Department for Education

Staying Close

Implementation guide for local authorities

November 2026

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Background

The Department for Education ((DfE) recently commissioned Claire Chamberlain and Ashley John-Baptiste to report on the tragic and unacceptably high number of care-experienced young people who die far too young. The report shone a spotlight on a care system that too often leaves young people entering adulthood alone and isolated. Too many feel disconnected, lack a support network of their own, and remain living in semi-independent accommodation from age 16 into early adulthood.

This lack of long-term stability links directly to the challenge of housing insecurity. Care-experienced young people frequently describe not feeling equipped to manage the challenges of adult life. A lack of suitable housing and support increases the risk of homelessness. Data from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government found that one in four rough sleepers surveyed had spent time in care. This Staying Close programme is a key element of the government's strategy to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping amongst care leavers.

Leaving care support often means funding additional services to compensate for what too many care leavers lack: a tribe of their own. They do not have the network of loving, lasting connections that many of their peers can rely on. While strong personal adviser services are crucial, local authority support alone will not be the solution for many young people.

That is why the government published the enduring relationships policy paper. It brings together the action we are taking to reform the care system, with a clear focus on whether young people in and leaving care have meaningful, lasting relationships in their lives. The reason this matters is that the state will not always be there. Staff change roles, move on and go home at the end of the day. Young people deserve connections that are more than professional relationships. They need their own people. We must build a care system that puts itself at the service of creating lifelong loving connections.

Staying Close is a crucial component of the enduring relationships agenda. Rather than pushing young people towards independence, we need housing options that fill young people's lives with connection. The evidence-informed housing options set out in this guide can help build a sense of community through supportive facilitation and early planning. When young people move into their first home, we want them to have neighbours, friends and communities around them. Those relationships should be sustained throughout the transition to adulthood and beyond.

The programme also includes funding for dedicated mental health workers within local teams. Support from mental health workers with a strong understanding of care experience is crucial in helping care leavers access the services they need – and that housing, mental health and relationships are interconnected.

By working in partnership, we can use Staying Close to improve the experience and outcomes of young people leaving care. The programme will give them the tools, support and planning they need to enter adulthood with a stable home and a loving support network around them.

Key points for local authorities

- Staying Close aims to improve outcomes for care leavers through housing options that build connection around young people, alongside mental health support
- Local authorities must deliver at least one of the approved housing support models – either supported by an external provider or as an in-house version– and they must deliver the mental health support element
- Funding must provide additional support and should not replace existing provision from other local authority budgets
- Once invited to join the programme, local authorities will be expected to submit a delivery plan showing how they will implement the framework locally and the impact it will have for young people
- The programme is intended to build capacity in local authorities to deliver housing with support, supporting preparation for the national Staying Close duty from 2029

What is changing for local authorities already providing Staying Close

- Enduring relationships and support networks are now at the core of the programme.
- Staying Close must be delivered through one of the approved housing support models – either supported by an external provider or as an in-house version
- Mental health support is now a compulsory element of the programme
- There is a stronger focus on additionality, sustainability and preparation for the 2029 duty.
- Additionality means demonstrating how Staying Close will fund provision over and above what you would deliver to all care leavers. Sustainability means building the evidence-base for long-term investment from your authority.

What Staying Close is

Staying Close helps care leavers at risk of homelessness make a successful transition to adulthood by setting them up to find and keep a home that is right for them and strengthening the relationships, networks and practical support around them. Alongside this, Staying Close will also enable improved access to mental health support.

Our vision is to put enduring relationships at the heart of the care system. Commencing in 2029, provision of staying close support will be a national duty for each local authority:

- to assess whether to provide support for care leavers in the interests of their welfare

- to help them to find and keep safe, secure and suitable accommodation
- to access services relating to health and wellbeing; relationships, education and training; employment; participation in society

Hereafter, this guide refers to the Staying Close programme, which will build capacity in local authorities ahead of the separate 2029 duty.

We have developed a policy framework to deliver the programme through 2 workstreams:

- **better housing support** that helps young people plan and prepare to live interdependently, while building supportive relationships and learning life skills
- **mental health support** that helps young people stay well and navigate the transition into adult services where needed

Early pathway planning and timely personal adviser support is a vital foundation for young people accessing support through Staying Close, as it is for all young people leaving care. This early work enables PAs to explore young people's preferences and future plans. This information can be used to improve transitions and access to Staying Close.

It is vital that Staying Close funding is only used to create additional support, aligned with the new model, beyond the support that local authorities already provide. This ensures improved outcomes for more young people in their area, and that it will not duplicate any existing support that the local authority provides. The result will be that more young people live in safe, secure, suitable homes that are right for them, with strong support networks.

