

Report of the Children, Young People & Learning Policy Overview Committee 2013/14

Improving Outcomes for Care Leavers Not in Education, Employment or Training



Members of the Committee

Cllr John Riley (Chairman)
Cllr Judith Cooper (Vice Chairman)
Cllr David Benson
Cllr Lindsay Bliss
Cllr Brian Crowe
Cllr Jazz Dhillon
Cllr Dominic Gilham
Cllr John Hensley
Mr Tony Little

Contents

Chairman's Foreword	3
Recommendations	4
Background to this Review	5
Identification of Needs	7
Communication of Opportunities	8
Provision of Services	11
Background Reading	13
Appendices	14



CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

The mantra, "what would I do if this was my child?" will be a familiar one to those who have followed the work of this Committee in its recent endeavours to improve the lives of Hillingdon's looked after children (LAC) and care leavers. However, we want this question to become more familiar to a wider range of people. We want every Member and officer of the Council to be aware that it is their responsibility to contribute to the growth and development of those for whom we act as corporate parent. It is mine and the Committee's belief that, if the full weight of the Council's resources and networks of influence are brought to bear in this way, LAC will have every opportunity to go on to have healthy and successful independent lives.

It is within this context that the Committee decided to conduct a review into improving attainment for care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Applying the above mantra to this specific issue, we believed that a good parent would probably do a great deal to ensure that their child was provided with the best support possible in the process of moving into independence. This would be likely to include guidance, financial assistance, careers advice and day-to-day support. In many ways, the Council already provides similar types of support to care leavers but the Committee wished to explore how this provision might be improved; how we might ensure that the best parent in the Borough, is the Borough.

Consequently, this review was far reaching and considered evidence from a range of charitable, educational and business organisations working with the Borough's LAC and care leavers. Together these organisations offered an impressive range of opportunities in skills development, gaining qualifications and work experience that supplemented the support already being provided by the Council itself. However, despite this commendable level of existing support, three areas for improvement did emerge:

- 1. The identification of need and how we monitor progress;*
- 2. An awareness of the support available amongst frontline staff; and*
- 3. The bridging of any gaps in existing and future provision.*

As ever, the Committee is indebted to the witnesses and officers who provided evidence and support to this review. It is worthy of special mention that we also heard from a care leaver NEET in an informal focus group. This was an invaluable session that ensured that Members did not deal only with the structural and high-level issues facing care leavers, but also with the issues that were faced on a day-to-day basis by this vulnerable group of residents.

Councillor John Riley

Chairman of the Children, Young People & Learning Policy Overview Committee

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children, Young People and Learning Policy Overview Committee recommends:

Identification of Need

- 1) That Council welcomes the Government's commitment to collecting data on care leavers at ages 18, 20 and 21, in addition to age 19 and commits to assessing this data as a means through which to monitor and improve the impact of the Council's support of care leavers;
- 2) That the Cabinet Member for Education & Children Services requests that officers explore the viability of the Hillingdon Virtual School identifying the LAC most 'at risk' of becoming NEET and passing this information on to the relevant social workers, personal advisors and officers in Children's Services;

Communication of Opportunities

- 3) To ensure that LAC and care leavers benefit from the full range of services and support provided by the Council, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services requests that officers explore new ways of sharing information between frontline staff and other Council departments and report findings back to the Cabinet Member in due course;
- 4) To ensure that LAC benefit from the full range of support offered by external organisations within the Borough, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services requests that officers undertake research on the full range of externally provided services / opportunities that are aimed at, or could be used by, LAC and care leavers;
- 5) Subject to recommendation 4, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services requests that officers explore improvements to methods of communication between frontline staff and the Borough's charitable, educational and business organisations and report findings back to the Cabinet Member in due course;

Provision of Service

- 6) To expand upon the opportunities available to this vulnerable group of young people, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services encourages Members and Council departments to consider where they might be able to provide work experience opportunities specifically to LAC and care leavers;
- 7) To ensure that care leavers who are undertaking part-time courses to develop skills are not obliged to withdraw, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services requests that officers monitor the implications of the Welfare Reform on care leavers and, where necessary, put measures in place to ensure that these risks are mitigated;
- 8) In order to provide opportunities for education providers in the Borough to share best practice, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services considers whether officers should facilitate meetings between schools and Higher and Further Education providers; and
- 9) That the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services considers whether the issue of engaging with the Borough's schools to offer support to LAC from as early an age as possible, be referred to the Corporate Parenting Board for further consideration and progression.

