

**Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission & Children and Young
People Scrutiny Commission
Housing Support for Care Leavers - 24/2/22**

Report of Focus Group with Care Leavers in Hackney

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission and Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission are holding a joint session on the 24th February 2022 to review housing support for care leavers in Hackney. To support this review process the Chair and Vice Chair of both Commissions held a focus group meeting with a number of Hackney care leavers on 2nd February 2022.
- 1.2 The focus group was supported by Hackney for Tomorrow (Care Council) and Hackney Corporate Parenting team. In total 10 young people between the ages of 18 and 23 participated.
- 1.3 The following report provides a brief summary of the key issues which emerged from members' discussions with care leavers. The report uses anonymised excerpts to protect the identity of participants. It is also important to note that given the size of this cohort the report does not purport to be representative, but does provide an *illustrative account* of some of the housing and accommodation issues care leavers face.

2. Current Housing Situation

- 2.1 Care leavers in the focus group described living in a range of different types of accommodation. These included:
- Supported accommodation
 - Independent tenancy with Council / Housing Association
 - Independent tenancy in private rented sector
 - A mother and baby unit
 - Supported lodgings (a room in a private home).
- 2.2 Young people lived in accommodation located in Hackney and in neighbouring boroughs. A small number of young people were attending university outside of London and therefore located much further afield.

3. Motivation for care leavers to attend the focus group?

- 3.1 It was clear that housing and accommodation was an issue which resonated strongly among care leavers and reflected in their willingness to participate in the focus group. Without exception, all care leavers described some personal anxiety about their current or future housing situation, or both.

3.2 In this context care leavers came with a range of expectations for their participation focus group. Some care leavers came to highlight some of the problems with their current housing situation:

'In my situation here now, I did not choose to be here, it was imposed on me. I am in a place with my baby, but the place is full of damp and I have taken pictures of this to show people and nothing has happened. I have tried to talk to my social worker and nothing has happened and I am trying to find somewhere else to live.'

Whilst others were hoping to find out more about their rights and entitlements to housing support and accommodation as a care leaver:

'I am hoping to get a better understanding of the services that the borough might provide for care leavers, especially more information about housing offers.'

Many of the care leavers came along to the focus group with the hope that by describing their experiences it would help to improve the support that was provided to other young people in similar circumstances:

'What I hope to get out of this meeting is to help change the way that care leavers and young people are treated in regards to the housing situation.'

'What I want to get out of this is... to help to get more social housing for young people, and vulnerable young people.'

4. Awareness of local housing support offer for care leavers

4.1 All care leavers are required to have a Pathway Plan, a document which they complete with their social worker or personal adviser which sets out their needs, future goals, and what support they will receive. Whilst many of the participants spoke of their own Pathway Plans, there was considerable uncertainty about the nature of housing support on offer and what housing options might be available to them.

4.2 This uncertainty was compounded by the complex system of entitlements for housing support, accommodation and other benefits, which also varied not only in respect of their age, but also in respect of whether they lived in Hackney or outside of the borough.

4.3 Care leavers described a number of specific gaps in their knowledge or understanding about the local offer and entitlements to housing support and accommodation which included:

- Entitlements to housing and other benefits after the age of 21;
- Understanding and knowledge of the social housing quota, how care leavers are put forward and eligibility decided;

- Those in accommodation outside of the borough and entitlement to housing support and other benefits (e.g. council tax exemption/reduction);
- Those attending university out of London and their entitlement to housing returning to Hackney;

4.4 As one care leaver pointed out, not being fully aware of what they were entitled to inhibited their ability to plan ahead and prepare for their future:

'It's not clear to a young person and care leaver what is set up for them and what their options are. This creates a lot of insecurity among care leavers, and it puts you in a bit of a hole as you can't really prepare for what's to come if you don't know what's available and what you can do to prevent your future going down a dark place, you just can't do anything about it. The onus is on the social worker and local services to make this clear to care leavers.'

