recorded in the young person's Pathway Plan.

HOUSING OPTIONS FOR CARE LEAVERS

Unless the young person is in full-time higher education or residential education, Children's Social Care's duty to provide the care leaver with accommodation will end when the young person reaches the age of 18. At this point, the young person is no longer 'in care' and is able to access their own accommodation and hold a tenancy.

If the young person is in full-time higher education or residential education, Children's Social Care will provide the young person with accommodation during the holiday periods and will support the young person to have access to adequate funds to secure accommodation suitable to their needs during term time.

Depending on whether or not the young person is ready to live independently, there are a number of accommodation options available to young people who are aged 18 or over:

- Remaining with former foster carers
- Moving into supported housing
- Moving into social rented housing
- Moving into other independent living situations such as shared accommodation with other young people.

As every young person develops at their own pace, and some young people will need more time than others, it is not assumed that all young people will be ready to live independently when they reach the age of 18.

For those young people who are aged 18 or over and are not yet ready for independent living, remaining with foster carers or moving into supported housing may offer the best options for meeting their housing and support needs.

It is important, however, that Children's Social Care sends a Housing Referral Form to the Housing Service as soon as it is agreed that the young person will join the local Housing Register and apply for the tenancy of a council or housing association home.

Where an application is to be made for social rented housing, the Housing Service will meet with Children's Social Care and the young person to discuss the young person's housing options, the applications process and how social rented housing is allocated. As well as helping the young person to apply for housing, the Housing Service will monitor and oversee the rehousing process to ensure that a suitable offer is made on time.

Remaining with former foster carers

Some care leavers may wish to remain living with their foster carer(s) when they reach the age of 18 and are no longer 'in care'.

A 'staying put' arrangement is only possible if the young person and foster carer are both happy with it – and it is essential that both parties understand the implications of the agreement they are entering into – it can provide the young person with the time they need to improve their independent living skills or complete their studies.

Moving into supported housing

Some care leavers move into supported housing to meet their needs.

Supported housing is provided in various forms, ranging from shared houses or flats (where young people share all of the facilities) to supported housing schemes (where young people live together, but have their own flat) and individual, self-contained flats and houses. Residents of supported housing are provided with on-site or floating support.

During their stay in supported housing, the young person is able to practice budgeting, cooking, cleaning and maintaining daily routines. Support that they will receive will be included in their support plan and Pathway Plan.

The experience of living in supported housing plays an important role in building the young person's confidence and ensuring that they are prepared and ready for independent living when they move into their own accommodation. It also helps Children's Social Care to identify any specific needs that the young person has and to determine how these needs can best be addressed and met.

Moving into social rented housing

For some care leavers, social rented housing will represent the most appropriate housing option when they are ready for independent living.

In order to be allocated a property, the young person will need to complete a housing application and join the local Housing Register. They will also need to arrange for Children's Social Care to provide the Housing Service with confirmation that they are ready for independent living.

Thurrock Council operates a choice based lettings system guided by the Housing Allocations Policy. (See **Appendix C**). The policy recognises care leavers as a priority group and awards a reasonably high priority.

Applying for social rented housing

Although care leavers can make a housing application without the active involvement of Children's Social Care or Housing Services, one of the primary objectives of this Protocol is to ensure that care leavers who require social rented housing are offered suitable accommodation at the time they need it and are provided with all of the advice, help and support they require in order to successfully manage and sustain their tenancies.

Children's Social Care and the Housing Service have therefore agreed that, when a care leaver requires social rented housing, Children's Social Care will complete the online housing register application. This will be followed by a completed Housing Referral Form (see **Appendix D**), attach a copy of the relevant section(s) of the young person's Pathway Plan and e-mail it to the Allocations Team mailbox housingreg@thurrock.gov.uk. (see **Appendix E**).

Within 5 working days of receiving the Housing Referral Form, the Allocations Team will confirm its receipt, review its contents, request any additional information or documentation that is needed, and confirm the approval.

Care leavers will be actively encouraged to agree to the involvement and support of the After Care Team in their housing application. A young person will normally only receive an offer of social rented housing if Children's Social Care provides written confirmation that they are ready for independent living and the young person's prospective landlord is satisfied that they are going to be able to comply with their tenancy conditions.