BACKGROUND TO THIS REVIEW

It may appear from the title and remit of this review that the Committee has explored an extremely specific and small cohort of young people who fit into the categories of being both care leavers and not in education, employment or training (NEET). Indeed, the number of young people leaving care in Hillingdon in 2013 was 60 of which only 10 were known to be NEET. As will be expanded upon in the next section of this report, this by no means provides a full picture of all care leavers NEET in the Borough but it does suggest that this is a relatively insignificant cohort to warrant the attention of a major review. However, there were several important reasons as to why the Committee considered this to be a significant area of concern that should be placed high on its and the Council's agendas.

In the first instance, it is worth noting that Members of this Committee have adopted the simple mantra of "what would I do if this was my child?" when dealing with LAC and care leavers. Anecdotally, it was considered that good parents would be likely to provide a great deal of support, care and advice to their children if, after leaving home, they had not gone on to be in education, employment or training. Instead, work experience opportunities might be sought, colleges or universities might be visited, and careers advice might be given until a positive outcome had been achieved. It is, of course, not always simple for the Council to emulate this level of support for all young people leaving care, many of whom may wish to be independent. Nonetheless, the Committee felt that understanding care leavers as warranting the same level of care and support as our own children was an understanding that no level of inquiry was too much in seeking to improve their individual prospects.

Furthermore, the recommendations put forward in this report have far wider application than for the current cohort of care leavers alone. Throughout the course of this review, Members, officers and witnesses emphasised that the Council should not wait until young people had left care and gone on to be NEET to provide support, guidance or intervention. Instead, LAC should be engaged in work experience, exposed to higher and further education, receive careers advice and be given the full range of support as at young an age possible. As such, this report engages significantly with what *preventative* as well as remedial support can be offered so as to reduce the likelihood of LAC going on to be NEET. Consequently, this means that the review will benefit children and young people at every level of the care system and for future generations of care leavers.

Perhaps the most important rationale behind the review was that of a concern that young people who have been in the care system and have gone on to be NEET are some of the Borough's most vulnerable residents. The Government's recent Care Leaver Strategy stresses this point by stating that:

Research and inspection reports show that the quality of support care leavers receive is patchy and that their journey through the first decade of adult life is often disrupted, unstable and troubled. They often struggle to cope and this can lead to social exclusion, long term unemployment or involvement in crime. For example, 34% of all care leavers were not in education, employment or training (NEET) at age 19 in 2013 compared to 15.5% of 18 year olds in the general population.¹

¹ Care Leaver Strategy: A cross-departmental strategy for young people leaving care (October 2013)

It should be acknowledged and commended that Hillingdon has a 3 year average figure for care leavers going on to be NEET of 21% which is significantly below the national average. Nonetheless, given the significantly higher risk of care leavers going on to be NEET and the often complex needs that they have, the Committee felt that making improvements to the ways in which the Council supports those beginning their independent lives was an area that would make concrete and lasting improvements to people's lives.

Evidence Gathering

To address these issues, the Committee undertook a series of 3 witness sessions with officers and colleagues from across the Council as well as from agencies working with the Borough's LAC and care leavers. This included representatives from charities, local businesses, education providers and a range of Council departments providing services used by, or that could be used by, LAC and care leavers. A full breakdown of witnesses who provided evidence to the Committee can be found at Appendix A alongside the review's terms of reference. The Committee was extremely grateful to those who gave their time to present at a witness session and, without exception, Members were both encouraged by and in admiration of the outstanding work that was being done across the Borough to meet the needs of this vulnerable group of residents.

