

Recommendations of the West Sussex Joint Scrutiny Task and Finish Group with comments on current policy at Chichester District Council

A common and flexible policy across the County to be introduced regarding “local connection”

(1) Taking into account the evidence provided during the review and the subsequent guidance on allocation policies across the County provided by the West Sussex Strategic Housing Group, the Task and Finish Group considers that there is sufficient scope within allocation policies across the County to facilitate care leavers securing accommodation in suitable locations for them which in the long term will help them settle quicker and make the transition into independent living easier. This may be within another local authority area. Districts and Boroughs across the County should be proactive in using the scope provided by existing flexibilities within their housing allocation schemes to this end in the spirit of the Joint Protocol launched in November 2015.

The Council's Allocation Scheme is sufficiently flexible to allow care leavers who have no valid local connection to the District to join the Council's Housing Register and to be accorded a local connection if it can be demonstrated that they cannot be suitably housed in the area where they do have a local connection. The Allocation Scheme allows a local connection to be awarded in exceptional circumstances with the agreement of the Head of Housing and Environment Services and the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning.

This flexibility has been recently exercised in respect of one of the care leavers who gave evidence to the Joint Task and Finish Group. The person was at risk of violence in the area where she had a local connection so she was awarded a local connection due to exceptional circumstances and was allocated a social home after a short period of time in our temporary accommodation.

The flexibility accorded by our Allocation Scheme should only be used to meet the needs of care leavers and not to satisfy their wants. This means that each case must be dealt with on its own merits.

(2) That when placing Care Leavers into accommodation, Officers in the District and Borough Councils should ensure that they are aware that certain areas are not suitable for housing of Care Leavers. Avoiding those areas will help Care leavers make that transition into independent living much easier.

Officers working in the Housing Service are aware that certain areas are not suitable for housing some care leavers. The Allocation Scheme recognises this issue and provides that some people may be subject to restricted bidding if they would be at risk in certain areas.

The Council's officers are reliant on being provided with the relevant information and this highlights the need for the Joint Protocol on Housing Provision for Care Leavers to be fully implemented so that a joint assessment can be undertaken at least two months before they are required to leave their current accommodation.

Providing Good quality and Consistent support throughout time in Care and sometimes beyond the end of Care

(3) The Task and Finish Group considers that Officers should be encouraged to provide good quality and consistent help and support from an early age and ensure that the same support worker is allocated to a young person in care even if they are moved to a different area.

This appears to be an issue for the County Council to consider and implement. Consistency is often something missing from the lives of young people in care and any initiatives to provide it is welcomed.

(4) The Task and Finish Group also considers that Care assessment should be based on need rather than age based, realising that some young people need support for much longer than others - Care should not just come to a stop at 18.

This is an issue for the County Council to consider. There is no doubt that some care leavers are simply not suitable for general needs housing at the age of 18. Others may have difficulty in maintaining a tenancy without significant support. Thus there needs to be on-going assistance for some care leavers beyond the age of 18 to ensure that they can be appropriately housed in supported accommodation, if necessary. Alternatively others may need significant support to ensure that they can maintain a tenancy in general needs accommodation.

Care Leavers - Policy in West Sussex

(5) That representations be made to the Government requesting that the statutory duty to provide accommodation for Care Leavers by a County Council should be extended to age 21 rather than 18 to provide more flexibility and support for care Leavers and help them in their move to independent living.

This recommendation is supported because many 18 year old care leavers are simply not equipped for independent living without significant support.

(6) That West Sussex County Council and the District and Borough Councils work with accommodation providers to provide more communal type living accommodation in West Sussex to help Care leavers into independent living.

This recommendation is supported, however, it is recognised that Registered Providers of Social Housing may be reluctant to provide accommodation of this type because the management costs tend to be high, thus it may be necessary to work with private sector providers.

Once single care leavers reach the age of 21 they will only be entitled to Local Housing Allowance at the single room rate until they reach the age of 35 and this means that it may be difficult for them to find suitable accommodation in the District. In the private rented sector they will be competing with students who are often prepared to pay more than the Local Housing Allowance Rate.

From October 2018 single people under the age of 35 will only be entitled to the single room rate in social/affordable housing as well as the private rented sector. At the present time there is no accommodation in the social/affordable sector at or below the single room rate so it will be difficult for this group to find affordable accommodation in any sector of the housing market.

We will need to work closely with West Sussex County Council to determine the number of care leavers requiring communal type living accommodation in the Council's district before exploring options to satisfy the demand in both the social and private rented sectors.

(7) That West Sussex County Council be requested to amend its Young People's Service provision for Care Leavers to provide support via the Young People's Service from age 16 rather than 18.

This recommendation is supported although it has no direct impact upon the policies of this Council.

(8) That there should be a universal Care leavers Policy approach across all Councils in West Sussex to assist with co-ordination etc.

Whilst such an approach is welcomed it is unlikely that such a policy could be implemented because the district and boroughs have separate allocation policies with significantly different local connection criteria. They also have different housing options available.

Joint Protocol on Housing Provision for Care Leavers

(9) That Officers from West Sussex County Council ensure that the Joint Protocol is fully implemented as soon as possible and that all Councils are involved in the Pathway Planning meetings and other discussions.

This recommendation is supported and it is crucial that districts and boroughs are involved in Pathway Planning meetings and other discussions at the earliest possible time.

(10) To help in the implementation of the Protocol it is suggested that all Districts and Borough Councils should have a named Link Officer responsible for Care leavers in their area, making communication easier and clearer.

This recommendation is supported and the Council will nominate the Senior Interventions Officer as the Link Officer.

Future Monitoring of Housing Provision for Care Leavers

(11) That the Task and Finish Group be retained to meet on a quarterly basis as a Countywide group to oversee the process of housing provision for care leavers and ensure that improvements are being undertaken to the process. If it is not possible to do this via the Joint Scrutiny process then it should be referred through the West Sussex Corporate Parenting Panel.

This recommendation is supported since monitoring is necessary to ensure that care leavers are provided with appropriate advice and accommodation and that there is a consistent approach to the issue across the County.

Housing Benefit/Universal Credit - Potential Impact on Young People under the age of 21 years who leave Local Authority Care

(12) That Officers continue to monitor the situation and undertake further lobbying if it subsequently proves that young people leaving Local Authority Care are not to be exempted.

This recommendation is supported.