



Corporate Parenting Committee
28 April 2021

**Report from the Strategic Director,
Children and Young People**

Update on Semi-independent Provision for looked after children and care leavers

Wards Affected:	ALL
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Key
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
No. of Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	None
Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details)	Brian Grady Operational Director Safeguarding, Partnerships and Strategy Brian.grady@brent.gov.uk Shirley Parks Head of Forward Planning, Performance and Partnerships Shirley.parks@brent.gov.uk

1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This report provides Corporate Parenting Committee with an update on the quality assurance of semi-independent provision commissioned by the council to accommodate looked after children (LAC) aged 16-18 and care leavers.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review and comment on the contents of this report.

3.0 Detail

- 3.1 Local authorities have a duty to assess and meet the needs of young people aged 16+ who are looked after and who are care leavers as set out in the Children Act 1989 and 2004, the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It is the local authority's responsibility to ensure all LAC and care leavers are properly prepared for transition to adulthood in a planned and effective way to achieve the best possible outcomes for the individual young person. To support this duty, the council commissions a range of semi-independent living accommodations for looked

after children aged 16+ and care leavers aged 18–21, as an alternative to staying put arrangements in foster placements or as a step-down from residential provision.

- 3.2 At the end of March 2021, there were 183 young people in placed in semi-independent provision, of whom 42 were looked after children (aged 16-18) and 141 were care leavers aged 18+. The number of young people in Brent placed in semi-independent provision has doubled over the past five years (from 90 in April 2016 to 183 in April 2021). In part this reflects the older age profile of Brent looked after children, many of whom enter care as teenagers. It also reflects an increasing number of care leavers who are not ready to move into their own tenancies and require ongoing support. As a result of Brent's approach to supporting care leavers until they are considered to be ready for independence, there have been no tenancy breakdowns among the care leaver population living in Brent over the past 4 years. CYP is working closely with colleagues in Housing to provide a tenancy for Care Leavers when they are ready, as set out in the corporate offer to Care Leavers, but we anticipate that this may become a challenge as housing stock supplies reduce.
- 3.3 The council commissions a range of semi-independent placements from 25-30 providers at any point in time. This includes supported placements that have 24-hour onsite support, shared placements with different levels of day time support and independent accommodation with floating/visiting support. Brent commissions the majority of its semi-independent placements (82%) through a contract framework (a Dynamic Purchasing Vehicle) established by the Commissioning Alliance (previously known as the West London Alliance), a commissioning partnership of London local authorities. Brent continues to have a block contract with Centerpoint, who are currently providing 20 placements, 5 of which are high support placements. Brent also spot-purchases placements to meet the needs of individual young people.
- 3.4 The type of semi-independent placement commissioned is based on assessment of the needs of the individual young person. Brent expects all semi-independent providers to provide a settled and safe environment for young people and to support access to education, employment or training and to help young people build a range of life skills that will enable them to make a successful transition to independence.

4.0 The Brent Quality Assurance Framework of Semi Independent provision

- 4.1 Semi-independent placements are not currently regulated. There are, therefore, no regulatory or national minimum standards for what constitutes "good" quality semi-independent provision. Unregulated provision is currently allowed in law and is for children usually over the age of 16 who need support to live independently rather than needing full-time care. As semi-independent placements are not regulated, local authorities are responsible for quality assuring the provision they commission.
- 4.2 Working in partnership with Barnardo's, Brent has developed a new Semi-Independent Quality Assurance Framework that has care experienced young people at its core. The aims of the framework are:
- To develop a quality assurance approach that is informed by care experienced young people and regularly refreshed with their input
 - To provide guidance to Brent staff, key workers, and providers, on Brent's expectations of semi-independent provision and the support that should be provided to support care-experienced young people as they move towards independence
 - To empower young people who are living in or moving to semi-independent accommodation to speak up when they feel that these standards are not being met