In addition to formal evidence-gathering sessions, an informal meeting took place with a small number of Members and a NEET care leaver. Members that attended this session were extremely grateful for the information that was provided by the young person and wished to place on record their thanks for the time and insights that were given. The evidence from this session particularly informed the Committee's findings on the level of support offered to care leavers in careers advice, funding of professional courses and the day-to-day experience of being a care leaver. Where appropriate, reference has been made to this session in the body of this report.

Structure

To reflect the main themes identified by the Committee throughout this review, the information, evidence and findings are set out under the following headings:

- Identification of Needs
- Communication of Opportunities
- Provision of Service

IDENTIFICATION OF NEED

It is important to be aware that the only available data on the number of care leavers NEET in the Borough is that collected when a young person who was in care on his/her 16th birthday is contacted and asked about their status after turning 19.² Consequently, it is clear that this data does not provide up-to-date or complete figures for care leavers NEET across the full age range of 18-21. Furthermore, without undertaking an audit of all current care leavers, it would not be possible to provide a definitive figure on the number of people in this target group at any one time.

In recognition of this gap, the Government's Care Leaver Strategy states that, as of 2014, the Department for Education, Ministry of Justice and Department for Work & Pensions would be collecting data on care leavers at 18, 19, 20 and 21. This would provide a more complete picture of how care leavers progress at different stages of their independent lives.³ Furthermore, this would supplement the qualitative information that case workers gathered through personal contact by allowing the Council to monitor the impact of the support provided to these young people throughout the 18-21 age range. With more comprehensive data available both on the local and national levels, the Committee felt that it would be better placed to work with officers to monitor the impact of the Council's support, highlight areas of concern and develop on areas of success. With this in mind the Committee recommended:

1

That Council welcomes the Government's commitment to collecting data on care leavers at ages 18, 20 and 21, in addition to age 19 and commits to assessing this data as a means through which to monitor and improve the impact of the Council's support of care leavers.

In addition to the more comprehensive collection of data on the outcomes for care leavers, it was noted that there was a considerable amount of intelligence within the Council itself that could be used to identify and engage this group of young people at an early stage. Specifically, it was highlighted that those in this cohort were often vulnerable and may have had difficulties in the education system for a number of years prior to leaving care. As such, the Hillingdon Virtual School (HVS) was considered to be well placed to identify at an early age the young people most likely to go on to be NEET. The Committee believed that this intelligence should be used and passed on to the relevant officers including to those running the programmes set out in detail in the following section.

2

That the Cabinet Member for Education & Children Services requests that officers explore the viability of the Hillingdon Virtual School identifying the LAC most 'at risk' of becoming NEET and passing this information on to the relevant social workers, personal advisors and officers in Children's Services.

² The requirements for being a care leaver are, in fact, relatively complicated requiring a certain number of days in care prior to and after the 16th birthday.

³ Care Leaver Strategy, p. 22

COMMUNICATION OF OPPORTUNITIES

Throughout this review, it was notable that the Committee did not highlight significant deficiency in services and opportunities available to the Borough's care leavers. Instead, it was seen that there was a broad range of opportunities available provided both by external organisations operating within the Borough and by the Council itself. However, the Committee was concerned that the knowledge and utilization of these opportunities was insufficient and that their being taken up was significantly hindered by a lack of awareness and poor communication amongst frontline staff. It was often the case that social workers, Council departments and external organisation would largely only hear about opportunities open to LAC and care leavers through informal networks which did not guarantee that they were always passed on or taken up.

It should be noted that the opportunities that the Committee felt to be relevant were not simply those that engaged current care leavers NEET. Instead, they included programmes, sessions and events that were aimed at those still in care and provided experiences, qualifications and skills that would prepare them for their independent lives. The utilisation of these opportunities was considered to be an effective way to prevent LAC going on to be NEET as well as raising the overall attainment of Hillingdon's leaving care community.

Unfortunately, there is not sufficient space in this report to highlight in detail all of the opportunities that the Committee considered. Suffice to say that there was a commendable range of programmes being run providing high-quality support with which Members were extremely impressed. The following sets out some of the key themes that arose and what the Committee believed could be done to use and communicate these resources more effectively.