A care leaver's housing application will not be rejected solely on the grounds that the young person does not have a local connection with Thurrock. The services will work together in the best interests of the young person and ensure that the number of care leavers received by each Housing Service is fair and reasonable.

The Allocations Officer will ensure that:

- The young person has made an online housing application
- All supporting evidence has been provided and the young person's housing application has been registered, assessed and verified
- The young person is eligible and qualifies for social rented housing
- Children's Social Care has provided written confirmation of whether or not the young person is ready for independent living and, if they are not yet ready, when they are likely to be ready

Until Children's Social Care provides written confirmation that the care leaver is ready for independent living, the young person will not be actively considered for an offer of housing and they will not be able to bid for housing through the choice based lettings scheme.

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9. WORKING TOGETHER TO SUSTAIN THE SOCIAL HOUSING TENANCIES OF CARE LEAVERS

In order to ensure that care leavers get the best start in life and achieve a smooth transition to independent living, it is essential that Children's Social Care, the local Housing Service other social landlords communicate well, work proactively and collaboratively to sustain the tenancies of young people.

Before a care leaver is rehoused, Children's Social Care and Housing will ensure that the young person is aware of their tenancy obligations – paying the rent and service charges, keeping the property in a good and clean condition, and behaving in a reasonable manner – and that they understand the likely consequences of them breaching their tenancy conditions.

As part of their preparations for independent living, a care leaver will have a bank account, a birth certificate, a passport and National Insurance Number.

9.1 How social rented housing is allocated

When Children's Social Care provides the Housing Service with written confirmation that the care leaver is ready for independent living, the application will be verified and made active on the Housing Register. This means that, from that point onwards, the care leaver will be actively considered for any suitable social rented housing that becomes available.

Thurrock operate a choice based lettings scheme and advertise most of the vacant social rented housing on the internet. Except where it is decided that a property should be offered to an applicant as a 'direct let', housing applicants will normally only be considered for a property if they are suitable for it and if they 'bid' for it. A shortlist will be compiled of the 'bidders' with the highest priority.

The applicant at the top of the shortlist will be invited to view the property. If it is a housing association home, applicants at the top of the shortlist will be nominated to the housing association which will then invite them to a viewing.

When a care leaver is shortlisted for social rented housing, they will be invited (with their allocated Social Worker or Personal Advisor) to an accompanied viewing of the property which will be undertaken by the social landlord's Housing Officer or Lettings Officer.

During the accompanied viewing, the young person and their Social Worker or Personal Advisor will receive a guided tour of the accommodation, will be briefed on the landlord's expectations and conditions of tenancy (including the rent and service charges), will be told about local facilities and services, and will have the opportunity to ask questions.

After the viewing, the care leaver will decide whether or not the property is suitable.

Before the social landlord is able to provide the care leaver with a formal offer of tenancy, it will need to be satisfied that the young person is ready for independent living and will be able to successfully manage and sustain their tenancy.

In order to satisfy the social landlord that the care leaver is ready, Children's Social Care will ensure that the support identified in the young person's Pathway Plan is in place and it will specify exactly who is responsible for providing the support and how it will be reviewed. It will also share with the social landlord the relevant parts of the Pathway Plan.

9.2 Signing the tenancy agreement

When the social landlord is satisfied that the care leaver is ready to take on the tenancy, it will make an appointment to meet with the young person and their Social Worker or Personal Advisor to complete the tenancy 'sign up'.

During the interview, the social landlord's Housing Officer will describe the contents of the tenancy agreement, the care leaver's rights and responsibilities as a tenant, and the likely consequences of any breach of the tenancy conditions. They will also provide the young person with their contact details and information about the social landlord's services.

As part of the 'sign up', the Housing Officer will normally help the care leaver to complete an application for Housing Benefit. Proof of identity, income and savings will be required.

During the interview, the care leaver's Social Worker or Personal Advisor will talk to the Housing Officer and agree the timing and frequency of the follow-up interviews and home visits that will be undertaken by Children's Social Care and the social landlord.

In order to ensure that the young person has settled in well – and identify the need for any additional advice, help or support – Children's Social Care will visit the care leaver in their new home within 10 working days of them moving in. The Housing Officer will also visit (with Children's Social Care or on their own) within 4 weeks of their tenancy start date.