Better housing support

There are 3 possible options for housing support in the Staying Close framework, which has been developed using evidence from programmes that have shown strong success in improving outcomes. In order to receive funding, local authorities will need to deliver at least one of the 3 housing options, whether in-house or with an external provider.

Local authorities can choose whether to deliver services in-house or commission external support from any provider (or both). Local authorities can choose to work alongside expert delivery organisations to deliver evidence-based programmes and contact them regarding this, and where local authorities choose to deliver their own in-house version, they must demonstrate that the activity to be delivered meets each requirement of the framework in order to produce equally positive results.

The 3 housing support options are:

Community-building housing projects

These projects promise young people a long-term home, following preparation for care leavers by developing confidence, practical skills and strong networks. Weekly sessions allow care leavers to build social skills and life skills through facilitated group work. Care leavers support one another as they plan to move into their home and settle into a new phase of their life. Evidence suggests these projects can

- **improve housing stability:** Young people move into their own homes and can remain there long term, providing security and reducing housing instability after leaving care. The model is highly effective at helping care leavers maintain their accommodation. For example, local House Projects delivered in collaboration with the National House Project report no tenancy breakdowns or evictions
- **strengthen belonging and reduce isolation:** Young people leave care as part of a group, and report that these projects help them develop supportive peer networks that reduce isolation and provide ongoing emotional and practical support

We want to expand availability of community-building housing projects across the country so that more young people leaving care can benefit from the networks, support and experience that the projects provide. This will require strategic support from local authority leaders to invest long-term support in building a stronger offer for care leavers.

Supported lodgings

Supported lodgings provide care leavers with a home-based environment and ongoing guidance and support from a host. Reported benefits include

- strong feelings of safety and belonging
- improved confidence in managing a future tenancy
- positive relationships with hosts (89% reported a good relationship)
- better participation in education, employment and training (EET); the longer care leavers spend in supported lodgings, the more likely they are to be in EET

We want to work with authorities to expand high-quality supported lodgings provision across the country, with a particular focus on effective recruitment, matching and support for hosts. This will require strategic support from local authority leaders to plan long-term for recruitment and support for hosts.

Intensive family-based support

Some care leavers need more intensive support than supported lodgings or community-based housing projects can provide. Shared Lives schemes are similar to supported lodgings, but a trained carer offers much more intensive practical support.

Family-based intensive support models, usually Shared Lives schemes, offer:

- full integration into family life, with practical and emotional support that care leavers value
- greater supervision and stability - care leavers have reported improved wellbeing and belonging
- support for young people with learning disabilities, neurodiversity autism or complex trauma (may sometimes include personal care)
- strengthened community and relationships - improvement in at least one measure for social life, friendships and involvement with community for 77% (17 out of 22) of young people

We want to expand access to this support to include care leavers who might otherwise just miss out on similar support entitlements under the Care Act 2014. By expanding this offer across the country, we can ensure that the most vulnerable care leavers have a long-term home where they can build relationships and community. This will require joint working with adult social care teams.

Mental health support

Evidence shows that access to mental health support is linked to wider outcomes (for example, housing stability).

Staying Close will include a band 6 mental health worker fully embedded into the leaving care service. This must be additional to any existing mental health provision already available to care leavers. This should be a co-located, integrated, psychologically focused service to provide:

- early, direct and evidence-based low-level transitional mental health support to care experienced young people while they are supported to access adult mental health
- transitional mental health support to young people while they wait for support from statutory services
- improved access to mental health services
- upskilling for their leaving care teams

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3"><u>A summary of the new Staying Close model</u></td></tr>
<tr><td>Strand</td><td colspan="2">Local authorities need to deliver at least one housing option, alongside mental health support. Local authorities can choose whether to deliver services in-house or commission external support from any provider, or both.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Strand 1 – relationship centred housing offers

Local authorities to deliver at least one of community-building housing projects, supported lodgings, or intensive family based support</td><td>Community-building housing projects

For care leavers who could – with the right support – take on their own home.

• Offer of a long-term tenancy on completion of the programme – local authorities need to plan and secure suitable accommodation provision well in advance of completion of the programme
• Building a support network of peers - young people are surrounded by peers, building social skills through facilitated group work and supporting one another as they plan to move into their home and settle into a new phase of their life
• Co-production - young people work together to take ownership of the project, meeting regularly to make decisions about their plans, their home and where they will live.
• Experiential learning for life skills – for example, covering safety, wellbeing, cooking, tenant responsibilities, and so on.</td><td>Supported lodgings - trained hosts provide a home and support

For care leavers who are ready to live interdependently, with ongoing support and advice in a family home.

