



GUIDE TO LEAVING CARE

LONDON BOROUGH OF MERTON

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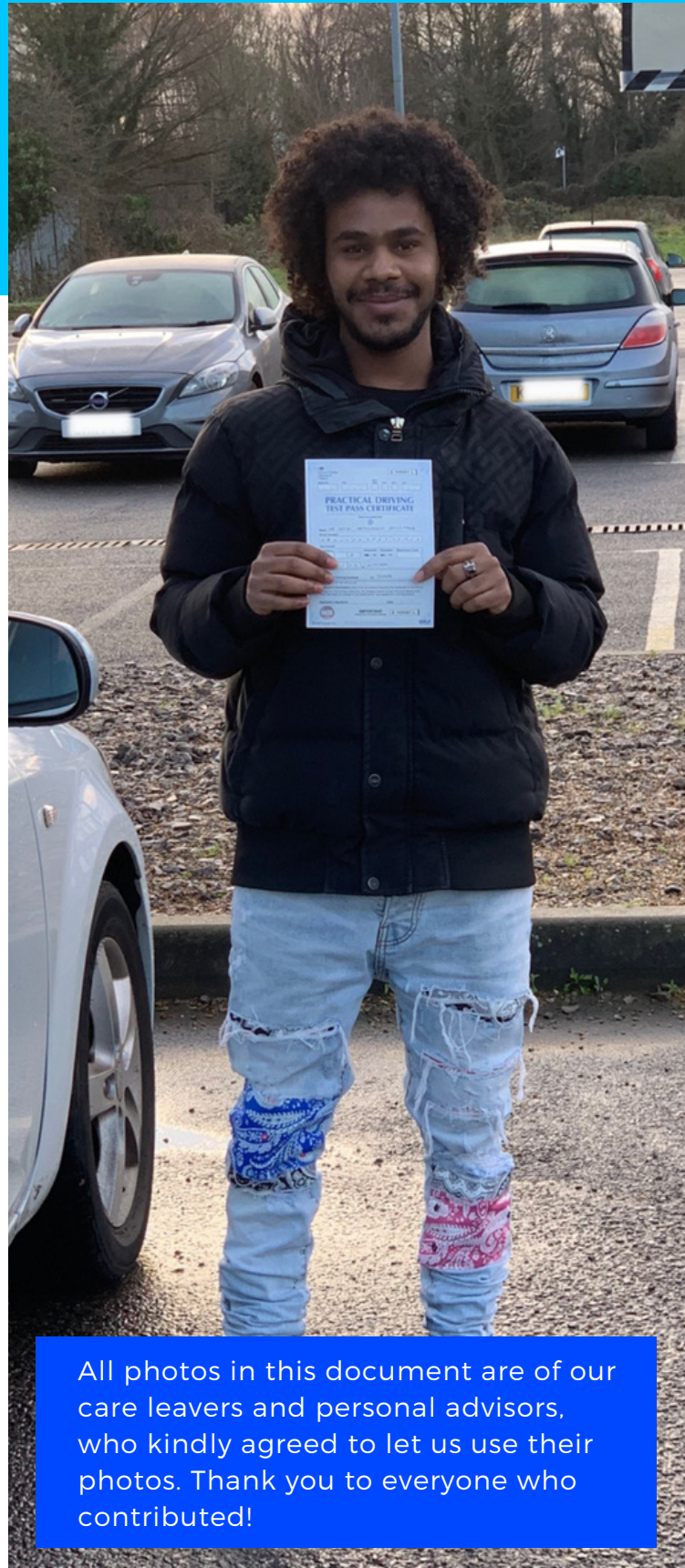
INTRODUCTION

This guide is for you if you are 16 or over and are currently, or have been, a child in care with Merton. Leaving care can be a daunting time and it's likely you'll have lots of questions about what happens next. This guide should give you lots of the information you need as well as outlining your rights and entitlements and explaining how we can continue to support you into adulthood.

When you reach your 18th birthday you will no longer be a child in care with Merton but that doesn't mean that we stop caring about you. We can continue to work with you up to the age of 25 to help you achieve your goals and build the life that you want. There are lots of ways they can do this which are outlined in this guide. Whatever you choose to do, we will be with you every step of the way.

If there is any part of this guide that you're not sure about, your social worker or personal advisor will be able to help you.

You can also access this information on our website or via our Care Leaver app.



All photos in this document are of our care leavers and personal advisors, who kindly agreed to let us use their photos. Thank you to everyone who contributed!