The exact timing and frequency of the follow-up interviews and home visits undertaken by Children's Social Care and the Housing Officer during the first 12 months of the care leaver's tenancy will depend on the specific needs and circumstances of the young person. However, during the first year, it is expected that Children's Social Care will meet with the care leaver in their home at least once every 8 weeks and the Housing Officer will meet with the care leaver in their home at least once every 12 weeks.

9.3 Help in setting up home

The more prepared that a young person is when leaving care, the more successful their move will be and the more confident they will become.

All care leavers are entitled to a Leaving Care Grant of £2,000 to help them set up home when they have secured an offer of independent accommodation. The grant can be used to purchase household furniture, bedding, a cooker, a fridge and other essential items. Although the money is not paid directly to the young person, their Personal Advisor will work with them to ensure that their needs are met.

When a care leaver has secured an offer of independent accommodation, their Social Worker or Personal Advisor will arrange for their 'Leaving Care Grant' monies in advance of the young person's tenancy start date.

10. Communication, joint working and problem solving

It is essential that, from the outset, Children's Social Care and the social landlord work proactively and collaboratively to support the care leaver in sustaining their tenancy.

Good communication, effective joint working and outcome focused problem solving will all play a vital role in ensuring that Children's Social Care and the social landlord are aware of any difficulties that the young person is having and are able to provide imaginative solutions to the problems they are experiencing.

During the tenancy 'sign up', the Social Worker / Personal Advisor and the Housing Officer will exchange their contact details and the contact details of their organisations. They will agree on the liaison arrangements and the timing and frequency of the follow-up interviews and home visits that will be undertaken by Children's Social Care and the social landlord.

As well as agreeing to work together to address any problems or concerns, Children's Social Care and the social landlord will agree to alert one another, at an early stage, if problems do occur or they are concerned about the care leaver's behaviour or wellbeing.

An early alert or referral will enable Children's Social Care and/or the social landlord to assess the care leaver's situation and work with them to address and resolve any problems before they become so serious as to put the young person's tenancy at risk.

It is the responsibility of Children's Social Care and the social landlord to work with care leavers, and with one another, to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness. Possession proceedings should only ever be initiated after Children's Social Care has had the opportunity to meet with the tenant and landlord to try and resolve any problems and there has been concerted efforts made by each responsible agency to prevent this.

If the care leaver is evicted from their home and subsequently makes a homelessness application (see **Appendix B**), the Housing Service will inform the After Care Team, investigate the reasons for the young person's homelessness and decide whether or not the care leaver is owed a rehousing duty under the homelessness legislation. If it decides that the young person has caused their homelessness, the Housing Service will normally only be required to accommodate them for a period of up to 28 days.

If the care leaver is found to be intentionally homeless, a copy of the decision letter will be sent to the After Care Team and the young person's Pathway Plan will be updated.

APPENDIX A – DEFINITION OF CARE LEAVERS

The Leaving Care Act has two main aims:

- To ensure that Young People do not leave care until they are ready.
- To ensure that they receive more effective support once they have left.

Definitions

The Local Authority has a duty towards eligible and relevant and former relevant children:

- **Eligible children** are those young people still in care aged 16 and 17 who have been looked after for (a total of) at least 13 weeks from the age of 14.
- **Relevant children** are young people aged 16 or 17 who have already left care, and who were looked after for (a total of) at least 13 weeks from the age of 14, and have been looked after at some time while 16 or 17.
- **Former relevant children** are young people aged 18-21 who have been **eligible** and/or **relevant** children in care - young people who are looked after by a Local Authority either through a compulsory care order or remanded or accommodated by voluntary agreement including accommodation under section 20 of the Children Act.

APPENDIX B – LEGISLATION AND GUIDANCE

This provides a short summary of the provisions of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the homelessness legislation (Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996, as amended).

- Leaving care should be properly planned – so care leavers should not become homeless when they reach the age of 18
- Young people should be properly prepared for independent living and the monitoring / support systems should be put in place to ensure that they are able to successfully manage and sustain their tenancies – so care leavers should not become homeless from their social rented housing.

APPENDIX C – COUNCILS' HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY

This provides a brief overview of the housing allocations arrangements in Thurrock, but also reinforce the rehousing process described in the Protocol.

APPENDIX D – HOUSING REFERRAL FORM

This is the Referral Form that Children's Social Care will send to the Housing Service (with the relevant sections of the Pathway Plan) to request a Care Leavers award on the Housing Register

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