• Offer of a long-term tenancy on completion of the programme – local authorities need to plan and secure suitable accommodation well in advance of the arrangement ending.
• Practical and emotional support in a home-based setting – access to support and advice from a host
• Regular opportunities for shared activity and relationship-building, guided by the young person - for example, cooking or going to the gym together each week
• Careful matching to enable a co-produced, relational approach – a series of matching meetings ensure time for care leavers to choose the right person to live with
• Training and support for hosts – an ongoing training programme so hosts can provide high-quality support and advice</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Intensive family-based support

For care leavers who have higher needs but who are just below the threshold for support from adult social care (for example, some autistic people and some people with learning disabilities or complex trauma).

• Planning for long-term housing on completion of the programme – local authorities need to plan in advance and be flexible if plans change.
• Sharing family life – Young people share family and community life with a carer, building connections and making friends
• Practical and emotional support in a home-based setting - with intensive support and supervision, carers help young people to gain life skills and find opportunities, including education, employment and training
• Training and on-call support for carers – Shared Lives has a rigorous application process and an ongoing training programme
• Careful matching and relational practice – young people meet carers up to 6 times before choosing to move in, making a mutual choice</td></tr>
<tr><td>Strand 2 – Mental health support</td><td colspan="2">To help care leavers stay well and navigate and secure the help they need with their mental health needs

• Mental health support from a Band 6 mental health worker. They will support care leavers with their mental health balancing intensity of support against availability. They will help care leavers to navigate the transition from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services where needed. Local authorities should work closely with their integrated care board (ICB) and NHS trusts to recruit and co-ordinate this offer.</td></tr>
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Case studies

Community-building housing project

(Alan, Islington's National House Project)

"I joined my Local House Project in Islington in 2018. We were one of the pilot projects and I was one of the first young people to experience leaving care in this way. We called ourselves the OJs – the Originals – and that's what we were. We didn't know what to expect, we didn't know what it would be like but it's one of the best things I've ever done. I had opportunities to try new things, learn new things, make new friends and then, when we all agreed that it was the right time, I moved into my own home, which I still live in now and which I love. I have a photograph of all of us taken just after we joined, and I keep that photograph in my wallet."

Community-building housing projects

(Liam, Break)

When Liam was 18, he moved from a Break children's home into Break's Staying Close Staying Connected service, living with two housemates in Norwich. Liam lacked some confidence and struggled with aspects of his housing; paying his rent and housemate relationships were a challenge. As well as maintaining relationships from his children's home, he also developed a number of key new relationships; he accessed the in-house emotional wellbeing service, developed a relationship with a mentor, met friends through the Staying Close Young People's Forum and through Break's 'Breaking the Mould' project, accessed work experience that turned into paid employment. This relationship-based approach, combined with the opportunity to make housing-related mistakes while supported by the safety net of Staying Close, has enabled him to live in his own flat for the past two years while maintaining the relationships he developed during his time with Break.

"A lot of people have said that I've become more confident over the last few years, and I agree. Three years ago, I probably would've said no to a lot of the things I'm involved with now. I think that's been the biggest change, I have more confidence in myself.

I think my life would be completely different without Break. I don't think I'd have my own place. I don't think I'd have the people around me. I wouldn't be where I am now."

Supported lodgings

(Aisha)

At 16, Aisha was a care-experienced young person who had experienced a number of moves and was unsure what to expect when supported lodgings was first

suggested. She moved in with a host and initially spent a lot of time in her room, but over time, a close and trusting relationship developed. Her host gave her space while making sure she knew someone was there when she needed them.

During the two years she lived there, Aisha became increasingly independent. Her host supported her to find her first job and helped her develop everyday skills including cooking, laundry and managing a home. Aisha said her confidence “grew massively” and that the experience changed her perspective on what she could do for herself.

When Aisha became pregnant, her host supported her to prepare for the next stage of her life, helping her find a home and move in. At the time of the interview, Aisha was 19, living in her own home and still in regular contact with her former host.

Reflecting on supported lodgings, she said: “I think it made me the person I am today.”

Intensive family-based support

(Shared Lives)

A young person nearing adulthood faced a high risk of homelessness after their living arrangement broke down. Alongside the challenges of leaving care, they had additional support needs that were not fully understood. Professionals took a strengths-based, relational approach, focusing on the young person’s individual needs rather than diagnosis or service thresholds.

A key factor was involving the young person’s wider support network. Family members and trusted adults helped professionals understand the young person’s strengths, vulnerabilities and aspirations, while providing reassurance during an uncertain time.