YOUR RIGHTS

THE LAW STATES THAT:

CARE LEAVERS AGED 16-17

·For care leavers aged 16 and 17 the local authority (in this case, the London Borough of Merton) is under an absolute duty to support you (as well as providing you with a personal adviser), which continues to apply once you reach the age of 18.

CARE LEAVERS AGED 18-20

·For care leavers aged 18-20 there is a proactive duty on local authorities to keep in touch with care leavers.

CARE LEAVERS AGED 21-25

·For care leavers aged 21-25 there is a duty on local authorities to assess care leavers' needs and develop and keep under review a pathway plan, only where a young person requests support.

If you decide you do not want support from us but later on you change your mind, you can still contact us any time up until your 25th birthday. You can call our Duty Line on 0208 545 4293 where a Personal Advisor will be able to give immediate advice, as well as considering with you whether you need to be matched with a personal advisor for ongoing support.

TERMINOLOGY

Different types of support are available depending on your circumstances, the help that you need, and whether you are an Eligible, Relevant, Former Relevant or Qualifying young person. More detail about these definitions are below.

Eligible

A young person who is aged 16 or 17 and,

- is currently a child in care with Merton
- was a child in care with Merton on or after their 16th birthday
- has been a child in care with Merton for at least 13 weeks since they were 14 years old

Former Relevant

A young person who was either Eligible or Relevant and has now turned 18 years

Relevant

A young person who was Eligible but left care while aged 16 – 17 years.

A young person will no longer be 'Relevant' if they return to their birth family for 6 months or more before their 18th birthday.

Qualifying

A young person who was a child in care their on 16th birthday, but for less than the 13 weeks since their 14th birthday.

This includes other accommodations not organised by Merton, for example hospitals, youth detention centres, and private fostering.

We recognise that these categories can be confusing. If you feel unsure, please reach out to your Personal Advisor or Social Worker.

TERMINOLOGY

Eligible, Relevant and Former Relevant Young People

The support outlined in this guide applies to all Eligible, Relevant and Former Relevant young people entitled to a service under the provisions of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, with extended provisions under the Social Work Act 2017.

Qualifying Young People

The support outlined here will also be available to any Qualifying young person if the need for such support is identified during a needs assessment, and there are no alternative sources of support available to that young person. Needs assessments in Merton are undertaken via a Pathway Plan. A Pathway Plan will be completed by a Social Worker or Personal Advisor with any Qualifying young person who seeks support from the Local Authority up to the age of 25, so that the appropriate support can be identified.

If you are not sure which type of support you are entitled to, you can speak to your social worker or personal advisor. You can also contact the Duty Personal Advisor who will be able to discuss this with you.



WHAT DOES MY PERSONAL ADVISOR DO?

We want you to have plenty of time to prepare for independence, so we aim to match you with a personal advisor shortly after your 16th birthday. You will continue to work with your social worker until you are 18, but your personal advisor will start to help you to think about your goals and aspirations. They will also help you to think about things like cooking, budgeting, setting up and looking after your home.

Your personal advisor will visit you at least once every 8 weeks up until your 21st birthday. They can visit more often than 8 weeks if you'd like this. Visiting more often can be included in your Pathway Plan if this is something you would like.

Your personal advisor will complete a Pathway Plan with you which sets out your needs, wishes and goals. The Pathway Plan is unique to you and outlines all of the things Merton are doing with you to help you to be happy and healthy; in education, work or training; managing your finances; having a safe place to live; seeing your family and friends; and knowing what is happening in your local community. Your personal advisor can also help with specialist areas like if you are expecting to become a parent, or if you are an unaccompanied migrant young person.



WHAT DOES MY PERSONAL ADVISOR DO?

If you are worried or unsure about any of these areas of your life, your Pathway Plan will help us to plan how we will sort things out together. For example, you might want to go to university or find an apprenticeship, your Pathway Plan will outline how we will help you to achieve this.

When you reach your 21st birthday your personal advisor will think with you about whether you'd like us to keep supporting you. Your personal advisor will also ask how often you'd like to be visited and what you'd like help with.

To give you an idea of what to expect, here are two of our wonderful personal advisors to tell you a little bit about themselves...

A LETTER FROM MARTINA, PERSONAL ADVISOR AT MERTON

My name is Martina. I have worked within a social care setting for 15 years and have been a PA for over 10 years.

As a Senior PA I have case load and support a wide range of young people with different needs.

My role as a Senior PA is to support care leavers from the age of 18 years to 25 years with their housing, education, and their emotional wellbeing.

As a corporate parent our responsibility is to provide care, support and safeguarding to all our care leavers.



Over the last 10 years I feel the main importance of working with our care leavers is building positive relationships and giving care leavers the tools to drive their own future.

