

***Care Leaver Protocol***  
***Stockport Homes Group and***  
***Stockport Council***  
***April 2024***



**Stockport Homes Group**  
One team, transforming lives

**STOCKPORT**  
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

## **1. Aim of the Protocol**

- 1.1 Having a safe and secure place to call home is central to the wellbeing of all young people. As corporate parents to people in care and leaving care within Stockport, SHG and the Council are committed to ensuring the best accommodation and life outcomes for them.
- 1.2 This protocol outlines how this will be delivered in operational terms, alongside the relevant legislative and strategic frameworks. It seeks to deliver a strongly person-centred approach with accommodation at its heart, recognising that the relationship with care leavers needs to be personalised, long term and built upon trusted relationships and respect.
- 1.3. With a commitment to the continual development of services and incorporating the voice of young people, this protocol only sets a baseline for provision. There is the expectation that the offer to young people will continue to evolve listening to their lived experiences and feedback, with bespoke interventions where necessary to meet individual needs and aspirations.
- 1.4 The Protocol is a public document so is available to young people to view, however is also reflected in the care leaver 'Local Offer' that covers the range of support and services available.

## **2. Scope of the Protocol**

The Protocol covers seven areas:

1. Corporate parenting and the values of this protocol
2. The legislative and strategic framework
3. Exploring care leavers' accommodation and support options
4. Accessing housing and support
5. Care leavers and homelessness
6. Wellbeing, employment and wider aspirations
7. Review and dispute resolution

## **3. Corporate Parenting**

- 3.1 Corporate parenting underpins this protocol with the Local Authority having the vision that:

*'Stockport is committed to being an effective, caring and ambitious corporate parent. Children and young people are the future of Stockport, so it makes sense that they are at the heart of everything we do.'* (Corporate Parenting Strategy)

- 3.2 The Children and Social Work Act 2017 (CSWA) outlines the corporate parenting principles that the Council and partners need to pay due regard, these include:

- to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and care leavers
- to encourage those children and care leavers to express their views, wishes and feelings

- to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and care leavers
- to help those children and care leavers gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners
- to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and care leavers
- for those children and care leavers to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work
- to prepare those children and care leavers for adulthood and independent living

3.3 Within Stockport, young people have also set priorities within the Corporate Parenting Strategy, with particular relevance to this Protocol:

- Priority 1 Achieving your Goals and Aspirations (Education, Employment and Training)
- Priority 2 To support you to feel safe, supported and secure in your home
- Priority 3 Support care leavers to have good physical, emotional and mental health and reduce health inequalities
- Priority 4 To support you to manage your money and make it stretch for the things you want to do
- Priority 5. Develop and implement a staying close 3-year pilot programme offer for care leavers leaving residential care.

3.4 As a result, this Protocol promotes an approach and culture that:

- Listens to young people and encourages them to express their wishes and feelings
- Gives honest, clear advice and information to enable decision making
- Offers choice as far as possible
- Recognises the role of positive relationships in sustaining accommodation
- Ensures young people are supported to develop the skills to sustain and thrive in accommodation
- Offers financial and practical assistance where needed

3.5 As corporate parents, SHG and the Council also recognise that as with all young people care leavers will make mistakes, sometimes need additional help and have ups and downs in life. Under this protocol both commit to ensuring that care leavers will continue to be supported empathetically in all circumstances, focussing on positive outcomes and helping address and learn from mistakes.

#### **4. *Legislative and strategic framework***

4.1 This Protocol is framed within the context of relevant housing and social care legislation that outlines:

- Who qualifies as a care leaver
- Local authority duties to support and assist care leavers
- The concept of corporate parenting
- How local authorities decide how social housing is allocated
- The obligations towards people needing housing advice, homeless or threatened with homelessness

4.2 These are outlined within:

- Housing Act 1996 - Part 6 (Allocations) and Part 7 (Homelessness), as amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
- Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002
- Children Act 1989
- Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000
- Children and Social Work Act 2017 - sections 1, 2 and 3

4.3 In addition, there is a range of statutory guidance relating to the legislation that local authorities must have regard to. This includes:

- Homelessness code of guidance
- Applying corporate parenting principles to looked after children and care leavers
- Children Act 1989: care planning, placement and case review
- Children Act 1989: transition to adulthood for care leavers
- Extending Personal Adviser support for all care leavers to age 25
- Local offer guidance
- The Supported Accommodation (England) regulations 2023

4.4 The Council's Homelessness Strategy and Corporate Parenting Strategy have further focus upon developing services to meet housing and support needs of care leavers, with a strong holistic approach outlined in both. At a Greater Manchester level, Housing Providers have also adopted a series of pledges that SHG have committed to. These are:

- Ensure young people leaving care have easy access to a range of accommodation that meets their needs
- Ensure that young people know their rights and understand their tenancy agreement.
- Tailor our tenancy sign-up procedures to support young people to understand them fully.
- Prevent homelessness, we will support young people leaving care to sustain their tenancy, to learn the necessary skills to maintain a home.
- Work with our suppliers to provide furniture packages to young people with reduced income.

## **5. *Exploring care leavers' accommodation and support options with them***

5.1 From the moment children become cared for by the local authority, they will be supported by Social Care in acquiring the skills, confidence and experience to prepare them for adult life. As with all young people, conversations will include thinking about their aspirations and this will include accommodation options post 18. A record of this will be maintained and updated in each young person's care plan' and 'pathway plan' so it is clearly recorded and can be reflected upon.

5.2 In preparation for the transition to adult life, Social Care will ensure the following are included within support and pathway planning supported by the SKILLS programme to develop independence living skills, such as:

- Budgeting skills
- Managing family and personal relationships and self-care skills

- Developing positive support networks
- Practical and emotional living skills
- Accessing health and wellbeing services
- Developing self-esteem and a positive sense of identity
- Building resilience, positive attitudes and behaviours
- Employment and training planning and support

- 5.3 This support will be delivered through a combination of formal and informal approaches, built upon dialogue and engagement with the young person and their carer/s.
- 5.4 When young people are 15 ¾- 16 ¼ years old a particular focus will be put upon 16+ needs assessment and planning for leaving care and accommodation options post 18. These options include:
- Staying put – where a young person remains in a former foster carer post 18
  - Supported lodgings – where a young person lives in a household as a lodger
  - Specialist supported accommodation – where a young person has high level needs
  - Residential provision- for the most complex young people
  - Care leaver Post 18 accommodation schemes – Shaw heath or Bridge Apartments
  - Staying close – accessing support to care leavers leaving residential care in supported or independent accommodation
  - Living with family or friends
  - University or further/higher education with linked accommodation
  - Own tenancy in the social sector
  - Private sector tenancy<sup>1</sup>
- 5.5 The pros and cons of each will be discussed with the young person, enabling them to make a decision based upon their circumstances, aspirations and availability of accommodation. The pathway plan review meetings, chaired by an independent reviewing officer, will oversee the young person plans to ensure they are in the best place to be ready to access the most appropriate accommodation option. The fortnightly 16+ multi-agency Accommodation Panel will also keep track of their progress and support with any advice and consultation.
- 5.6 The 16+ multi-agency Accommodation Panel, chaired by the Service Leader Leaving Care Services and including representatives from SHG and other partner agencies, will ensure that each young person has a clear accommodation plan that they are working to for when they turn 18 years.

## **6. Accessing SHG/social housing**

- 6.1 Where a young person decides, after discussion and due consideration that they wish to access their own tenancy, they will make an application to housing and have a meeting (housing interview) with their personal advisor (PA) and a housing options officer (HOO) from SHG. Where young person is leaving residential care or needs additional support with preparation for independent living a referral will be discussed with them for Staying close wrap around support and/ or House Project to support them with preparation for independent living skills.