Professionals worked collaboratively at the young person’s pace. Rather than rushing into a placement decision, they explored a range of housing and support options. The young person was given genuine choice and actively involved in decisions about their future.

To build trust, introductions to a carer took place gradually through informal visits and shared activities. This allowed both parties to develop a relationship before making any commitments.

The young person was successfully matched with a Shared Lives carer, gaining stability, belonging and consistent support. The highlights the importance of relationship-building practice, gradual transitions and flexible support tailored to the individual.

What works and minimum standards

In delivery plans submitted to DfE before grants can be issued, we ask local authorities to set out:

- Details of their planned Staying Close offer; how it will meet the minimum standards of our framework **(pages 11 to 19 of this guide)**
- How their offer will meet the needs of their young people, and which cohorts of young people they plan to prioritise for this support to reduce isolation and homelessness **(pages 20 to 21)**
- How the programme will be embedded in your service, and how they will gather evidence to build the case for continued long-term investment locally **(page 22)**

Minimum standards

Local authorities are free to choose one or more of the housing models to deliver according to the needs of the young people in their area and their existing high-quality provision. Local authorities can choose whether to deliver services entirely in-house or commission external support from any provider, for example, from the National House Project or a Shared Lives scheme. We have set out below the minimum standards for each of the housing models to ensure consistency of approach between in house and externally commissioned activity.

Minimum standards: community-building housing projects

Community-building housing projects prepare care leavers to move into their own homes by developing confidence, practical skills and strong peer networks.

The key elements of a high-quality community-building housing project are:

i. **Local authority needs to plan and secure suitable accommodation provision well in advance of completion of the programme.** As the programme is designed to prepare young people for their own tenancy, it is vital that a robust plan is in place to guarantee a tenancy once the young person is ready to move.

   Reasoning and evidence: This will ensure clear expectations about when young people can expect to move into their home are established and adhered to was a key component of young people's satisfaction (or not) with the programme.

ii. **Co-production.** Young people work together to take ownership of the project, meeting regularly to make decisions about their plans, their home and where they will live. They amplify the voices of care leavers within their local authority.

Reasoning and evidence: Opportunities for young people's voices to be acted upon in the design of the programme are crucial. This increases young people's sense of ownership. This ownership can increase confidence to take part in Care Leaver Forums, creating a more responsive service.

iii. **Building a support network of peers.** Young people are surrounded by peers, building social skills through facilitated group work and supporting one another as they plan to move into their home and settle into a new phase of their life. This work should begin well in advance of young people leaving care, especially where young people do not already have a network of trusted family or friends. To ensure a managed transition and time to build networks and skills before young people move home, early pathway planning from age 16 onwards is crucial for this model. Weekly in-person meetings are recommended to help young people to make friends, develop their social skills and build confidence to thrive as adults.

   Reasoning and evidence: Informal peer support helps care leavers to develop essential life skills for adult life so they experience a positive transition.

iv. **Experiential learning for life skills.** An evidence-informed life skills programme with in-person group work to scaffold social skills and confidence, covering safety and wellbeing, cooking, tenant responsibilities etc.

   Reasoning and evidence: Qualitative evidence suggests that young people value support that is gradual, flexible and tailored to their individual circumstances and emotional readiness.

v. **Offer of a long-term tenancy upon completion of the programme.** Young people should generally be offered individual social housing tenancies to provide long-term stability, autonomy and affordability.

   - If shared tenancies are proposed instead, projects must demonstrate robust matching, young people's choice, ongoing support (for example, social skills development or mediation), and your delivery plan's risk register must include contingency arrangements if placements break down or a housemate moves out.
   - If using supported or semi-independent accommodation, local authorities must provide a comprehensive plan demonstrating strong oversight, responsiveness to young people's feedback, and high-quality support. To prevent isolation and uncertainty, proactive pathway planning is vital, including careful matching and choice for young people to maximise opportunities and long-term stability. In particular, local authorities must articulate how they will ensure young people are ultimately moved from this accommodation into their own long-term tenancy.

- Safeguarding is key; a psychologically informed approach is needed to ensure young people move once they are ready, feel prepared and have strong support networks to help them. This should include plans for continued support after move-in.

Reasoning and evidence: Care leavers value accommodation that feels like a long-term home, particularly when it comes with safety, consistent relationships, choice and support that reflects their readiness. Young people moved into a home under the National House Project have had no homelessness or evictions to date, showing the impact of the right support on housing stability. While there is strong provision of semi-independent accommodation in many areas, the review into the early deaths of care leavers identified a significant variation in the quality of support.