I want to listen and understand a young person's dreams and wishes and always be transparent to enable them to develop skills that will help when they are ready to live more independently in adulthood.

PAs also support care leavers who are in custody and with their resettlement back into the community.

We also support care leavers with young children, and we work with asylum seekers and support their journey through the care system and emotional wellbeing.

It is very rewarding and it's a privilege to try and make a difference in our young people's lives. If you are passionate about supporting and helping young people and making a difference in their lives, being a PA is very rewarding and the job is for you.

My Mantra has always been:

“Making the closure in their case a more positive experience than the experience they felt coming into the care system.”

A LETTER FROM TAYO, PERSONAL ADVISOR AT MERTON

Hello

My name is Tayo Phillips. I work in Merton Social Care, 16+ Team and I am a Senior Personal Advisor for Care Leavers. I have been working in this role for the past eight years.

My main job as a Personal Advisor is to assist Care Experienced Young Adults to develop skills that will help them to live independently at a time when they are ready to do so.

As a young adult, you can make your own decisions and choices. However, I am there to support and advise you with making the right decisions for you. I will continue working with you until you turn 21, or up to the age 25 if you need us.

I provide practical, social, and emotional support for young people; guiding them through education and job choices, helping them to find the right accommodation and providing advice on day to day living experiences.



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Preparing for Independence

Before your 18th birthday your personal advisor and your foster carer can help with...

- Setting up a bank account (if your immigration status prevents you from setting up a bank account, we will support you to access alternative finances)
- Learning how to manage finances and budget
- Learning how to cook
- Learning how to shop for food and house supplies

Merton also run Preparing for Independence and Managing Money workshops which you can attend.

You will have access to an Income Maximisation Officer, Shahnewazuddin Reza, who will be able to give you advice about benefits and managing your money. You can reach out to Reza on 0208 545 4759



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Health and Emotional Wellbeing

Your personal advisor can...

- Tell you where you can get information about intimacy and healthy relationships
- Help you to sign up with a GP and dentist in your local area
- Give you information about counselling services that are available locally
- Help you set up free prescriptions
- If you need support with anything else, your personal adviser can help you to access services that are available in your area

You will receive a booklet from the Named Nurse for Looked After Children, Penny Marchant, when you reach 18 years, this will include information about your health history to take with you into adulthood so that all your health information is in one place. You can contact Penny on: 0208 545 4246

If you are on a low income or in receipt of Income Support, Income Based Employment and Support, Job Seekers Allowance or Universal Credit, you can apply for a Health Credit Certificate [HC2 or HC3] to support free dental care, eye care and prescriptions.



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Making Friends and Developing Relationships

Join our Children in Care Council! *Our Voice* meets fortnightly on Wednesday evenings at our Care Leavers Hub in Mitcham where you'll have an opportunity to socialise, participate in activities, and have your say about services for children in care and care leavers in Merton. If you are interested in joining *Our Voice* you can either speak to your personal advisor or contact our Participation Team on 0208 274 5878.

The Corporate Parenting Service also runs events throughout the year for our young people including a summer BBQ and a festive party in December. Come along and meet staff and other young people. The staff are hoping for a rematch after last year's Tug of War!

Your personal advisor will help you to maintain or regain contact with people who are special to you or who cared for you in the past, like former foster carers or family members.

We can link you with a mentor too, to support you with additional guidance, motivation, emotional support and role modelling!



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Leisure and Participating in Your Community

Your personal advisor can help you to find local groups in your area with other young people who have similar interests to you.

Merton can provide you with £10 per week for a leisure activity e.g., gym membership. Alternatively, we will provide you with £500 per year for a holiday or wellbeing activity.

We encourage you to attend our Care Leavers Hub, located at the David Nichols Centre in Mitcham, where you can access support from a duty personal advisor, access a computer and printer, use kitchen facilities, a stocked pantry and socialise with other care leavers!



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Housing and Accommodation

There are a number of different options for accommodation and housing post 18. Your personal advisor will start to explore these with you shortly after your 16th birthday so that there is plenty of time for you to think about what you would like to do. Decisions about where you live will always be made with you, and there are different options available depending on your individual needs and preferences.

Staying Put

This is where, if you and your foster carer/s agree, you can stay with your former foster family post 18. If this is something you would like to consider, your personal advisor or social worker will be able to discuss this with you.

Semi Independent Accommodation

This often means you will have your own private room in a house with other young people and shared kitchen facilities, bathroom and living space.

All young people in semi independent accommodation will have a key worker who will visit regularly to support with preparing for your own tenancy. Key workers can help with things like budgeting, paying bills, shopping, learning to cook and clean, and looking after yourself.