5. Support from Social Workers (and Personal Advisers)

5.1 Care leavers were asked to indicate how well they felt they were supported by their social workers and/or personal advisers. From this discussion there were a number of themes which emerged:

- Care leavers described mixed experiences of support from their social worker/PA;
- Turnover of social workers/PA made it difficult for care leavers to form relationships;
- Problems communicating with social workers/PA
- Social workers awareness of care leavers entitlements, especially housing support and accommodation options.

5.2 It was clear that a number of care leavers had good relationships with their social workers. These care leavers described social workers as accessible and responsive, and who were able to provide a wide range of practical and emotional support through their journey from care.

'Thankfully I have a really good relationship with my current social worker, much better than previous ones.'

'I have had pretty much a good experience with all my social workers. I know they have changed often but we have a professional relationship and I go to them for advice. My current social worker has been very supportive, sending me cards when I passed my driving test and on my birthday and when I went for an interview [they] helped me prepare for it and when I got the job she sent a congratulations card, these little touches make it feel really personal and that they care.'

'My current social worker is good though, [they] do nice things like send Christmas cards and things and it makes it personal. [They] write things like 'this year has been hard, but you are going to continue to do well!''

- 5.3 Some care leavers present indicated that their social worker was an active advocate for them, and rigorously campaigned for additional support which was positive and welcome:

'The good thing is that my new social worker fights for things for his young people and in terms of housing, I mean I have to message him, but as soon as I do, I get a response and if it's something he doesn't know he will find out from his managers and get back to me. For me my current social worker is pretty good.'

- 5.4 Other care leavers described a more mixed experience with the support that they received from their social worker. One of the most common issues that many care leavers described, was the frequency in which their social worker changed which made it difficult to build relationships with them.

'For care leavers, the one thing that's hard to deal with is that your social workers are changing all the time and I hate that. If you are trying to bond and build a relationship with your social worker you can't because before you know it, they've left and you've got a new one.'

'What can I say, I have had so many social workers, I can remember at least 6, probably 7. I had a good relationship with a social worker but she left. I cried a lot then because I knew that the next social worker would not be as nice as [them].'

'When it comes to my experience of social workers and support, I'd like to point out that one ongoing issue we all have to face is building a relationship with them and then disappearing.'

- 5.5 A further area of concern expressed by some care leavers in the focus groups was the poor communication and limited accessibility of some social worker support:

'A lot of my previous social workers were difficult to communicate with and get hold of, I used to live outside of London so I needed a lot of things but could never get hold of the social worker. When I lived outside of London, it was really hard for me, especially as a young black person growing up in another city, it was so difficult to get hold of someone to talk to.'

'The social worker that I have now is just the communication problems that we have, all this talk about building a good relationship with the social worker is for nothing as she's not communicating. If you try to contact her and leave messages with other people [they] still do not get back to you. [They] do not tell me what's going on, which is a big problem that I am facing right now.'

- 5.6 In relation to housing support and accommodation options, care leavers indicated a number of practice areas where they felt that social worker contribution could be improved

- Awareness of the local housing offer and accommodation options for care leavers;
- Greater clarity and consistency in housing advice;
- More effective and earlier communication of the gravity of the local housing situation.

5.7 A number of care leavers indicated that that some social workers had an incomplete understanding of local housing support and accommodation offer which left them unaware of their entitlements:

'One thing that really does get to me is that I really don't know what I am entitled to and what my rights are and I really do feel that my social worker does not inform me of those kinds of things and I feel left in the dark. I am 23 but there are things which I am only really learning now to the things I am entitled to not just around housing but around other things like mental health support. I feel like I have been living under a rock and not part of the real world. But my main point is the lack of knowledge of my social worker, I mean if [they] don't know what I am entitled to, then how do I know?'

'But whenever I have asked my social worker about housing, like other people here it was like they were playing dumb and just didn't know where to point me. I know that a certain amount of properties get allocated to care leavers but [they] had no idea of that.'

5.8 There were also issues around the clarity and consistency of housing advice provided to care leavers:

'I did have a social worker whilst I was at university who told me I would get housing when I came back to Hackney, but I finished university with a different social worker and the advice is all different.'

5.9 What was apparent in many of the contributions of care leavers however, was that the gravity of the local housing situation had not been communicated to them in an effective or timely way which had raised expectations as to what the borough might be able to provide.