Minimum standards: supported lodgings

Supported lodgings provide care leavers with a home-based environment and ongoing guidance and support from a host.

We want to work with authorities to expand high-quality supported lodgings, with a particular focus on effective recruitment, matching and support for hosts. The length of the young person's stay should be flexible based on the young person's readiness, which may evolve during the arrangement, on average, arrangements last between 18 and 24 months. Ofsted requirements for supported accommodation schemes for 16- and 17-year-olds are relevant.

The key elements of a high-quality supported lodgings model are:

i. **Careful recruitment and matching to enable a co-produced, relational approach – a series of matching meetings ensure time for care leavers to choose the right person to live with.** As it is so important that the care leaver and the host get on well, they should both have a say in whether to go ahead or explore alternative options.

   When recruiting hosts, schemes should:

   - undertake sustained recruitment to ensure hosts are available when needed
   - build partnerships with community, faith and employer networks
   - use inclusive materials that reflect the diversity of young people
   - present both the benefits and challenges
   - make enquiries simple to make and respond promptly
   - monitor progression from enquiry to approval

- involve hosts and young people with lived experience as ambassadors

Robust but proportionate assessment and vetting are essential for safeguarding. Processes should focus on whether a host can provide a safe, suitable and supportive home, without replicating foster care processes. Assessments should also help hosts understand and prepare for their role, ensuring they have the right motivation and capacity.

Reasoning and evidence: For those who were given the right opportunities to connect with other young people living in supported lodgings, nearly 70% reported that they found this helpful. Young people reported that opportunities to meet hosts before moving in helped reduce anxiety, while some described moves into Supported Lodgings as rushed and lacking sufficient information or choice. The research recommends giving young people greater agency over moves and sufficient time for relationships to develop before moving in.

ii. **Training and support for hosts – a comprehensive, ongoing training programme so hosts can provide high-quality support and advice.**

Areas young people may need support with (including referrals to services) could include:

- health and wellbeing
- building enduring relationships and a support network
- education and training
- employment
- participation in society

Effective strategies for ongoing support for hosts suggested by existing providers include:

- a named worker for each host
- regular supervision and reflective practice sessions
- opportunities for peer connection through host meetups or training groups
- crisis support and clear escalation pathways
- recognition of wellbeing, including planned breaks

Reasoning and evidence: Providers should develop host training which supports hosts to build meaningful and constructive relationships. Training needs to prepare hosts for the diversity of young people's experiences, including instability, turmoil and loss. Existing providers suggest local authorities should consider how to support young people with early benefit applications before their 18th birthday to ensure seamless transitions.

iii. **Practical and emotional support in a home-based setting – access to support and advice from a host.** Unlike other forms of supported accommodation, supported lodgings involves young people having a room in a host's private home, with wraparound support. Opportunities for everyday interaction (for example, through shared living spaces) are important to provide practical and emotional support naturally.

Reasoning and evidence: A 2024 survey showed 9 out of 10 young people in supported lodgings felt they had a good relationship with their host. The same number felt more confident in their ability to live independently.

Supported Lodgings may not work as well where there are minimal opportunities for everyday interaction and relationship-building.

iv. **Regular opportunities for shared activity and relationship-building, guided by the young person.** Examples could include cooking together or going to the gym each week. Local authorities may wish to explicitly allocate part of the payments to hosts for these activities. Local authorities should also consider establishing peer support groups for young people to enable young people to connect and share experiences.

Reasoning and evidence: Peer support groups should be designed to be inclusive and engaging, addressing potential barriers to participation.

v. **Offer of a long-term tenancy upon completion of the programme – local authorities need to plan and secure suitable accommodation well in advance of the arrangement ending.** They should be flexible if young people's plans or needs change. Plans should include continued support after transition. This may sometimes involve a tenancy arrangement to stay with the host but may also involve the offer of social housing or arranging other long-term homes, according to the young person's preferences and requirements.

Reasoning and evidence: Care leavers value accommodation that feels like a long-term home, particularly when it comes with safety, consistent relationships, choice and support that reflects their readiness.

Minimum standards: intensive support in a family home

Some care leavers need more intensive support than supported lodgings or community-based housing can provide. This approach is similar to supported lodgings, but the host provides the role of a full-time carer – including for those with learning disabilities, autism, neurodiversity and complex trauma – offering much more intensive practical support, so that the young person fully integrates into family life. Staying Close funding could expand access to include care leavers who might otherwise just miss out under the Care Act 2014. If a programme provides support

for people with personal care needs, it will need to register with the Care Quality Commission. Otherwise, it would be out of scope for the CQC.

