

Short Debate: Supporting people previously homeless into permanent housing after the Covid-19 pandemic, 14th May 2020

Care-experienced young people at risk of homelessness

Key messages

- Government measures to address homelessness during the pandemic are welcome, but have missed out key groups of vulnerable people, including the hidden homeless and people forced to sofa surf with friends.
- Young people leaving the care system are widely recognised to be more at risk of homelessness. It is vital that their needs are taken into account as part of efforts to support people into permanent housing after the pandemic.

Questions to the Government

- Given that care leavers are widely recognised to be at higher risk of homelessness than other young people, will the Government ensure that they receive targeted support – delivered jointly by MHCLG and DfE - as part of efforts to address homelessness after the pandemic?
- The Department for Education has rightly stated that no one should be made to leave care during the pandemic. Will the Housing Secretary follow this example and ensure that no care leaver is evicted from their accommodation (whether local authority, supported housing or private accommodation) whilst the effects of COVID-19 are ongoing?
- Will the Housing Secretary consider amending the priority need criteria so that all care leavers aged up to 25 are eligible to be housed, not just those who can evidence vulnerability?

Young people leaving the care system at higher risk of homelessness

- Young people who have been in the care system can choose to leave from age 16, or more commonly, 18. They are entitled to support from their local authority up to age 25, including with finding accommodation. However evidence from Just for Kids Law casework shows that many struggle to access this due to gatekeeping and rationing of support by local authorities, even prior to COVID-19.
- Care leavers are widely recognised to be more at risk of homelessness than other young people. The Government's rough sleeping strategy cites data from the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) in 2017-18 which shows that 11% of people sleeping rough were in care as a child.ⁱ A survey of 87 care leavers by Centrepoin in 2017 found that 26% have sofa surfed and 14% had slept rough since leaving care.ⁱⁱ
- Care leavers regularly approach Just for Kids Law for support because they are living in unsafe or unsuitable accommodation or their local authority is refusing to recognise their legal status as a care leaver and provide them with accommodation at all. For care leavers aged 21+, unless they can prove they are vulnerable as a result of having been looked after by the local authority as a child – a high threshold which many struggle to meet – they will not be classed as in priority need under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 and therefore will not be eligible to be housed if they are facing homelessness. Even if they do not meet the vulnerability threshold, care leavers are still likely to need support and have fewer options to fall back on (e.g. family members) than other young people their age.

Experiences of young care leavers during the pandemic

Since the onset of COVID-19, care leavers have told us they are experiencing a wide range of financial, emotional and practical problems, including in relation to their accommodation. Loneliness, isolation and

anxiety are common, particularly for those living alone. Some young people are living in unsuitable settings where they are struggling to self-isolate (see case study below for an example of this).

We are also seeing a lack of clarity around carrying out homelessness assessments, in part due to a lack of contact with staff, and a lack of capacity of housing services and children's services to accommodate homeless children. The young people we support are telling us of increased difficulties in getting hold of housing staff as they are working remotely and young people are struggling to get hold of anyone to help them with their housing needs. Some young people were due to move and this has now been put on hold, or want to move because their current accommodation is not safe or suitable for their needs, but are now unable to as their local authority has stopped the process.

We have heard instances of young people being placed in unaffordable accommodation during the pandemic, for example one homeless young person was housed in a hostel costing £245 per week. This is shocking at a time when many young people are unable to work and are experiencing delays and backlogs with accessing benefits.

We are also concerned that accommodation providers are continuing to evict vulnerable young people during the pandemic (as in the case study below), in some cases for minor infractions, and that these young people may then have no alternative accommodation or source of support.

Case study: vulnerable young person in need of housing support

A young person who had been subject to a serious knife attack contacted us for support as he was living in a supported hostel, in an outer London borough, but did not feel safe to return there. He approached another local authority who provided him with alternative hostel accommodation elsewhere. However, he breached the restrictions on residents being allowed outdoors only between 10-4pm and only for one hour during the lockdown and was evicted from the hostel.

The council only gave him one hour to pack and leave and he therefore missed the taxi that was booked to take him 30 miles away to another hostel. He had no further contact from the local authority and had no other option but to sleep in a park with his belongings. After JFKL intervened, the council agreed to find him alternative accommodation. He was placed in a hotel for the night and then provided with a bungalow with no furnishings, our housing solicitor had to make representations to the council before he was provided with any support.