- To identify providers that can meet Brent's requirements, so that the local authority narrows the number of providers commissioned giving greater influence over quality.
- 4.3 The framework builds on the range of technical and compliance quality assurance checks that are routinely undertaken to ensure that young people are living in a safe, clean environment and have appropriate support to meet their needs. This includes ensuring current gas and electric safety certificates are in place; current DBS check status; current COVID risk assessment and status; up to date fire risk assessments, HMO licence; staff vacancy and turnover information, placement turnover information, including emergency placement endings and the number of child protection enquiries, complaints and missing episodes within the last 12 months. Commissioners also discuss safeguarding information, including information about other young people placed in the provision, when commissioning a placement for a young person to ensure appropriate matching. Where placements are being considered in semi-independent settings that have not been used before, references are sought from two other local authorities who have placed children there.
- 4.4 The new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) is informed by what young people in care and care leavers have told us about their experiences of semi-independent provision. The focus of consultation was to understand young people's views of placements in terms of the quality of the accommodation and support available (eg. staff/the role of the key worker). Consultation has also been undertaken with social work teams. Consultation with providers focused on how the QAF could help them ensure that young people's needs are being met and that they are contributing to improving the outcomes and life chances of children in care and care leavers.
- 4.5 The QAF is structured around five core themes that group the issues raised by young people and providers during the consultation phase of the project. These have been agreed by young people:
- Entering Semi-Independent Placements.
 - Staff and Key Workers.
 - Communities, Neighbourhoods and Support.
 - Building Quality.
 - Communication and Wellbeing
- 4.6 Under each theme, the QAF identifies the issues raised by young people and providers, details the expectations that Brent has of semi-independent providers and professionals supporting young people (Table 1) and lists 'solutions' or what needs to be consistently implemented for these expectations to be met.

Table 1: QAF Expectations

Entering Semi-Independent Placements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people should be involved in the placements process wherever possible. Social workers and personal advisors should discuss and note their preferences upon entry into care, or prior to a planned move to a semi-independent placement, and pass this information on to the Placements Team. • Young people’s voices should be listened to and accounted for at every stage of the placements process. Particular support should be given from known professionals, e.g. their social worker, whilst the young person settles into the placement. • All relevant professionals – placement staff and managers, social workers, and personal advisors – should ensure good communication with the young person leading up to, and in the weeks following, a placement move. They should ensure that young people are supported through the practicalities of moving in and provide help and support where needed. • A placement starter pack, including information on Brent’s Care Leaver Offer, as well as essential items such as home and kitchenware, must be provided upon first entry into semi-independent placements.
Staff and Key Workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff motivations and experience should be properly interrogated at interview. • Placement staff should be regularly supervised and monitored in order to deliver the best service possible. • Staff should provide weekly reporting and updates on the young people that they are working with. This allows for smooth handovers. Comprehensive safeguarding forms should be kept up to date alongside this. • Staff and key workers should establish trusted relationships with the young people that they are working with, through individual conversations, taking an interest in their lives and hobbies, and ensuring that they listen to their concerns. • Providers are encouraged to share individual experiences and suggestions of best practice with one another, to allow for peer learning and improvement.
Communities, Neighbourhoods and Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providers should work to foster a sense of community within the placement and supporting young people to develop positive relationships with neighbours and the community within which they live with. • Young people’s opinions on mixed gender and age placements should be discussed with them before entry into semi-independent placements, to ensure that they can live somewhere that they feel comfortable.
Building Quality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providers should offer secure, comfortable, high-quality accommodation that provides a homely and safe environment for young people.
Communication and Wellbeing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providers should ensure that they are prioritising the wellbeing of young people throughout their work with them, and that they are communicating their rights and entitlements with young people effectively. • Providers should ensure that they treat the young people within the placement as young adults, working on a basis of mutual respect and trust when it comes to things such as curfews and complaints.

4.7 Feedback during the consultation phase from both young people and providers highlighted the importance of collaborative working. The QAF includes a commitment to continually engage with and support care-experienced young people and providers to ensure that provision is continuously improving through the following initiatives:

- A quarterly best practice support and training group, (facilitated and co-chaired by Brent staff) for all semi-independent providers
- Training for semi-independent providers co-produced with and delivered by young people and care leavers, as they are the 'experts by experience'
- The involvement of care leavers in monitoring/inspection visits to providers alongside officers (as paid casual workers)

4.8 Semi-independent accommodation providers are key partners in Brent's contextual safeguarding approach that requires agencies to work together to deliver interventions to manage the challenges and risks of safeguarding incidents, related to county lines, knife crime and the risks of vulnerable young people missing from care. The first Best Practice Group meeting took place in March 2021 and included training from the Metropolitan Police on the Philomena Protocol (an initiative aimed at helping to locate and safely return a young person as quickly as possible when they are missing) and support in regard to missing young people in general. Guidance was also provided on the production of Local Area Risk Assessments. A separate training session on the production of a shared generic Local Area Risk Assessment at the request of providers also took place in March 2021. The next Best Practice Group in July 2021 will include a presentation by The Rescue and Response Project on County Lines.