If young people stay in a shared lives arrangement for more than 2 years, the number of care leavers who can access these placements over time could be more limited. However, choice and flexibility are key for young people to feel secure in their homes.

The key elements of an Intensive family-based support model are:

i. **Careful matching and relational practice –** Young people meet carers up to 6 times before choosing to move in, making a mutual, relational decision. Local communications should centre the experiences of young people, carers, families and professionals to build confidence. To support co-ordination and recruitment of a sufficient number of carers, Staying Close teams should liaise with adult social care colleagues and existing local shared lives schemes. This will enable co-ordinated, long-term planning.

   Reasoning and evidence: "Effective approaches to matching involved information sharing to promote choice for young people and carers, wherever possible. Choice was also promoted by a relationship-based approach, with young people and carers meeting to see how they felt about living together and progressing to an overnight stay, before the arrangement was implemented"

ii. **Training and on-call support for carers.** Shared Lives schemes have established robust application and training procedures. Schemes should implement targeted recruitment and retention plans based on local demand and track what works. Every arrangement should have a shared support and contingency plan with clear professional responsibilities, access to specialist help, and mental health support.

   Reasoning and evidence: Training for carers that is tailored to the needs of care leavers is recommended to help sustain arrangements and ensure young people feel supported and understood

iii. **Practical and emotional support in a home-based setting -** with intensive support and supervision. Carers help young people to gain life skills and find opportunities, including EET. Areas young people may need support with (including referrals to services) could include:

- health and wellbeing
- building enduring relationships and a support network
- education and training
- employment
- participation in society

Reasoning and evidence: the evaluation found evidence that a Shared Lives arrangement can facilitate outcomes that include:

- increased independence and quality of life through better risk and relationship management
- improved health and wellbeing skills

A subsequent Shared Lives impact report indicated EET well above the national average for care leavers.

iv. **Sharing family life** – Young people share family life with a carer, building connections and making friends.

Reasoning and evidence: During intensive support through shared lives, care leavers reported improved wellbeing and belonging

v. **Offer of a long-term tenancy upon completion of the programme – local authorities need to plan and secure suitable accommodation well in advance of the arrangement ending.** Plans should include continued support after transition. Local authorities may wish to explore step-down options, continuing support in the community through day visits.

Reasoning and evidence: Care leavers value accommodation that feels like a long-term home, particularly when it comes with safety, consistent relationships, choice and support that reflects their readiness

Minimum standards: mental health worker

Many children with social care involvement do not fit neatly within existing diagnostic or organisational pathways and therefore require co-ordinated, relationally continuous care rather than sequential referrals between services. Gaps and long waits for intervention can intensify issues and create a distrust in the structures that are meant to support.

The mental health worker might provide direct support to care leavers on the Staying Close programme or walk alongside them while they are waiting if more intensive support is required. They should prioritise working with care leavers on Staying Close but might also have capacity to support other care leavers.

They may be able to upskill colleagues in the Staying Close team and wider leaving care service about care leavers' mental health needs. Overseen by this worker, there may also be opportunities for reflective spaces for professionals in the leaving care service to discuss and debate their approach to supporting the mental health of young people. This could help professionals to improve services for young people through reflective practice, while protecting their own wellbeing.

Evidence shows that this element is crucial for other outcomes (such as housing stability).

The key elements of the mental health strand are:

Requirement of mental health worker (and reasoning, research and evidence)

i. Mental health worker co-located between the integrated care board (ICB) / NHS, the mental health trust, and care leavers teams

- Psychological therapists with recognised accreditation for delivery of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)'s recommended psychological therapies for mental health conditions most likely to be experienced by the cohort
- The right workforce, appropriately trained, with the right capacity and skills mix, is essential to ensuring the delivery of evidence-based care aligned to NICE guidance
- All clinicians in the service should have completed an appropriate accredited training programme aligned to NICE guidance
- All clinicians should be accredited or registered by (or both) recognised registering bodies for practitioner psychology or psychological therapy and supervised by appropriately trained supervisors

ii. Evidence of the effectiveness of the mental health support

- Improvement in mental health using patient-reported outcomes, or goal-based outcomes
- Improvements in mental health symptoms
- Improvements in functioning, participation, housing stability, continuity of relationships, family experience or confidence that support is co-ordinated around them

Recommendation for the mental health worker

i. NHS scale band 6
   - We have calculated the unit cost at the bottom of band 6 mental health worker band) * 1.25 on costs.
   - An example of a band 6 is a trainee high-intensity therapist. This level gives the right balance of skills and experience for the role of supporting care leavers who may have complex needs.

ii. Supervision to be covered by the ICB to ensure full integration of the mental health worker between the two teams.
   - Continuing professional development is critical to improving outcomes for people receiving treatment and for supporting staff wellbeing. See the NHS Talking Therapies Supervision Guidance and Best Practice resource for more information
   - Exception: DfE acknowledges that this requirement is outside the control of local authorities. If every effort has been made to facilitate this but it has not proved possible, the authority should:
     - alert DfE at the earliest opportunity
     - ensure Directors of Children's Services have annual meetings with the ICB and the mental health trust to facilitate these relationships
   - Once the NHS and ICBs become corporate parents in 2027, corporate parenting responsibilities may be useful for framing these discussions.

