



**WOKINGHAM  
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**Guidance on working  
with hard to reach Care Leavers**

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**Owner:** Isabel Prinsloo, Service Manager for Corporate Parenting.  
Louisa Wiseman, Team Manager, Here4U

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## Guidance on working with hard to reach care leavers

As a corporate parent, Wokingham Borough Council has a duty to provide support and guidance to all Care Leavers post-18, up to the age of 25. The statutory responsibilities of councils are set out in the [Children Act 1989](#), including through amendments made by the [Children \(Leaving Care\) Act 2000](#), the [Children and Families Act 2014](#) and the [Children's Act 1989: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers vol 3](#).

The [Children Social Work Act 2017](#) made additional provisions for care leavers, and outlined in law for the first time what it means for a local authority to be a good corporate parent:

*"The importance of working in collaboration with young people and families and not 'doing to them'; if we do get things wrong we will say so, and we will actively encourage young people to tell us."*

### What you will find in this guidance:

- The different types of care leavers and the duties on the Local Authority to keep in touch and seek engagement.
- The different categories of hard to reach care leavers.
- Expected activity around staying in touch.

## 1. Categories of Care Leavers and duties regarding staying in touch

**1.1 Qualifying** - these are typically young people who were in care for 13 weeks post age 14 and up to a day post-16, however then returned home to parental care before they turned 18; whereby the care order or Section 20 was discharged (exceeding a period of 6 months prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday), and they remained out of care for 6 months and up to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

This would also typically include young people who were subject to Special Guardianship Orders (SGO). The support duties to this cohort is comprised of advice and guidance. They will not have an allocated PA or be subject to pathway planning between the ages of 18 and 20.

They will only be subject to pathway planning if they progress to Higher Education. The duty to stay in touch with this cohort is much reduced, and only needs to take place on an annual basis if they do not reach out to the service in the 12 months prior. They can however reach out at any time to seek guidance and advice from the service.

**1.2 Former relevant** - these are typically young people who:

- were in care for 13 weeks post age 14 and up to a day post-16;
- remained in care up to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday; or
- came back into care prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and remained until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

These young people will have an allocated personal advisor who will take the lead in supporting them when they turn 18. They will be subject to formal pathway planning as a minimum up to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, when they can decide if they want to continue with formal pathway planning or whether they want to conclude this and reach out as and when needed.

The aim is to help our young people become more independent as they get older and therefore the tapering off of our level of support reflects this journey and progress. For this cohort we have a clear duty to make all efforts to remain in touch at a minimum of every 8 weeks.

This can be via phone calls, texts, emails etc. However, the frequency of keeping in touch can be amended and changed based on the young person's progress toward independence and in line with their wishes and feelings. This is captured in their pathway plan and the frequency will be adapted in line with this, e.g., every three months, every four months or every six months.

**1.3 Former relevant Care Leavers 21+** - For young people subject to pathway planning post-21, typically where they are in higher education, the frequency of staying in touch will be agreed with the young person. This cohort of young people generally have low support needs and continue to have formal pathway planning purely because of remaining in Higher Education. The frequency of staying in touch can therefore be much reduced.

**1.4 Local Offer young people** - This cohort are young people who no longer require formal pathway planning from the age of 21 and up to their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday when the Local Authority's Care Leaver duty concludes. The duty to stay in touch with this cohort is much reduced and only need to take place on an annual basis if they did not reach out to the service in the 12 months prior. These care leavers can however contact the service as frequently as they wish for guidance and advice.

## **2. Categories of hard to reach Care Leavers**

**2.1 Not in touch** - young people who have not been in contact with the service or who are not contactable by the service for a period of 6 to 12 months. This can also be where it is deemed that the young person is acting 'out of character' with their contact based on previous levels of engagement.

**2.2** Young people who are **inconsistent** in their contact and engagement with the service.

**2.3 Missing** – These are care leavers that go missing, rather than not maintaining contact. This is where the service do not know where this young person is, and have no information to help inform our understanding of what their living arrangements and daily circumstances are.

Examples include former-UASC care leavers that have received a negative asylum claim or are at risk of doing so and go missing to avoid deportation, those that are wanted by the

police for investigation into criminal matters, or those that are fleeing domestic abuse or exploitation.