4.9 The first co-produced training delivered by young people is taking place in May 2021. Young people are being supported by officers and Barnardo's to co-produce the training.

4.10 Young people will be joining the CYP Commissioning Team's rolling programme of semi-independent monitoring visits to help assess providers against the QAF, once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. It is anticipated that they will provide invaluable insight on the quality of the accommodation and they will be adept at engaging with young people living in the accommodation to get their feedback. The local authority is planning to employ care leavers to undertake this work on an hourly paid basis, which would enable them to cite this as paid employment on their CVs. It is hoped that the first cohort of care leavers undertaking these monitoring visits will inspire future generations of care leavers to become part of the quality assurance monitoring process.

4.11 Since July 2020, 20 virtual monitoring visits of semi-independent accommodation have taken place and a further 10 are scheduled by the end of April 2021. Once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, the expectation under the QAF is that all semi-independent providers used by Brent will be visited twice a year. The key focus for site visits will be to assess if the QAF expectations are being met - the standard/condition of the accommodation and the community environment, staff records and supervision records, to assess how the young person is being supported to achieve their goals and positive outcomes and to develop their independence skills.

4.12 When monitoring visits are undertaken, an action plan is agreed with the provider to address any identified concerns. Visits to 6 providers since July 2020 identified areas for improvement that included facilities that needed to be redecorated or repaired and the need for additional equipment, such as mini fridges in each bedroom at one unit, bike storage arrangements at another and gardens that needed to be maintained. As the QAF becomes embedded it is anticipated that action plans will reflect more robust monitoring of qualitative activity.

5.0 Quality Assurance Monitoring through the Commissioning Alliance DPV

5.1 The Commissioning Alliance's new Semi-Independent Dynamic Purchasing Vehicle, hosted by Hammersmith and Fulham Local Authority, went live in August 2020. All

DPV providers undergo a tender process to join the DPV and there is also an accreditation scheme that runs alongside the DPV. To become accredited, a provider is inspected by the Commissioning Alliance in respect of: a) a fit and proper person test for directors and the named responsible individual and b) paperwork in regards to safer recruitment; DBS checks; training and policies and procedures. A third stage of extensive property visits is due to shortly be rolled out by the Commissioning Alliance.

5.2 Brent expects all providers to be working towards delivering the outcomes for all young people placed with them that are set out in The Commissioning Alliance Semi-Independent DPV specification. Brent encourages all semi-independent providers to join the Commissioning Alliance DPV, as this gives further reassurance to the quality of provision:

- “The young person enjoys good physical, emotional, mental and sexual health; has a healthy lifestyle, and has access to information about health issues that allows them to make informed choices.
- The young person is physically safe, stable and emotionally secure. They are protected from ill-treatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation; they are free from bullying and discrimination; and are protected from social exclusion through involvement in crime, anti-social behaviour and other risk-taking activities.
- The young person attends and fully engages in education, training or employment and receives encouragement and recognition for their achievements.
- The young person positively participates in their own development and with the local community; they are actively involved in making decisions about their future; they develop self-confidence and can deal with change and other life challenges; they understand the effects of racism and discrimination and are able to challenge this behaviour; they demonstrate enterprise and a will to contribute to the well-being of others.
- The young person is equipped with all the skills they require and supported to move into permanent independent living, making smooth and successful transition into adult life.”

5.3 Brent is driving work with Commissioning Alliance partner authorities to develop an agreed set of due diligence and safeguarding questions at the point of placement; to share monitoring information as well as soft intelligence more widely and to develop more robust accreditation and monitoring reports.

6.0 Future changes

6.1 In June 2020, the Department for Education undertook a consultation on semi-independent accommodation and subsequently published a report ‘Reforms to unregulated provision for children in care and care leavers’ in February 2021 that summarises the consultation and reforms of the sector.

6.2 The proposed changes include: the introduction of national standards and providers being registered and inspected by Ofsted and a ban on the placement of under-16s in semi-independent provision with Ofsted given additional powers to take enforcement action against illegal unregistered providers. The DfE is engaging with local authorities to understand the impact of these changes, which will come into force from September 2021, and how best to manage implementation. The Brent QAF will be reviewed against the national standards once further information is available.

Related documents:

- Report to Corporate Parenting Committee July 2019 on Semi-independent Provision for Looked After Children and care leavers

Report sign off:

GAIL TOLLEY

Strategic Director, Children and
Young People

*