Working with DfE and evaluators

As local authorities prepare delivery plans and begin delivering Staying Close, DfE can provide further guidance through the Staying Close mailbox: staying.close@education.gov.uk.

We also ask that local authorities submit quarterly reports on time and attend any monitoring meetings scheduled. As far as possible, we will utilise existing reporting such as the Children Looked After return to DfE and Homelessness Case Level Information Collection return to MHCLG to minimise duplication.

An evaluator will work with a small number of local authorities to develop evidence for the further rollout of the programme. If selected, local authorities should work with evaluators to set out further cost data and information on the impact of Staying Close on other departments within the authority. This will help us to evidence the impact of the programme, and help leaving care teams to build the case for continued investment in Staying Close within their local authority.

Assessment of young people for support

As part of their delivery plans, local authorities need to consider how their offer will meet the needs of their young people, and which cohorts of young people local authorities plan to prioritise for this support.

When assessing the need of care leavers (legally, 'former relevant children') aged under 25 as part of pathway planning, local authorities should consider where the most critical support is required, in particular for those at acute risk of homelessness. Beyond this, local authorities should prioritise care-experienced young people whose welfare most requires support. It is important that there is a single referral pathway for young people leaving care so that housing needs can be assessed fairly across the cohort.

Young people aged over 21 who have previously opted out of personal adviser support may return to the local authority for assistance. In these circumstances, a proportionate needs assessment should be undertaken as part of pathway planning, which may also include consideration of whether Staying Close support would be appropriate.

Local authorities should also consider wider factors when assessing risk of homelessness and housing instability. These risk factors are likely to include mental health needs, EET status, relationship networks, and social isolation.

Local authorities should set out how young people can be assessed to access Staying Close support within their local offer. For transparency and to manage expectations about availability, it may be helpful to set out the approximate number of places available each year, and explain how young people can access support, including any criteria used to prioritise places.

Where a young person believes they should be entitled to Staying Close support, but it has not been offered, local authorities are encouraged to have a clear complaints and appeals process to enable decisions to be reviewed.

Co-production

Far more than simply listening to young people's views, co-production places young people at the centre of their own solutions, plans and decisions. Young people with this level of agency are more likely to engage with Staying Close because they can influence their support and see its benefits, controlling their own lives. Examples may include giving young people the opportunity to try out living in the housing option before they decide whether it is the best choice for them.

Local authorities are encouraged to consider how young people can be meaningfully involved in shaping their support and influencing service design. This approach can strengthen engagement and ensure support feels relevant and empowering.

Preparation for move-on

Whichever housing model local authorities use, it is vital that move-on planning (as part of ongoing pathway planning) begins early and be led by the young person's needs and readiness, with clarity about future accommodation and support. This includes contingency planning for if relationships break down and arrangements fall through. Where appropriate and mutually desired, for intensive family-based support and supported lodgings, local authorities should also consider how positive relationships with hosts and friends can be sustained after the formal arrangement ends. Local authorities might consider funding support or activities for this.

Planning for ambitious delivery

Local authorities' delivery plans should explain how their offer will build capacity through additional provision, so that more care leavers access high-quality accommodation with the right support.

To support your plans for how many young people to support, DfE has estimated the cost per young person of the various housing models. This should be a starting point for your plans not a final figure. Note that exact unit costs in your area will depend on the size of your programme, supporting more young people can generate economies of scale.

Community-building housing projects

- Indicative cost per year - £29,297
- + or - c £1,000 depending on region for example London +£1,000

Supported lodgings

- Indicative cost per year - £20,350
- Covers training and recruitment, wraparound support and payments to hosts

Intensive family-based support

- Indicative cost per year - £31,000
- Covers training and recruitment, wraparound support and payments to hosts. May be lower than this where no, or lower levels of, personal care is needed.

Sustainability

To ensure long-term sustainability once Staying Close becomes a national duty in 2029, local authorities should explore reinvesting costs saved as a result of Staying Close back into the programme. This should allow local authorities to support more young people than in your first year, without compromising the amount of support young people receive.