Allocated Personal Advisors and their managers must assess the circumstances in order to discern whether a care leaver is missing rather than not maintaining contact. This includes, but is not limited to, whether a care leaver has gone missing from their placement, whether they have not attended college/university, whether this is out of character, and whether their family or other agencies have had recent contact with them.

- 2.4 Care Leavers who do not want a service** – This cohort is generally young people who have found their journey through care difficult and are mistrustful of professionals, or young people who have become very independent and self-sufficient from a young age and find that ongoing formal support by the time they turn 18 causes them frustration.

They can therefore take the position that they do not want support and wish the Local Authority to back away. All efforts need to be made to try and find a compromise if possible, such as reduced frequency of contact. As adults they have a right to their views, wishes and feelings.

### **3. Expected actions to meet our duty to stay in touch:**

- 3.1 Not in touch or difficult to engage care leavers** – These are typically young people who have not had any contact with the Local Authority for a period of 6 to 12 months or longer. Firstly, the service must explore if there is another person that can be contacted who can ensure that the young person is safe and well.

This could be a former foster carer (who may still be in contact with the young person), a family member or any other significant person in the young person's life who can reassure the service that the young person is safe and well.

Contact with family or other significant individuals in the young person's life should balance the right to privacy as an adult against assessed risks and vulnerabilities. Assessed risk to self or others must be considered when taking the decision to override the right to confidentiality.

If the alternatives don't offer a solution; A Disengaged / Hard to engage risk assessment needs to be completed (see [Appendix A](#)). The PA needs to consider their individual needs and vulnerabilities such as mental health, domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, substance use and learning needs. The PA also needs to complete a pathway review to capture this, as well as any actions from the risk assessment. This will need a stop and think discussion with senior manager oversight.

- 3.2 Inconsistent** – There are some care leavers who do not always maintain regular contact with the service, and the council has a duty to reach out and encourage an ongoing relationship. It is recommended as part of their pathway review that the PA explores what is the best method of staying in touch that will achieve the best success in keeping in touch (e.g. text, WhatsApp, email, calling to speak to the young person).

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The PA needs to keep to this frequency regardless of whether the young person is consistent in responding. Alternative ways to secure contact is to reach out on birthdays and during specific cultural important festivities and letting young people know of interesting events planned by the service.

It is more reassuring where we know that a young person will reach out if they are in need. These young people will generally have a pattern regarding when they reach out or how long it is before we are able to make contact with them.

Young people who do not reach out when they may need support is a major concern. It is therefore crucial that PA's record when a young person is unresponsive to the service's attempts to contact them, and when this exceeds beyond timescales.

There should be formal consideration of whether this young person has changed from 'inconsistent' to 'not in touch'. The appropriate not in touch actions will then need to be followed.

- 3.3 Missing** – Care Leavers that are assessed to be missing must be reported to the team manager within 3 working days and to the relevant Service Manager within 5 working days. Where there are assessed vulnerabilities and risks, the reporting timescale should be reduced proportionally.

Allocated Personal Advisors and their managers should discern whether a care leaver is missing, rather than not maintaining contact, through assessing the circumstances including but not limited to; whether a care leaver has gone missing from their placement, whether they have not attended college/university, whether this is out of character and whether their family or other agencies have had recent contact with them.

Personal Advisors need to consider the young person's individual needs and vulnerabilities such as mental health, domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, substance use and learning needs. The assessment should include any contact with relatives and other agencies and relevant information from this communication. Contact with family to discuss the individual that is missing should balance the right to privacy as an adult against assessed risks and vulnerabilities.

Assessed risk to self or others should be considered when taking the decision to override the right to confidentiality. **A Disengaged / Hard to engage risk assessment** needs to be completed (see [Appendix A](#)). Care leavers assessed to be missing rather than not in contact with the service should be **reported as a missing** adult to the Police Missing Persons Unit local to their address.

A photograph of the young person should be provided to Police, if available (this does not need to wait for 24 hours if the care leaver is deemed to be vulnerable or at risk). This report should include reporting specific vulnerabilities, when a professional or family member last saw them, and why they are assessed to be missing.

The **Home Office** should be informed when any former-UASC go missing (this should help if missing former-UASC are in other Home Office regions). This will also need a **stop and think discussion** with Senior Manager oversight. The PA will continue to attempt contact with the care leaver on a frequency agreed by management, with regular management oversight recorded.