Independent Housing

When you and your personal advisor think that you are ready for your own independent housing, we can support you to apply for social housing via Merton's Housing Department. Care experienced adults are considered 'priority need' and you can be supported to bid for a property that meets your needs. Bidding for your own tenancy can take time, your personal advisor will be able to discuss the process with you in more detail.

Rent Deposit Scheme

You may prefer to find your own property via the private rental market. If you decide to do this Merton can support you by paying for your first month's rent and deposit.

WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Supported Lodgings

This is where you rent a bedroom in another person's home and that person helps you with day to day living and getting ready for managing your own home in the future. Merton will find a supported lodgings placement for you if this is your preferred option. This is usually a good option if you don't want to remain with your former foster carers but you don't feel ready to live independently.

Shared Lives

Shared Lives is similar to Supported Lodgings, but with Shared Lives you will live with someone who is trained to support young adults with additional needs. You will be supported with day-to-day living depending on your needs, as well as being prepared for independence if this is something you would like to explore for the future.

You might not feel ready to move into your own private or social housing tenancy because of your mental or physical health, or perhaps you need some extra support because of additional learning needs. If this is the case, we can look for Shared Lives accommodation for you.

Setting Up and Settling In

You will also receive a Setting Up Home Allowance of up to £3000 when you move into your own tenancy. This is to help with things like furniture and kitchen appliances. We can also provide additional funding to cover the cost of curtains and carpets.

We will also provide you with a suitcase and boxes and pay for the cost of a removal van to help you move into your new home. Your personal advisor will provide you with a starter pack of essential food items to help you settle in.



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Managing Your Money

If you are eligible for benefits your personal advisor will support you to apply for these 6 weeks before your 18th birthday.

If you are not able to access benefits, for example if you are an unaccompanied young person seeking asylum and you do not yet have leave to remain in the UK, we will provide you with a weekly subsistence.

All care experienced adults living in the London Borough of Merton will be exempt from paying Council Tax.

We will also pay for important documents including applying for a passport if you don't have one, citizenship applications, travel documents, provisional driver's licence and birth certificate.

Additional financial support can be considered as part of your Pathway Plan to cover travel costs to your family and your former foster carers.

Each year on your birthday you will receive a £25 birthday allowance which will be paid into your bank account up until your 25th birthday, with the exceptions of your 18th and 21st birthdays when you will receive £50.

If you do not have a phone, we can provide you with a low cost phone.



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Education, Employment or Training

We want to help you to succeed, whether this means pursuing higher education, finding an apprenticeship or training, or gaining employment. You will have a Personal Education Plan developed with the Virtual School up to age 17, and this will be incorporated into your Pathway Plan to take forward with you from age 18 onwards.

The Virtual School can support you to identify a course of study in line with your aspirations. Your personal advisor can also help you to apply for Student Loans. Your course provider may also offer additional support to care leavers, your personal advisor can help you to explore this.

We will support you financially with additional costs as outlined below for as long as you continue in education. This means that if you complete an Undergraduate Degree, for example, and you decide to pursue a Masters Degree, we will continue to support you.

Full Time Education

If you decide to pursue a full time further education course (12+ hours per week) we will provide you with:

- £5 per week to cover the cost of wifi
- Up to £250 per year for course clothing, books and equipment
- Up to £15 per week for personal care costs
- A laptop

If you are aged under 19 and in full time education you can apply for a free Oyster card from Transport for London. If you are aged 19 or over you can apply for a subsidised Oyster card.

If you are in full-time higher education and your term-time accommodation is not available during the holidays, and you are not able to return to your foster carer, we will either provide you with accommodation during the holidays or we will provide financial assistance for accommodation you have found for yourself. We will continue to do this for as long as you continue to pursue your course of education.

Students in Higher Education will also receive a bursary of £500 per term, payable at the beginning of each term. An additional payment of £750 will be made to each student at the beginning of the summer break. Total per year £2250.

WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Part time education

If you are in part time education under (12 hours per week) we will provide you with £3 per hour of teaching time (up to a maximum of £21 per week).

Employment

We can provide you with a local bus pass to help you to look for work. We can also refer you to our Toward Employment Service who will keep you informed about job opportunities.

We can also help cover the cost of clothing for interviews, your personal advisor will be able to give you more information about this.

Apprenticeships

If you are undertaking an apprenticeship, our Income Maximisation Officer can complete a financial assessment with you and we can provide a top up amount to ensure you have an income that at least matches the rate of minimum wage.