Internal Opportunities

Sports and Leisure – The Committee was informed that there was a wide range of opportunities for vulnerable children in the Borough to engage in sporting and recreational activities. These were incentivised and made as accessible as possible by being provided at concessionary rates including low-cost informal sessions designed to engage those that were less willing to commit to a regular sports club or activity. Sessions in boxing, street dance and football, for instance, started at £1. In addition, there was also a sports bursary scheme to provide funding either for talented athletes who were not being funded elsewhere or for sports clubs.

With regards to skills development, the Team provided tailored activities as a means through which to increase participation. These included the "Sportunity" programme that provided young people aged 14-25 with skills as sports leaders and allowed them to gain entry-level leadership qualifications. Similarly, the "Get On Track" programme was aimed specifically at disadvantaged young people aged 16-25 by providing self-discipline, motivation and confidence to encourage more active lives and to enhance skills and employability. These were only a small part of the opportunities available through the Sports & Leisure Team that were aimed both at vulnerable or under-engaged groups as well as being open to all young people in the Borough.

However, despite the potential of these programmes to engage and equip LAC and care leavers with skills, it was noted that there was not known to be a significant take up of opportunities within these groups. This was partly attributed to the Sports & Leisure Team not currently having direct access to children in care and the consequent difficulties of identifying and targeting promotion at LAC and care leavers. This issue had been partially addressed by officers attending Step Up (the Kids in Care Council) but this had only provided access to a small number of children rather than the wider care community. Consequently, more regular access and communication was considered to be necessary due to the programmes changing on a seasonal basis and there being a continual churn in young people.

A number of specific suggestions were made as to how opportunities might be better promoted to LAC and care leavers including:

- the use of social media to promote activities;
- the use of the Virtual School and the Fostering, Adoption & Permanency Panel to pass on information on what extra-curricular activities were available; and
- putting officers from sports, leisure and arts teams in more regular contact with officers working directly with LAC and care leavers.

Adult Learning - Similarly to the relative lack of take up in sports and leisure activities, the variety of courses provided by the Adult Learning Service were not seen to be well used amongst care leavers. A representative from the service advised that, at that time, there was only known to be one care leaver undertaking a course despite the fact that they were open to all residents between the ages of 19 and 55 years old. It was noted that this could be due to the high-quality and significant variety of courses provided by Uxbridge College. Nonetheless, the Committee felt that there could be better awareness amongst frontline staff of the courses and support available through the Adult Learning Service. It was felt that officers having a good and broad knowledge of the support on offer, more and more opportunities would be taken up.

With these points in mind and an awareness that there were other Council services that could potentially be used to support LAC and care leavers, the Committee recommended:

3

To ensure that LAC and care leavers benefit from the full range of services and support provided by the Council, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services requests that officers explore new ways of sharing information between frontline staff and other Council departments and report findings back to the Cabinet Member in due course.

External Opportunities

Education Funding and Support – During the care leaver NEET focus group Members heard that there was a great deal of funding and support offered between the ages of 16-18 for LAC and care leavers in order to undertake courses. Support included bursaries, one-to-one careers advice and the support of personal advisors. However, Members heard that many young people did not know what career they wished to pursue at 16 and, consequently, often wanted to undertake further courses in order to take a different path at an older age. However, the level of support that was offered to those over 18 – especially financial support – was thought to be much less forthcoming which had

resulted in young people believing that they were unable to undertake further qualifications due to prohibitive costs.

However, when the Committee raised this concern with representatives from Uxbridge College and Bucks New University, it became apparent that, although the availability of funding was reduced over the age of 18, it was still available providing that young people identified themselves as having been in care. Representatives from both institutions advised that the primary issue was not with the provision of funds but with identifying those who qualified for them.

Although it would not be possible for all frontline staff working with LAC and care leavers to know about every educational opportunity on offer, the Committee felt that there should be a more fail-safe mechanism for communicating what support was available across the Borough. This would help to ensure that LAC and care leavers were provided with up-to-date and accurate information at often difficult and stressful times in their lives.