For the duration that the young person is reported missing, the PA will continue to review the pathway plan every 6 months. The plan needs to capture ongoing efforts to make contact and any progress from other agencies. Should the young person be found and located, the PA must meet with them as soon as possible and trigger a pathway review to consider their circumstances and needs at that time.

PA's will inform their team manager and in turn the Service Manager when a care leaver ceases to be missing. The case will remain allocated to the PA on Mosaic until the care leaver reaches the age of 21, at which point a decision will be made as to whether the case will transfer to the local offer.

**3.4 Young people declining a service** - When a care leaver has expressed clearly that they do not want a service, the PA needs to offer to do a pathway review to clearly capture why the young person does not want the service. This can be an opportunity to explore the possibility of reduced contact frequency which can help to alleviate some of the frustrations experienced.

Alternatively, the service should explore whether there is another person that can be contacted to keep the service apprised of the young person's wellbeing. This may be a former foster carer (who may still be in contact with the young person), a family member or any other significant person in the young person's life who can reassure the service that they are safe and well.

If, however, the young person is adamant and not agreeable to the alternatives, the final pathway plan should outline where they can go for support should they need to, and capture that they can reach out to the service at any time for support.

This will also inform them that we will reach out annually just to remind them that the service is still available should they change their minds. The young person then also needs to inform the Local Authority in writing of not wanting a service and the reasons for this.

**Once this has been received the service will confirm this to the young person in writing. Management Oversight should be recorded, scrutinising any plan to cease to initiate contact and indicating if this response is supported. The relevant Service Manager must also be made aware of this.**

#### **4. Conclusion**

Local Authorities have a statutory duty to make all efforts to stay in touch with Care Leavers between the age of 18 and up to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. However, this does not necessarily mean face to face contact. However, as part of Wokingham Borough Council's commitment to good practice, the service will make efforts to see our care leavers face to

face on a two monthly basis, or in line with the frequency of face to face contact as set out in their pathway plans.

Where young people reach the age of 21 and decide they no longer wish to receive formal pathway planning support, the service will ensure that the young person is made aware they can reach out as and when they need support.

## Appendix A: Disengaged / Hard to engage risk assessment

### Disengagement/ Hard to Engage Risk Assessment

This risk assessment should be completed by the practitioner in the event that a young person decides to disengage from the support service available to them, or is proving hard to engage.

At the time of completing this form, the position must be that all reasonable and concerted efforts have been made to make contact with or to secure information to reassure the service that the young person is not at risk and therefore not needing formal escalation to act on their behalf with no success.

Whilst young people aged 18 plus have a right to refuse a service, we have a responsibility to ensure we have weighed up what risks, if any, this decision places upon the young person – practitioners and managers need to assess and come to a decision on *‘what does disengagement mean for the young person’?*

The risk assessment should be completed in conjunction with guidance as outlined in the Wokingham Guidance on working with hard to reach Care Leavers.

If serious risks are identified, support and/or attempts to engage should not cease until this risk assessment has been signed off by the Manager. The Manager may want to escalate this to Senior Management and to consider if a Risk Framework meeting or Adult Safeguarding referral is needed. In situations like this, multi-layered decision making is the best way to ensure there has been robust management oversight and collaborative decision making.

This risk assessment should be placed on the relevant child’s Mosaic record.

Name and age of young person:	
Mosaic ID:	
Practitioner’s name:	
What are the young person’s reasons for declining leaving care support?	
Have we been able to negotiate contact is maintained via a 3rd person?	



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<p>Is there agreement in place to make less frequent contact?</p>	
<p>What would cause us concern for this young persons safety and wellbeing? <i>Bullet points</i></p>	
<p>What is working well for this young person? <i>Bullet points</i></p>	
<p>Where we have significant concerns have this been escalated and relevant referrals been made? E.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has a stop and think been convened?</li> <li>• escalated to Snr Managers</li> <li>• referral made to Adult Social Care</li> <li>• young person reported as missing to the Police</li> <li>• Was a risk frame work meeting convened and if not reasons why it was not considered to be needed</li> </ul>	<p>(note the date when these actions have been taken and next steps)</p>
<p>Where there are no overriding significant concerns this can be signed off and placed on the young persons file</p>	<p>Annual communication is to be sent out to the young person, reminding them that the service remains available to them should they change their mind.</p>