

MEDWAY FOSTERING SERVICE

Policy on preparing for adulthood

This page outlines to young people, parents, foster carers and social workers our policy on preparing young people for adulthood.

Although the main focus of this policy is on young people preparing to move on to independent living, we recognise that there are opportunities for teaching children of all ages the appropriate independence skills and will encourage staff and carers to take up such opportunities.

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Statutory framework

The statutory obligations on local authorities for leaving care services are set out in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Children (Leaving Care) (England) Regulations 2001.

Standard 14.1 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services requires us to ensure that our foster care services help to develop the skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living.

Further requirements are imposed by Standards 14.2 to 14.5 including:

- the provision of written guidelines to carers in terms of what is expected of them in preparing children and young people for independent living.
- ensuring that carers understand the need to provide all children in their care with age and developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning independence skills.

Aims and objectives

The essentials of successful practice for helping care leavers have been identified in and supported by a substantial body of research findings. In summary, these are to:

- provide stable placements, continuity of carers and maintenance, wherever possible, of positive links whilst young people are 'looked after'.
- 'look after' young people until they are prepared and ready to leave care.
- promote and maintain relationships with carers and families, where possible, after young people leave care.
- prepare young people gradually to be ready to leave care, paying attention to practical self-care needs – health, budgeting, domestic skills – and personal and relationship dimensions.
- enable young people leaving care to fulfil their potential in education, training and employment.
- ensure young people leaving care have access to a range of accommodation and the support and skills to maintain themselves in their accommodation.
- ensure that there is a contingency provision to support care leavers in the event of a crisis, including arrangements for respite care.
- provide or enable ongoing personal support. This may include specialist leaving care scheme support, support by carers and social workers, and support by youth workers, befrienders, mentors or volunteers. This is underlined by the introduction of personal advisers under the 2000 Act.
- ensure that young people leaving care receive the full entitlements to welfare benefits, where they are entitled to claim.
- involve young people in all assessment, planning, review and decision-making for leaving care.
- inform young people leaving care of the available services – including the provision of accessible leaving care guides – and of their right to access their own records.
- monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the above.

Planning for adulthood

While each young person placed with a Medway Council carer is a unique individual with their own specific needs, all share some common characteristics.

These include the facts that all will grow and develop from childhood to adulthood and will leave the care system. While these are shared characteristics, the implications for each young person will depend on many factors and could be dramatically different from one young person to the next.

Some will have formed secure attachments, benefited from a high level of academic achievement, have a career and accommodation to move on to and have the ongoing support of family or former carers.

Others will be less well prepared for making their own way in the world. Some with severe learning disabilities will never be able to live independently, while others with poor parenting experience or a disrupted childhood will be vulnerable to substance misuse, homelessness, early pregnancy, unemployment, social isolation or criminal behaviour.

Whatever the individual young person's background and prospects, everyone involved in their care has a role to play in preparing and planning for as successful a transition to adulthood as possible.

Young people placed with our carers also share common characteristic that case responsibility remains with the placing authority. Our carers and staff share a duty to plan for the young person's care, but this is in partnership with others including the young person themselves, their parents and specifically the social worker.

Whenever a child or young person becomes looked after, social workers should be planning from the outset for their eventual discharge from care. It may be clear from the beginning that this will be a move on to independent living or it may be a return home.

Even where there is an active and realistic plan for rehabilitation, planning will include the provision of services aimed at maximising the chances of good outcomes in adulthood. This will focus on the categories used in the Assessment Framework and the Looking After Children System, these being:

- health
- education
- identity
- family and social relationships
- social presentation
- emotional and behavioural development
- self care skills

The Care Plan will be used to record the plan and the detail of how this will be put into effect will be recorded on the Placement Agreement. This will spell out who is responsible for ensuring that the Care Plan is progressed in areas such as education and health. While these may at first seem to deal with the present, in fact the attention to such detail is a key component in preparing children for adulthood that most parents routinely fulfil without consciously thinking about the long term benefits to the child.

The Care Plan will be reviewed on a regular basis and may need to be revised in the light of review decisions. The review is the key planning arena and the arrangements that will be needed to prepare the young person for leaving care and the assistance and aftercare support they will need should be discussed at every review.

Assessment and Action Records

An Assessment and Action Record should be completed for any child or young person who remains looked after beyond their second review, which must be held within four months of the child/young person becoming looked after.

The records are based on two principles:

1. that local authorities and other agencies caring for children separated from their families are accountable for the manner in which they discharge their parenting responsibilities.
2. good outcomes are dependent upon children/young people receiving a range of experiences that will enable them to fulfil their potential.

The questions in the records are based on the best available research evidence and ask if things have been done which it has been found are likely to lead to good outcomes for children/young people.

The completion of a record should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather a tool for ensuring that children and young people are receiving the care they need now as well as the experiences needed to maximise the chances of successful outcomes in adulthood.

We believe that Assessment and Action Records are one of the most important tools available to social workers and carers in preparing a young person for independence. We therefore expect a record to be completed within the timescales required by the Looking After Children System. Carers will be expected to work with young people and their social workers to both complete the record and to address any further work required arising from this process.