Space for Apprenticeships / Initiatives – A representative from Segro provided the Committee with information on what the company could do to facilitate improving attainment for care leavers as part of its commitment to investing in the local community. Segro was a Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 250 company with a large property portfolio across Europe of which 2 million square feet were located in Hillingdon. Given the relatively small number scale of the company's operations in Hillingdon, it was not in position to provide apprenticeships directly but did have a significant network of businesses that it could liaise with to provide such opportunities. Furthermore, Segro could also potentially provide space within the Borough in which to undertake apprenticeships or other initiatives.

As with all of the opportunities considered, the Committee wished for measures to be put in place to ensure that they would be communicated to relevant officers and, where appropriate, acted upon. With this and the above opportunities in mind, the Committee have not put forward individual recommendations on each individual opportunity. Instead, two recommendations asking officers to investigate what further opportunities were available across the Borough and how communication channels might be improved so that opportunities could be better exploited. Consequently, the Committee asked:

4

To ensure that LAC benefit from the full range of support offered by external organisations within the Borough, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services requests that officers undertake research on the full range of externally provided services / opportunities that are aimed at, or could be used by, LAC and care leavers.

5

Subject to recommendation 4, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services requests that officers explore improvements to methods of communication between frontline staff and the Borough's charitable, educational and business organisations and report findings back to the Cabinet Member in due course.

PROVISION OF SERVICES

Although there was a significant amount of opportunities that might be better utilised by the Council to support care leavers, three areas of improvement were identified. These are set out below.

Internal Work Experience

Throughout the course of this review, the Committee noted that the Council was a (corporate) parent with an exceptional wealth of resources that could be used to better outcomes for LAC and care leavers. This was highlighted specifically with regard to the provision of internal work experience opportunities with a view to raising the aspirations and levels of experience of young people as well as assisting them to decide what careers they wished to pursue. Within the Council itself there was a vast range of professions represented including law, finance, administration, maintenance, human resources, etc. that, if utilised fully, offered an impressive range of possible work experience placements. Furthermore, Members of the Council supplemented this resource with additional sectors including business, medicine, banking etc. This was seen to represent a vast network that could be exploited to further the development of the Borough's LAC and care leavers.

The Committee believed that these resources were currently not being used by the Council corporately as they would be by a good parent. Consequently, Members recommended:

6

To expand upon the opportunities available to this vulnerable group of young people, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services encourages Members and Council departments to consider where they might be able to provide work experience opportunities specifically to LAC and care leavers.

Implications of Welfare Reform

The Committee was informed that the welfare reform could have significant implications for care leavers who were receiving benefits. Although the exact details of who would be affected and how were not yet clear, there was concern that the current arrangements that allowed those on benefits to undertake courses for 16 hours per week would be stopped. Based, in part, on the information gathered within the informal session with a care leaver NEET, Members emphasised that slightly older care leavers who had not previously known what career they wished to pursue would be unable to undertake courses to develop the necessary skills for their intended career.

7

To ensure that care leavers who are undertaking part-time courses to develop skills are not obliged to withdraw, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services requests that officers monitor the implications of the Welfare Reform on care leavers and, where necessary, put measures in place to ensure that these risks are mitigated.

Schools – Unfortunately, the Committee were not able to hear from representatives from any of the Borough’s schools to ascertain how they were working with LAC to improve outcomes and prepare them for independent lives. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that representatives from schools were not unwilling to attend sessions but were unable to for practical reasons. Nonetheless, it was unfortunate that further information could not be gathered from schools because they were seen to one of the most important organisations with the potential to raise aspirations, equip children with skills and provide guidance for the future. In particular, the issue of careers advice arose on a number of occasions including through the informal NEET focus group and from Ofsted who recently stated that the “arrangements for careers guidance in schools are not working well enough”.⁴

Unfortunately, the Committee did not have enough information available to make specific recommendations on these areas but it was stressed that further work was required to make assurances that the needs of LAC were being met. Members also believed that this presented an opportunity to bring together all of the education providers in the Borough to share ideas, best practice and resources. The work done with LAC and care leavers by the Borough’s Colleges and Universities could be learnt from by schools and there may be significant scope for undertaking joint initiatives in the future. With this in mind, the Committee recommended:

8

In order to provide opportunities for education providers in the Borough to share best practice, that the Cabinet Member for Education & Children’s Services considers whether officers should facilitate meetings between schools and Higher and Further Education providers.