'Just yesterday someone from Hackney Housing was on a zoom with us and told us about our options, which realistically look like the only option is private [rented], but in preparation for housing I just wasn't really prepared because I was fed this line that it was going to be all sunshine and rainbows and everything was going to be ok when they did not tell me the real gravity of the housing situation in Hackney. As young people we should have been prepared for this a lot more, because you guys are technically our parents, and parents should prepare their child for the world and social services as our parents did not really do their job.'

- 5.10 Without recognition of the gravity of the local housing situation, some care leavers found it difficult to comprehend how their needs were assessed and prioritised for local housing options:

'I don't understand about the priority, I mean I have a baby and I am supposed to be a priority? This house is also full of damp and my baby has been coughing a lot, when we go to my friend's places it is fine, but as soon as I am back here he starts coughing, so the house is affecting me here but I am still not a priority.'

'But now I have a son, I want us to have a place which is ours and we can settle. I get that there is a housing crisis, but I still don't know why it's so hard for young people and care leavers to be somewhere safe and raise their children. I just don't understand why this is such a hard thing.'

- 5.11 Care leavers did empathise with social workers however, and did understand that there were wider systemic problems which contributed to the limited housing options that they were presented with.

'I can't get angry with my social worker about our housing situation we are in because its not directly their fault, I mean I voice my opinions and concerns towards her but it's frustrating because I know that if it was in her power to sort things for me, [they] would, but I know that [they] has limited control over the situation. It's not [them] it's the entire system which is setting care leavers up to fail and go into private housing which is too expensive for them.'

6. Young care leavers need to know their rights and assert these

- 6.1 In the context of the limitations of the advice and support available as described above, there was a sense that care leavers needed to be more aware of their rights and entitlements and should be more assertive in challenging social workers

'What I would say is that this has been very much down to how vocal the young person is and knowing what their rights are, because if I was not happy with something then I am going to say something, so I would email my social worker and copy her manager in. So for example, I became pregnant and got moved to a mother and baby unit in Hackney and I was told I would get a 2 bedroom place, but when the time came I was given a 1 bedroom, but after I settled down I started to email my social workers with my concerns and eventually I was moved to a 2 bedroom which was much better. I mean it's not just down to the young person, but you have got to speak out. If there is a young person who is not as vocal then I think that they are going to be left behind.'

'I have to agree with what other care leavers have said, you have to be more vocal with your social worker because they will walk all over you if you are not vocal about your issues.'

6.2 Although the Council has a Children's Rights Officer who can act on behalf of care leavers (and children in care), few of those present in the focus group were aware of this role and the support that was available.

'We had a meeting similar to this to talk about the Children's Rights Officer and pretty much everyone at the meeting had not heard of them or what that was. People need to know how they need to access this form of support other than their social worker.'

7. Care leavers living with uncertainty and anxiety about their future housing

7.1 From the focus group it was apparent that care leavers had a number of anxieties about their housing which was creating considerable anxiety. There were a number of specific areas which were creating anxiety:

- Changing eligibility for housing support past the age of 21;
- Uncertainties of living in the private rented sector;
- Uncertainty of living out of borough;
- The affordability of accommodation and ability to move on;
- Access to social housing through care leavers quota.

7.2 Eligibility for housing support changes for young people after the age of 21. For those not in a settled independent tenancy by this time, this may mean that they need to seek accommodation elsewhere, most likely in the private rented sector. Care leavers were aware of this change in eligibility and the prospective change that it may bring to their housing situation:

'I am 21 and I live in Clapton. It's a mother and baby unit supported accommodation and because I am 21 my tenancy ends in September which means I will have to move on.'

'I've not been told what is next, but I know I can stay here until I am 21 so I have about 2 years left of living here. It's lovely living here, but it's always in the back of my mind that I am just here for 2 years and I really don't know where I am going next.'

7.3 In this context, care leavers were anxious that a 'clock was ticking' in terms of their future housing arrangements and were anxious that they were prepared for such a change when they reached 21, including the options for moving to social rented accommodation (if this was available).