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<sup>1</sup> SHG can assist with deposit, rent in advance and help approaching landlords

- 6.2 The HOO will give a detailed account of the realities of living in a tenancy, the support available and discuss the responsibilities and the challenges of living independently. This will help the young person determine whether that is definitely the option they wish to pursue and in conjunction with the PA identify the kind of support and assistance needed to make the move a success. Young people will also be given information about Stockport's Coram Voice advocacy and support service.
- 6.3 In the main, this will be when a young person is approaching 18 although it could be at a later date if for example a young person leaving staying put or supported lodgings arrangement, or upon occasion with a slightly younger person. Primarily, this enhanced process will only relate to 'former relevant' young people under Stockport Council, however in exceptional circumstances may be applied to a 'qualifying' care leaver or someone from out of Borough who has been in the area since before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- 6.4 If the HOO is satisfied that the young person will be able to sustain a tenancy and the 16+ Accommodation Panel supports the rehousing process to continue, then they will be added to the housing register. Their priority will be assessed in line with the Council's Allocation Policy, which includes an additional degree of preference for care leavers aged under 25.
- 6.5 The person would still need to meet the eligibility and qualifying criteria for the housing register, but flexibility exists around issues such as past offending behaviour or rent arrears. This will equally apply to general rehousing applications from care leavers under 25, taking the corporate parenting approach that young people will make mistakes and need to learn from them in a supportive manner. The ability to maintain a tenancy and manage independent living going forward being the primary factor.
- 6.6 As well as being able to apply for properties through Homechoice, the choice based letting scheme, a request for a direct let will also be made by the HOO to SHG's Property Management Team. This will be for a property and location in line with the allocation policy and discussion with the young person and PA. Factors such as support networks, access to education and training will be taken into account, although an honest conversation around availability of accommodation will also be held.
- 6.7 Any offer of accommodation will follow checks with the relevant neighbourhood housing officer for a property to ensure no significant anti-social behaviour or other related issues exist. An offer may be with SHG, or through a nomination to partner housing provider. A young person may refuse an offer without being penalised, but any refusal will need to be fully explored to discuss the reasons and ensure the care leaver is aware of the restrictions on availability of accommodation. Repeat unreasonable refusals may then require a joint meeting with the young person to arrive at a planned way forward.
- 6.8 Once rehousing is being sought, a young person will be referred to the Tenancy Ready Team at SHG if this is assessed as needed. In conjunction with the young person and PA they will help bring together a support plan for the period leading up to rehousing and the move into a new home. The PA will request the £3000 setting up home grant and support the young person to make a support fund application for white goods (c.£1000). This will have a very practical focus on setting up home ensuring everything is in place, as well as providing reassurance and ensuring links with other relevant services. A clear three-way plan between the young person, SHG and the PA is needed to avoid duplication and ensure there is clarity around responsibilities.

- 6.9 When moving into a property, a SHG support worker or PA will always be present however the terms of the tenancy agreement and rights and responsibilities must already have been covered in preparation. It should be noted that the process of moving is very stressful for anyone, but particularly so for someone living independently for the first time, so a longer period may well be needed to support the move around the young person's needs.
- 6.10 In addition to assistance from the Council through its comprehensive and wide-ranging leaving care offer, SHG can arrange:
- Access to SHG's furniture recycling scheme
  - Six months free membership of the nearest Pantry Scheme (co-operative food scheme offering around £15 of food for a £4.50 membership fee)
  - Access to SHG's Counselling Scheme
  - Employment advice and support
  - Money advice sessions
  - Access to the Special Housing Fund (SHG and Council)
- 6.11 Ongoing housing support is also available for as long as needed, again in discussion with the young person and PA to ensure it is at the right level and no duplication exists.
- 6.12 Before signing for a tenancy, young people will be asked if they consent to having a 'care leaver flag' applied to SHG's housing a management system. With their agreement, this enables staff to identify at an early stage that someone is care leaver if there are difficulties with a tenancy.
- 6.13 SHG have adopted a minimising evictions protocol, which outlines an exhaustive approach towards exploring all options before seeking to repossess properties. Where a tenant is a care leaver, this will be an additional factor taken into consideration with the Leaving Care Team involved where permission exists or can be obtained. SHG are committed to working with the leaving care team to provide support to young people and avoid eviction. If SHG feel that a care leaver may be at risk of eviction or have ongoing concerns about the young persons ability to manage their tenancy then a planning meeting should be undertaken between managers within SHG and the Council to talk through a plan of support and next steps
- 6.14 If the young person is applying for an early withheld property under 18 years old, the flow chart **Annex A** outlines the steps to be taken to be satisfied this is the right plan for the young person and for ensuring registration with Ofsted under the supported accommodation (England) regulations 2023.