To ensure that scrutiny of this issue was sustained and that work was progressed as quickly as possible, it was proposed that further investigation of services provided by schools be referred to the Corporate Parenting Board. In accordance with the Children Act 1989 and related legislation, the Board has the responsibility of improving the quality of life and outcomes for LAC and care leavers. A considerable aspect of this role is the monitoring and improvement to educational outcomes for these groups and, with this in mind, the Committee felt it would be more appropriate for the Board to consider in detail and progress as appropriate. As such, it was recommended:

9

That the Cabinet Member for Education & Children’s Services considers whether the issue of engaging with the Borough’s schools to offer support to LAC from as early an age as possible, be referred to the Corporate Parenting Board for further consideration and progression.

⁴ Information from Ofsted website <<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/news/careers-guidance-schools-not-working-well-enough-0>> accessed on 26/09/2013

Background Reading

To assist with the writing of this review, reference has been made to a wide-ranging selection of background information.

- Care Leaver Strategy: A cross-departmental strategy for young people leaving care (October 2013):
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-leaver-strategy>
- National statistics on participation in education, training and employment by 16- to 18-year-olds in England, end 2012:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-in-education-training-and-employment-by-16-to-18-year-olds-in-england-end-2012>
- Minutes and associated reports from witness sessions:
<http://modgov.hillingdon.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=323&Year=2014>

Terms of Reference

1. To gain an understanding of the national picture on care leavers not in education, employment or training.
2. To gather evidence in order to gain an understanding of:
 - a. the number and demographic of young people leaving care in Hillingdon not in education, employment or training;
 - b. how Hillingdon's NEET care leavers compare nationally, to statistical neighbours and to the Borough's non-care leavers classed as NEET;
 - c. the major causes preventing Hillingdon's care leavers from going on to education, employment or training post 18;
 - d. the specific issues facing care leavers with learning difficulties and disabilities in getting into work or education;
 - e. what impact the raising of the participating age will have on young people in care and their likelihood of getting into education, employment or training; and
 - f. the work currently being undertaken by the Hillingdon Virtual School, Youth Services, Adult and Community Learning and the Sports and Leisure Team to improve outcomes for care leavers;
 - g. the role of schools, local colleges, Higher Education providers and businesses in providing apprenticeships and other learning opportunities;
3. To highlight what types of skills and experiences care leavers require in order to be able to continue into the next stage of their lives;
4. To determine what experience and skills local businesses would expect / require from care leavers to be successful in apprenticeships or employment;
5. To identify what support is required from the Council and its partner agencies to assist care leavers in entering and remaining in education, employment or training;
6. To identify what specific support those care leavers with learning difficulties and disabilities require to assist them in to work or education;
7. To make recommendations on what initiatives the Council could develop to provide the skills, experiences and support identified during witness sessions;
8. To review the current initiatives in place seeking to reduce the number of NEET in the Borough and make recommendations on how they might be improved and targeted specifically at care leavers.

Witnesses

Education and Early Career Preparation <i>(27 November 2013)</i>
Fiona Lyon, Head Teacher of the Hillingdon Virtual School
Deaglan McArdle, Schools and Colleges Development Manager, New Bucks Uni
Dr Darrell DeSouza (Vice Principal – Curriculum & Standards)
Debbie Hunn, Adult & Community Learning
Tom Murphy, Head of Early Intervention Services
Support from External Organisations <i>(15 January 2014)</i>
Craig Aitken, Outsource Training & Development Limited
Zara Sweet, P3
Sue Stock, Hillingdon Training Limited
Neil Impiazzi, Segro
Sport, Leisure and Extra-Curricular Activities <i>(19 February 2014)</i>
Howard Griffin, Sports Development Manager
Inga Spencer, Senior Economic Development Officer
Kevin Byrne, Head of Policy and Performance