'... it's 19, then it's 20 but by 21, it's too difficult to have your own place. You have got to try your best to give care leavers a place when they are before 21 and make sure that they are responsible to be able to do this. You have to try and give people places earlier. Instead of making people wait, give people a place to live rather than make them wait until past the age of 21 when everything is so much more difficult to find a placement for you.'

'I have heard from you guys today that you can get housing from 18-21. So I think we need to be putting young people on the housing register when they are ready from the age of 18 and not leaving it so late, because when they turn 21 they've missed it. Your social worker needs to be able to judge your maturity and how well you handle your current tenancy, rent and ASB all these typical things.'

- 7.4 With a care leaver quota of 18 social housing lets per annum, the reality for most young people after the age of 21 is to find accommodation within the private rented sector. The transition from supported housing to more independent living was understandably a source of anxiety for care leavers:

'Basically we are being pushed to go into the private sector, I may get some temporary accommodation which is supported accommodation, but even from there I am being told to look for private properties to rent and I am really nervous about that, as I am really not sure what's involved in being in a private property. From what I have heard I hear that you are left by yourself and you don't get that much support and if you get into debt, then you can get into trouble, these are all the things I am hearing, and it looks like I really don't have a choice in all of this.'

- 7.5 In addition, there was a real prospect that for some young people this future housing option could be out of Hackney, or even out of London which could destabilise their existing support networks:

'At the moment, it's stressful, confusing and frustrating because at the moment I don't know where me and my son are going to end up, it could even be out of London and away from my support system here. Not wanting to bring my personal life into it, but I have a lot going on at the moment and this is making things very hard for me.'

- 7.6 Care leavers (alongside many other young people) were also anxious about the level of rents that they would be required to pay when transitioning from education / training to employment.

'and now I am back in Hackney, but Hackney won't do anything because I am too old. So at the moment I am just trying to work but that's all so ridiculous as my rent is so ridiculous, but this is the only thing I can do, what else can I do?'

- 7.7 Care leavers were aware that if they managed to get a social housing let through the care leaver social housing quota this would potentially offer them longer-term stability and affordability and were therefore keen to be nominated for such lets. For a number of young people present, the eligibility and decision making process for care leavers to be granted a social let within the quota was not clear:

'It seems like the Board where you get nominated for a flat is always changing its agenda, changing what they want or what they expect the young person to be, so that's really nerve racking thinking am I going to be nominated or will they change'

their expectations of the young person and I don't meet that. I can't afford to live in London where rents are rocketing, my only option is to get a flat here. So I am really nervous.'

'I mean you can do everything right, follow all the rules and live like you are with no complaints, but you still might not get a house. What are the decisions being taken and what can a young person do to get a house? Who makes the decision and how is the decision taken between who gets a house and who doesn't? I got a letter from housing to say that there are other young people more in need and that's why I didn't get the place, so I really don't know what determines who gets a place and who doesn't.'

8. Supported (semi-independent) accommodation

8.1 Most care leavers participating in the focus group were in some form of supported accommodation. Care leavers raised three main issues in relation to their supported housing:

- Degree of choice where they were placed;
- The cost of provision and ability to move on to employment;
- Level of support provided on-site.

8.2 A consistent theme in the response of care leavers was that for many of them in reality, there was very little choice in the range of supported accommodation for them. For some young people this worked out well, but for others, less so.

'At the end of last year I got offered supported accommodation, I was told that I either live here or nowhere and that this was my only option. Luckily, I fell in love with the place when I saw it so I was quite happy with the outcome, but it was shocking to think that if I didn't like this place, I had no idea what would be next or what I would do. I am thankful that I am in this situation because I know that other care leavers have not been as lucky as me.'

'In the semi independent accommodation I was in before, the rent was very high and I don't want to talk about that. I had to find somewhere private where I could afford the rent, but they did not want me to go there, they wanted me to be here so they pushed me to be here.'