## **7. Care Leavers and homelessness**

- 7.1 SHG have a strong focus on homelessness prevention and believe that a positive transition out of care is vital in preventing later accommodation issues. Getting it right at that stage is a primary focus and there is a commitment to investing in the care leaver at that point and providing ongoing support, including access to a PA until 25 years.
- 7.2 However, where a young person is at risk of homelessness and consent to share information is given or required on a 'best interest basis', the Council and SHG will work collaboratively to resolve the situation. If aged over 21 but not receiving support

from a PA, the Leaving Care Team will offer a needs assessment and support, where the young person will accept it. Help may include:

- Mediation with family/friends/landlords
- Financial help to address arrears from the Council/SHG, but with a clear approach to addressing the underlying cause of financial issues with a young person
- Engagement of the Positive Engagement Team at SHG where anti-social behaviour is an issue
- Intensive housing support, money advice, help with addressing loneliness and isolation
- Access to the Multi-Agency Adults at Risk Services (MAARS) and Team around the Adult meetings where wider input needed
- Referral to SHG's Mental Health Support Worker, Homelessness Adult Social Worker or Drug and Substance Misuse Worker
- Engagement with cross tenure Domestic Abuse Worker
- Referral/consultation to Aspire Team where there are concerns about exploitation
- Making a direct offer of an alternative tenancy under this protocol where the location is not sustainable for the young person
- Escalation to 16+ accommodation panel before any eviction decision in exceptional circumstances

7.3 SHG will also follow the statutory framework in taking homelessness applications and making relevant decisions, however this will have regard to the challenges faced by care leavers. For example, strong consideration will be given to the 'priority need' status of young people aged 21 to 25 who have been in care, and in determining whether someone is deemed to have made themselves intentionally homeless.

7.4 Where there is no legal duty to accommodate a care leaver under 25, or that duty is limited, SHG will commit to ensuring a young person has accommodation unless there are substantial risks posed or a complete refusal to engage with license requirements. Even where this is the case, SHG and the leaving care team (and adult services, where appropriate) will work with the young person to find a pathway back into accommodation and ensure the co-ordination of services.

7.5 Where SHG has made a decision that they cannot accommodate a young person this decision needs to be ratified by senior managers within SHG and the council and a review meeting held.

Assessment processes and accommodation provided for care leavers will be compliant with Chapter 22 of the Homelessness Code of Guidance and the Children Act 1989: care planning guidance – volume 2 (pages 74 – 80) and volume 3 (7.12 – 7.18) with a particular objective of avoiding the use of hotel or bed and breakfast style accommodation. SHG and leaving care team adopt a shared strategic approach to the provision of emergency accommodation and housing and support pathways for young people in order to avoid the use of B&B accommodation. In exceptional circumstances and if faced with no accommodation options available, SHG and the council will work creatively with the young person to consider the most suitable accommodation in the immediate. Where a shortage of appropriate placements is available, this will be flagged at the 16+ Multi-agency Accommodation Panel to explore both short and long-term alternative options in the young person's best interests.

7.6 It is recognised that some young people will take longer to adapt to independent living than others and that transition is an ongoing process. Ongoing support and a corporate parenting approach aims to ensure that new supported housing options can



be generated, new strategies and plans adopted for individuals until they become ready and settled.