Pathway Plans

Responsible authorities are required under the Children (Leaving Care) (England) Regulations 2001 to carry out a needs assessment for each eligible child, with a view to determining what advice, assistance and support they should provide both while they are looking after them and when they have ceased to look after them.

The needs assessment will then be the basis for preparing the Pathway Plan. As a looked after child, an eligible child will already have a needs assessment in order to formulate a Care Plan, and this should form the basis for the assessment required under the 2000 Act.

Regulation 8 states that the responsible authority must prepare a Pathway Plan for each eligible child, and for each relevant child who does not already have one, as soon as possible after completing the needs assessment. It stipulates that the plan must cover at least the topics listed in Schedule 1 and for each of those topics must set out how the responsible authority plans to meet the needs identified through the assessment, and the timetable for the actions required to do so.

The plan must be recorded in writing. The responsible authority must keep a copy and must provide one for the young person in a form that is accessible to them. The authority should consider whether anyone else should have a copy of all or part of the plan. If another person or agency (such as a housing authority or school) is identified as playing a role in delivering part of the plan, they should have a copy at least of the part which relates to their contribution.

The authority should seek and take account of the young person's views about who should have a copy of his/her plan.

For looked after children, the Pathway Plan will complement and be part of the Care Plan. The Pathway Plan will, however, extend until the young person is at least 21.

Purpose

The Pathway Plan should be a major part of young people's planning for the future. It should include their hopes and ambitions as well as smaller goals for them to reach along the way.

It will also play a critical part in making the new arrangements contained within the 2000 Act work.

Each young person will be central to drawing up their own plan, setting out their own goals and identifying with their personal adviser how the local authority will help them. We will seek to ensure that at all times young people are consulted about their future and encouraged to be actively involved in the decision making process and implementation of the Pathway Plan.

We will work to ensure that the plan is owned by the young person and is able to respond to their changing needs and ambitions. It should look ahead at least as far as the young person's 21st birthday and will be in place beyond that where the young person is in a programme of education or training which takes them past that age.

Content

Schedule 1 sets out the details of what each Pathway Plan must cover:

- the nature and level of contact and personal support to be provided, and by whom, to the young person.
- details of the accommodation the young person is to occupy.
- a detailed plan for the education or training of the young person.
- how the responsible authority will assist the young person in relation to employment or other purposeful activity or occupation.
- the support to be provided to enable the young person to develop and sustain appropriate family and social relationships.
- a programme to develop the practical and other skills necessary for the young person to live independently.
- the financial support to be provided to the young person, in particular where it is to be provided to meet their accommodation and maintenance needs.
- the health needs, including any mental health needs, of the young person, and how they are to be met.

- contingency plans for action to be taken by the responsible authority should the Pathway Plan for any reason cease to be effective.

The Pathway Plan must also record key details such as the name, age and contact details of the young person, the name and contact details of the personal adviser and those of any other people who will be actively involved in delivering aspects of the plan. It will note the date due for review.

The role of foster carers

Foster carers have key formal and informal roles in the preparation of young people for independent or semi-independent living.

Formal roles include contributing to:

- Care Plans
- Placement Agreements
- Child Care Reviews
- Assessment and Action Records
- Pathway Plans

We expect carers to prepare for and attend all the relevant meetings in respect of the above and take a pro-active approach in the development and implementation of such plans.

The informal roles of carers are less easy to define but are at least as important as their formal roles.

Carers are best placed of all those in the young person's networks to help prepare them for independence on a day-to-day basis. For some young people this will involve helping them complete practical tasks such as making job or housing applications. Young people about to move into semi-independent or independent accommodation may need help in preparing a budget or notifying relevant agencies such as energy companies of the move.

Once again, we expect carers to be pro-active and positive in carrying out such tasks, whilst balancing the need to encourage the young person to take on increasing levels of responsibility for their own life.

We also expect carers to be aware of and take opportunities to provide children if any age and developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning independence skills.

Such opportunities may include:

- dressing
- observing religious festivals and customs
- making simple choices such as what clothes to wear or food to eat
- independent play

- shopping and handling money
- toilet training
- learning to travel unaccompanied
- learning to swim
- learning to ride a bike
- use of a library
- attending clubs or religious organisations
- sex education
- drugs awareness
- learning to keep yourself safe
- preparing simple meals
- simple household tasks, becoming more complex as the child gets older.

This is far from an exhaustive list and there will be many other ways that individual children can be helped by carers to develop independence skills. Carers should be mindful of such opportunities and take them as they arise.

Carers should also be mindful of the need to avoid putting too much pressure on the child, while at the same time ensuring that the child is encouraged to meet achievable challenges that will help to develop independence skills, whether independent living itself is imminent or still many years away.

Foster carer training

We are required to ensure that foster carers receive training to enable them to provide effective support and guidance to a young person preparing to move into independent or semi-independent living.

All carers must also complete a mandatory programme of training within two years of being approved as a carer. In addition, carers approved to foster teenagers will be required to complete training aimed at providing them with the skills to give effective support and guidance to a young person preparing to move into independent or semi-independent living within two years of approval.

Further relevant training will be provided as part of our ongoing training programme.