Where this is right for the individual young person, cost savings may occur if young people move into their accommodation before they turn 18. For this to work, the young person must be ready and well-supported, including through multi-agency assessment: cost savings should never be the deciding factor. If local authorities decide this approach is right for their area, they will need to ensure their provision meets the legal requirements for supported accommodation for children.

Note that under current regulations, it is not possible for care leavers to move in to Shared Lives arrangements until they reach age 18. Intensive family-based support, such as Shared Lives schemes, could be explored through the matching and transition process (days and weekends) as long as the main care arrangement is Ofsted-registered provision (i.e. to support the transition to Shared Lives at 18+).

Regardless of when young people move into their Staying Close-supported home, costs may also be avoided through crisis prevention, for example, from reduced emergency homelessness accommodation. These monies could also be reinvested into further Staying Close support to reach the maximum number of young people and ensure long-term sustainability and investment in the programme within your local authority.

To ensure local authorities build additional capacity, the delivery plan must include data on how many Staying Close-style housing places their local authority already has. This means how many care leavers under age 25 currently live in a housing model that aligns with one of the three Staying Close housing models.

We will then agree targets for numbers of additional young people moved into Staying Close housing through a memorandum of understanding. These targets must also ensure the support delivered through Staying Close is additional to any new programmes local authorities were already planning to implement. Once local authorities begin delivering the programme, we will use quarterly reports and monitoring meetings to ensure more young people are moved in to Staying Close-supported homes. Key metrics measured will include number of young people selected for Staying Close, number of young people moved into homes with support through Staying Close, and number of care leavers who are homeless.

Other considerations and interdependencies

Personal advisers and pathway planning

Early support from a personal adviser is key to a smooth transition to adulthood for young people.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide personal adviser support to all eligible care leavers up to age 25 where they want this support. High-quality personal adviser support is central to pathway planning, helping care leavers find a home that is right for them and access wider opportunities. It is also the bedrock of effective Staying Close delivery, helping to identify care leavers to benefit from a relationship-centred housing offer. PAs should ensure that care leavers have the support needed to manage and maintain their home, whatever accommodation option they choose.

It is crucial that the pathway planning process begins early in collaboration with the young person, and that children's services teams are aware of the full range of housing options available well before they reach age 18 including through Staying Close.

To make sure young people access the support they need, strong multi-agency working will be needed. The corporate parenting duty (coming into force in Autumn 2027) will provide an opportunity to build relationships for stronger cooperation.

Regional co-ordination

In the context of local government reform, local authorities must ensure funding remains in place for young people enrolled in Staying Close for the duration of their programme, even where legal responsibility transfers to another authority. If a young person in the area becomes the responsibility of a neighbouring authority due to boundary changes, local authorities would need to continue funding their Staying Close arrangement to ensure continuity of housing, relationships and support, unless an alternative solution also involved no disruption for the young person.

Wider work to prevent care leaver homelessness

Local authorities should use the forthcoming joint DfE and MHCLG Care Leaver Homelessness Action Plan as a framework to review and strengthen their local homelessness prevention approach for care leavers, ensuring housing, leaving care and wider services work together to prevent homelessness before it occurs.

Staying Close is an important programme to prevent care leavers from entering the homelessness system. It is also part of a wider, cross-government programme of action to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping.

Relationship with existing arrangements

Staying Close expands the range of high-quality, supportive housing offers available to care leavers. Relationship-centred housing models play a key role in reducing isolation for care leavers, but the Staying Close offers focuses on the most vulnerable and is not appropriate for all young people. In particular:

- in the first instance, young people leaving foster care should be offered Staying Put arrangements, where both the young person and the foster carer agree
- care leavers may be confident to manage their own tenancy with help from their existing support networks and PAs
- care leavers may be moving to accommodation linked to higher or further education
- Staying Close is probably not the best option for emergency accommodation at short notice due to the relationship-building needed before the young person moves to their Staying Close home, for example, care leavers facing an immediate prospect of homelessness or leaving custody at short notice

Staying Close duty under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 will place a duty on local authorities to assess care leavers (legally, the duty will apply to 'former relevant children') aged under 25 for Staying Close support in light of their welfare interests and provide that support where the local authority determines it is required. "Support" in the duty means support in the form of giving advice or information to eligible young people, or making representations on their behalf for the purpose of the duty.

The Staying Close programme is intended to help local authorities prepare for implementation of this duty in 2029. It will support the development of systems and services for care leavers who need support to help them maintain accommodation that is safe, suitable and affordable, and connect them to wider services where require

Department for Education

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