The young person is vulnerable and exhibiting PTSD symptoms. No further support was provided by the local authority until our solicitor made representations, at which point the council provided him with basic white goods and furniture. He is now struggling to access basic mental health services and is receiving no support from the local authority with this.

Case study: vulnerable young person in need of housing support during the lockdown

A young person aged 21 with mental health issues including anorexia, who had been violently attacked by her mother, became street homeless after the council ended the hotel accommodation which they had provided during the coronavirus pandemic, stating that she did not have priority need for housing, which she should have been eligible for on the grounds of her mental health. She was left to sleep in a park at great risk. Despite representation by a mental health team to the council and clear evidence of her vulnerability, the local authority refused to house her. This was in breach of the letter sent to all councils asking them to ensure all rough sleepers were housed during the pandemic.

After our intervention the council agreed that she should be housed and that they would provide accommodation while her case was being assessed. She was provided with emergency accommodation in a hotel. Fights and commotion broke out in the hotel due to somebody trying to break in. She was terrified. She was then told by the caretaker that she had to leave the hotel first thing in the morning as it had only been

booked for one night. She felt traumatised. The local authority had not done what they had promised by providing her with suitable accommodation on an ongoing basis during the coronavirus crisis. After further representation by us, she was finally provided with suitable temporary accommodation.

Case study: challenges of self-isolating for young people in shared accommodation

A young person aged 22 is a care leaver and at Kent University. She was living on campus on her own as everyone else had left after lockdown and wanted to be moved more into the town. She is due to finish university next month and was meant to be provided with her care leaving accommodation but her local authority have not been forthcoming with this.

She became unwell with COVID-19 symptoms and our solicitor informed the local authority of this and they immediately took steps to have her moved. However, she was placed in temporary accommodation which is shared with five other tenants and the young person is concerned that she will not be able to self-isolate. She has told us that the other tenants are not always hygienic and have had various visitors coming in and out of the property. She has described one shared accommodation she had to stay in previously as being run like a brothel.

She is also unable to practice social distancing as the current property has a shared bathroom, kitchen and main door. Her local authority is now looking for independent accommodation for her as her symptoms of COVID-19 have worsened and she was told to self-isolate until 5 May 2020. Our legal team is waiting to see what the local authority comes back with in terms of accommodation.

Recommendations

- Government efforts to support homeless people into permanent housing after the pandemic must not exclude those who are hidden homeless or sofa surfing.
- Similar to measures to protect other vulnerable groups such as domestic violence survivors, targeted support should be delivered to care leavers in recognition of their particular vulnerability as part of efforts to address homelessness after the pandemic. These should be delivered jointly by MHCLG and DfE where necessary. Wherever possible, care leavers should be housed in self-contained rather than shared accommodation to enable them to follow the guidelines on social distancing.
- The Government should amend Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 so that all care leavers aged up to 25 are classed as priority need and therefore eligible to be housed if they are homeless, not just those who are deemed vulnerable as is currently the case.
- The Rough Sleeping Taskforce chaired by Dame Louise Casey should take steps to identify, meet and consult with care leavers to ensure their needs are taken into account.
- During and after the Covid-19 emergency, all families, including homeless families living in temporary accommodation, must be protected against eviction and have access to suitable self-contained accommodation, including households with no recourse to public funds. Local authorities must be given the resources necessary to identify and support households living in unsafe temporary accommodation and provide them with alternative suitable self-contained accommodation where necessary.
- Vulnerable young people including care leavers should not be evicted from any form of housing unless their local authority can guarantee them safe and suitable alternative accommodation.
- Local authority housing services must remain open and be adequately resourced and supported by central government to do so to ensure that all homeless young people who urgently need support are able to access it and do not experience a delay which could cause them harm or put them at risk.

About Just for Kids Law and CRAE

Just for Kids Law (JfKL) is an award-winning UK charity working with and for children and young people to hold those with power to account, and fighting for wider reform by providing legal representation and advice, direct advocacy and support, and campaigning. The Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) merged into Just for Kids Law in 2015 and works with over 100 members to promote children's rights and monitor government implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Contact details

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ⁱ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018, *Rough Sleeping Strategy*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/733421/Rough-Sleeping-Strategy_WEB.pdf

ⁱⁱ Centrepoin, 2017, *From Care to Where: Care Leavers' Access to Accommodation*, <https://centrepoin.org.uk/media/2035/from-care-to-where-centrepoin-report.pdf>