## **8. Care Leavers with Additional Needs**

### **Care Leavers in Custody**

- 8.1 SHG and the leaving care team recognise the need to ensure appropriate planning is in place for care leavers who are due to be released from custody, to ensure a smooth transition into safe and suitable accommodation.
- 8.2 SHG will work with leaving care team, young offender institutions, secure training/colleges, prisons, youth offending team and probation to ensure that the accommodation needs of care leavers leaving custody are met and, specifically, that there is an accommodation plan in place for care leavers aged 18-25 who are leaving custody. Further guidance is also available within the Youth Justice Resettlement Strategy.
- 8.3 Young offender institutions, secure training/colleges, prisons, youth offending team and probation are subject to the duty to refer under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, and should refer, with the young person's consent, to SHG if they consider that the young person may be homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days. On receipt of such referrals, SHG will liaise with leaving care team and visit the young person if needed, to agree and deliver reasonable steps to prevent care leavers from becoming homeless on release from custody.
- 8.4 When a care leaver is identified as due for release from custody, a planning meeting will be held with all agencies involved; including Probation/Youth Offending, Personal adviser and Housing Options. This will inform assessing needs and helping to identify appropriate accommodation options and support upon release.
- 8.5 The young person circumstances will be presented to the 16+ Multi-agency Accommodation Panel for advice and consultancy about accommodation options. Any additional services or support will also be considered around the needs of the care leaver. Any requests for additional funding or resources to meet the care leavers needs can be ratified at the panel and actioned.
- 8.6 In the event of any imminent or actual homelessness then the young person will be supported to make a homelessness application.

## **9. Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Care Leavers**

- 9.1 Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children without leave to remain are unable to apply for SHG accommodation and advice should be sought from 16+ accommodation panel for accommodation options in these circumstances.
- 9.2 Once leave to remain is granted an appointment will be made with the Housing Options Team who will make an assessment under homelessness legislation. The former UASC will be supported by their personal adviser to attend any appointments and will arrange interpreters as appropriate and any referrals for support services.

## **10. Intersectionality**

- 10.1 SHG and the Council recognise that every young persons journey in life is unique and impacted upon by factors such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and neuro-diversity. As such, every effort will be made to provide a holistic, tailored support, engaging with specialist services, community groups and resources where appropriate.

## **11. Care Leaver parents**

- 11.1 If a care leaver is pregnant, they can be supported to apply to SHG for a 2-bed accommodation.
- 11.2 If a care leaver is already in their SHG accommodation, they should speak with their housing officer for advise and support.

## **12. Wellbeing, employment and wider aspirations**

- 12.1 Listening to young people it is clear that feeling safe and settled in their home is a priority in being able to move forward and develop in other areas of life. As well as being a landlord, SHG and the Council commit to providing holistic support and engagement opportunities including:

- Employment and apprenticeships advice and opportunities
- Volunteering and work experience opportunities
- Targeted work around positive relationships and domestic abuse
- Access to counselling and mental health support
- Community involvement, networking and addressing loneliness
- Promoting health and wellbeing services
- Supporting care leaver events and action weeks

## **13. Protocol review and resolution of disputes**

- 13.1 This protocol will be formally reviewed on an annual basis at the start of the financial year or following a change in legislation, guidance or service provision. Any amendments will be agreed between the Head of Homelessness and Rehousing and the Head of Social Care and Commissioning. The Review will feed back into the Children in our Care Board and Corporate Parents Working Group, with a review of outcomes from the past financial year.
- 13.2 Practitioners working with children leaving care who require accommodation are likely to encounter practitioner disagreements from time to time, whilst this is acceptable on occasion it is vital that such differences do not affect the outcomes for children and young people. Care leavers will also be able to access independent advice from Coram Voice advocacy and support services.
- 13.3 The process of resolving practitioner disagreements should first involve workers consulting co-workers to clarify their thinking and practice in the first instance. Where differences cannot be resolved, these will be referred to respective Leaving Care Team Leader and Housing Options Team Leader for discussion, resolution and

agreement. Cases raised in this manner will also be raised at the fortnightly Accommodation Panel to ensure any learning is shared and wider protocol or service level issues identified.

- 13.4 Disputes remaining unresolved will be considered by the Head of Homelessness and Rehousing and Head of Social Care and Commissioning for discussion, resolution and agreement. They will also consider any wider issues at a protocol or service level.

### **The Agreement**

This document is a formal agreement of arrangements, between Children's Social Care and Stockport Homes Group. The agreement addresses the key principles and issues. This agreement will be reviewed in full at the request of either partner.

#### **Stockport Homes Group**

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Key Contact: Sarah Higgins

Housing Options Team Leader

#### **Stockport Family**

Name: Jeanette Warburton

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**Annex A Flowchart for children in care moving into an early withheld single occupancy flat with Stockport Homes u18 years and registration with Ofsted under the supported accommodation regulations 2023.**