8.3 A significant area of discussion within the focus group was the relative cost of supported accommodation (compared to social housing) and how this inhibited young people from moving on to university or employment:

'I was thinking about when I did live in supported housing and now I can compare that to living in a flat, the one big thing is the rent and how this is, it's just a bit ridiculous. I just don't think I was supported in the best way before moving on, and now I am living in my own accommodation, I pay half of what I used to pay. When I was in supported accommodation there was no thinking about going to

university or getting a job or anything like that because as soon as you start working for so many hours you have to start to pay your own rent and from there it's really easy to get into debt and it is really stressful, I mean very stressful.'

'Obviously rent has increased over the past few years, which is how long I have been living by myself more or less. But I am paying half of what I was paying in supported accommodation. I was paying £1,200 a month in supported accommodation but where I am now in social housing I pay around £530 a month, so you see the difference, it's massive. Opportunity wise, it really does limit you. You can't do much, you feel like you have to sit in the dark and stay on benefits because that is the only way you can afford to actually live there.'

7.7 Care leavers were also questioned the flexibility and availability of support that was available within supported accommodation:

'In terms of the actual support, I mean I understand that the rent would be a bit higher because of the additional support you are getting from the support worker, but to be honest, it's more like you have to approach them with your issues, it's hard to build a relationship with them and for many of them, as soon as they leave, that's it I am done, I am going home and they don't care anymore. This is the reality of what it feels like and the level of support that you get is really questionable as well.'

'In terms of the support that's available for you in supported accommodation, I used to live in a complex needs place and support was supposed to be 24-7 staff and I am supposed to be able to talk to them and be able to get support at any time I needed. But what I found was that with issues during the day they would be able to support you, but when it came to then switching over at night, it was not the same story and they were not that helpful.... so the support was not there if you needed it. I mean in the hostels and supported accommodation a lot can go on in those places, where you might need support so it's concerning. I feel like for the price, the support is not for the same level if you get what I mean.'

9. Staying in Hackney

9.1 Many care leavers are cared for outside of the borough. Although many care leavers in this focus group indicated that they wanted to return back to Hackney, they realised that this might be a difficult option for them given the local housing landscape.

'I would love to come back to Hackney but with the gentrification there has been the displacement of loads of communities and what i think is really sad is that for care leavers, even though you may have been moved around a lot in this area, this area might be the only sense of normality you might have. I would love to come back to Hackney but I just dont think it's an option.'

9.2 Even for those young people currently living in Hackney, there was a recognition that the limited housing options for care leavers (and young people in general) may

require them to seek accommodation outside of the borough which would have implications for their existing social networks:

'I would also like to stay in Hackney, but it's just getting too expensive. With the gentrification and cost of living, it doesn't look like I will be able to stay for much longer.'

'The previous care leaver has said a lot of what i wanted to say, in particular, housing and finding a home in Hackney worries me quite a bit, like a lot of people living in Hackney we see a lot of new flats being built, there's an increase in gentrification which is driving up rents in London and the cost of living in London also. You ask anyone where they are going to live, are you going to live outside of London, most are saying yes and that is very scary because what if all your social networks and all your family, friends and love ones are in Hackney and then you have to move out, then it feels like you are really having to fend for yourself.'

- 9.3 For those care leavers who chose to go to university outside of London and seeking to return to Hackney, this was felt to be particularly unfair, as most would also be over the age of 21 to be able to qualify for housing support.

'There was a situation where before I went to university outside of London, and I was living there for 3 years and before my old Social Worker told me that I would be able to get support for housing and things when I got back from university, but when I got back I don't really get any support and now I am told that I am too old.'

'Yes, I did an extra year in college so that's why when I finished I was 22. It's just so unfair, there is such a big push around education and for care leavers to make something out of our lives and to be productive and then you do it like going to university, and then there is no real help or reward for it.'

- 9.4 Living out of borough also meant that young people were not entitled to the same array of benefits and entitlements as those living in the borough:

'In Hackney I don't have to pay up until the age of 25 as a care leaver, but in Newham I have to pay. You cannot imagine how much they are charging me for a small studio. I have been trying to get in touch with my social worker to let her know that I just cannot afford the council tax here in Newham because I am not working and just getting the support from Universal Credit. This is how I am surviving, but the money they are asking for Council Tax would mean that I would have to pay them all the support I am getting from Universal Credit.'