In addition to the above, all young people undertaking apprenticeships will receive a bursary of £3000 from the Education Funding and Skills Agency, Your PA or Social Worker can help you to apply for this.



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Refugee and Unaccompanied Migrant Young People

As a refugee or migrant young person, you will have general access to leaving care support as outlined in this guide. However, your entitlement to benefits and education can be affected by your immigration status, your personal advisor will explore this with you and agree the details of how we can help in your pathway plan.

We recognise that you may have some needs that are different to other care leavers, and we will do our best to support you with these. We will do this by:

- Giving you information and supporting you to access legal advice
- Giving you information about where to access advice about your immigration status
- Providing advice and support to access appropriate educational courses, for example English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes
- Support with transitioning to adulthood

- Supporting you to access public funds and other services where applicable
- Giving you financial assistance while you are awaiting a decision from the Home Office



WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Young Person becoming a Parent

If you are a young parent, we will take an interest in your child/ren and support you to access appropriate services for them and for you. This is an exciting time, and we will be there to help you.

If you are expecting to become a parent, your personal advisor will develop a plan with you and support you to prepare for the birth of your baby. With your agreement, your personal advisor will talk to your midwife and make sure you know about all the health services available to you. Your personal advisor will be able to help you to apply for any benefits you will be entitled to as a parent, as well as any additional grants, e.g., Maternity Grant. During your pregnancy we will also provide you with £150 to help cover the cost of maternity clothing.

Once your baby is born your personal advisor can help you to find local groups and a nursery.

If you are in education you may be able to access childcare support via Care to Learn, Student Finance for Higher Education students, NHS bursaries or via subsidised college crèches.

You can also speak to your personal advisor who will consider your needs and circumstances, particularly if you are unable to access the above avenues and are in full-time education.

When your child reaches 2 years of age you will also be able to apply for 15 hours free childcare.

WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Support for LGBTQIA+ Young People

If you identify as an LGBTQIA+ young person, you are able to access additional support through local groups:

Student Spectra

Student Spectra provide support to young people who identify as LGBTQIA+, are between the ages of 13-18, and live within the London area.

Student Spectra provide one-to-one counselling sessions online, via Zoom. They also run Pyramid Youth Group, a space for young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ to meet with one another and build friendships. The youth group is run by youth workers, support staff and volunteers, and takes place both in person and online.

To learn more about Student Spectra, visit their website:

www.spectra-student.org.uk

Or email them:

Uni-T@spectra-london.org.uk

LGBTQ+ Youth in Care

LGBTQ+ Youth in Care are an organisation who provide advice and support to care experienced young people who identify as LGBTQIA+.

LGBTQ+ Youth in Care run a care network, made up of care leavers, local authorities, care organisations, residential care providers, independent fostering agencies, supported accommodation providers and any other organisations providing support to LGBTQIA+ young people in care. This network meets to help build a better, more inclusive care system for LGBTQIA+ young people.

LGBTQ+ Youth in Care also provide support and advice for any young people who get in touch. Simply email:

lgbyouthincare@gmail.com

Their website has many useful resources, including information about LGBTQIA+ youth groups across the country.

To find out more, visit their website:

www.lgbyouthincare.com

IF YOU NEED SUPPORT FROM ADULT SERVICES

You might have additional needs which mean you need to continue having a social worker past the age of 18, for example if you have a disability. If this is the case we will, with your agreement, make a referral to Adults Services before you turn 18 so that the right support can be arranged in advance.

We can also support you to access additional support as an adult. The Merton Multi-Agency Transitions Protocol – Preparing for Adulthood outlines the support that is available to you, for example if you have additional language, health or special educational needs. This protocol is available via your social worker or PA, and is currently stored on the Merton Intranet.

IF YOU'RE NOT HAPPY...

You can also speak to an independent advocate if you are not happy with the advice we give you. We can arrange an advocate for you which will be provided by Jigsaw4U, alternatively you can contact them yourself on 0208 687 1384.

Your PA or social worker will provide you with details of their manager so that you can contact them if you are unhappy about any aspect of the service you receive from Merton.

Alternatively, you can contact our Complaints Team:

Telephone: 020 8545 3086

Email: childrenservicescomplaints@merton.gov.uk

YOU CAN ALSO ACCESS INFORMATION WE HOLD ABOUT YOU...

If you'd like to access your files your social worker or PA can support you to do this. Your social worker or PA can also review your file with you and help you to understand your journey with us. Alternatively you can make a Subject Access Request by completing the request form that is available online at:

<https://www.merton.gov.uk/council-and-local-democracy/data-protection-and-freedom-of-information/ask-for-information-we-hold-about-you>