

Item No. 10	Classification: Open	Date: 6 July 2022	Meeting name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		Report back to Corporate Parenting Committee on semi-independent living	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		None	
From:		Alasdair Smith, Director of Children and Families	

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the Corporate Parenting Committee note the contents of this report.

BACKGROUND

2. On 20 April 2020 Corporate Parenting Committee held a focused session on semi independent accommodation. Alongside a service report and presentation, the committee heard in detail from three young people and a number of issues were raised by them that the committee asked for detailed feedback about.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Room checks

3. The committee wanted to know what agreements are in place for these to happen to help protect the privacy of young people? The committee noted the responsibility of the council, and those commissioned to provide care on its behalf, to protect young people from harm but hoped that that some permission / boundaries could be set to protect young people and ensure privacy
4. Accommodation provided under the 16+ contract with Salvation Army and OASIS includes a range of different accommodation options. As a general rule young people who move into the accommodation first reside in a staffed units and when assessed as ready they are helped to move to a more independent setting which could be a shared house or flat with a small number of other residents.
5. Following concerns over recent fires in larger accommodation settings such Lakanal House, Camberwell in 2009 and Grenfell Tower in 2017 there are strict processes in place at the larger staffed units to ensure the health and safety of all residents.

6. Health and safety room checks across staffed units take place once a week and are of a variety of types.
7. Electrical safety checks include checking that: extension leads are not overloaded; plug sockets are in good condition; electrical items are turned off etc.
8. Fire safety checks includes making sure: fire escape routes are free from obstruction; the fire action notice is displayed; the alarms are not covered).
9. General health and safety checks include: making sure the floor is free from obstructions; cleaning products are stored away safely and correctly; window restrictors are on; and the cleanliness of the room is up to a good standard.
10. For young people who reside in unstaffed flats the checks are less stringent and usually take place much less often with more focus on the standard safety checks such as Gas Safety Certificate testing and Electrical Safety Certificates for landlords.
11. Apart from ensuring the health and safety of the property is maintained, the checks also allow the provider to assess a young person's readiness for independent living and also help the staff team assess any involvement in risk taking behaviours that requires support or intervention.
12. Room checks are essential, however every effort is made to minimise the impact on young people:
 - a. All Young People are made aware of the weekly health and safety checks during their assessment/interview and again during their induction period.
 - b. The health and safety processes are written into and agreed in either Assured Shorthold Tenancies (AST) or License Agreements and signed by the residents.
 - c. Learning from the checks, including near misses are regularly shared with residents to encourage a wider understanding of safety issues. These conversations cover areas such as responsible tenancy sustainment, being energy cost conscious and managing the risk of fire etc.
 - d. The health and safety checks always take place on the same day every week so that young people know when their room will be visited.
 - e. Young people are also given a reminder 24 hours before the checks take place, and sometimes again on the morning of the check to ensure they are prepared.

- f. If young people residing in the properties are busy at the agreed date and time they can request an alternative time and date to suit them.
- g. Staff do not always enter rooms whilst conducting health and safety checks, many can be completed as a visual check.
- h. The checks are not room searches - staff do not enter closets, open chest of drawers, touch personal belongings or remove anything from the room (with the exception of drug paraphernalia etc. if found).
- i. The health and safety checks are always completed by two members of staff.
- j. Staff never force entry to rooms unless there is a clear concern for the welfare of the resident inside.

Visitors to young people

- 13. The committee wanted to know why young people said they were not allowed visitors and what the current arrangements are.
- 14. The communal lounge at the OASIS staffed unit was closed for a number of reasons including as a health and safety response to the COVID pandemic. In addition, there was a complete refurbishment of the house including the kitchen, offices and lounge. There were changes to the flooring, furniture and decorations – this refurbishment could not be completed quickly. After the refurbishment a burst water pipe resulted in the main office ceiling collapsing, consequently the lounge was restricted again whilst remedial works took place. During the pandemic there were COVID outbreaks amongst both the residents and staff, which required closure of the lounge for each isolation period to mitigate risk.
- 15. The Covid pandemic was also the reason in part for the visitor's bans, as organisations sought to reduce risk and keep everyone safe. These restrictions were put in place across many services to reduce the risk and spread of infection in accordance with guidance from Public Health England.
- 16. After the lockdowns ended, many control measures were reduced, strict rules relating to visitors were relaxed slightly, however projects remain cautious because the threat of COVID and the risk of spreading infection has not gone away and there are still people with infections.
- 17. In terms of The Salvation Army visitors are allowed in the premises but are required to follow procedures such as signing in, providing ID and leaving by certain times.

Work and accommodation costs

18. The committee wanted to know why young people feel they are being 'penalised' for getting a job and then incurring large rent costs and often going into debt. Does this serve as a disincentive to finding a job?
19. A very important part of becoming independent is learning how to become financially competent, with that comes a need to understand that an earned gross salary will have significant deductions made to it before it is paid to the employee. Following the payment of the NET amount there are then often further payments that need to be made in terms of rent, council tax and bills. For many the realisation that your disposable income will be only a fraction of what you earn is difficult to come to terms with – but the understanding and acceptance of the situation is a key milestone in preparing for independence.
20. Care leavers living under the 16+ accommodation contract are required to make a contribution towards their rent when earning through work or through the claiming of benefits - for some this is viewed as a disincentive to work however the contributions are means tested and the remainder is covered by housing benefit on a sliding scale. This is the same wherever a young person lives and where rent is paid.
21. Below are four examples using a 'ready reckoner' from the Salvation Army which sets out the contributions required to be made for residents at their staffed unit who are earning different amounts. In each case, whilst those in work are required to make significant contributions – they always have a larger disposable income than those not in work.
22. Young person with no earnings

Weekly rent payable (inclusive of all bills)	£344.68
Weekly earnings through work	£0
Amount of housing benefit payable	£367.11
Contribution required from tenant above housing benefit income	£0
Disposable income per week	£61.23*

* via Universal Credit

23. Young person earning £125 per week

Weekly rent payable (inclusive of all bills)	£344.68
Weekly earnings through work	£125
Amount of housing benefit payable	£298.36
Contribution required from tenant above housing benefit income	£46.32
Disposable income per week	£78.68

24. Young person earning £250 per week

Weekly rent payable (inclusive of all bills)	£344.68
Weekly earnings through work	£250
Amount of housing benefit payable	£229.61
Contribution required from tenant housing benefit income	£115.07
Disposable income per week	£134.93

25. Young person earning £500 per week

Weekly rent payable (inclusive of all bills)	£344.68
Weekly earnings through work	£500
Amount of housing benefit payable	£92.11
Contribution required from tenant above housing benefit income	£252.57
Disposable income per week	£247.43

Housing allocation issues

26. The committee heard a view from young people that they should be able to submit their own housing applications with the support from staff. They also heard about young people having to chase key workers for updates on their housing position and not always receiving updates on these applications. The committee queried why young people were not making their applications in their own right with the support of staff.
27. Currently anyone is able to make a housing application to the Council's Housing Department, however in order to advance this application to a band 2 priority banding, a nomination form is completed by the Care Leaver Service, and/or staff at The Salvation Army or OASIS Community Housing is required to evidence band 2 status.
28. The Head of Service agrees and signs the priority nomination and the social worker / personal advisor write a supporting statement setting out the young person's independence skills and ability to maintain a tenancy.
29. Following the application each young person is provided with login details for Southwark's housing portal through which they are able to bid on properties in line with Southwark's housing allocation policy.
30. In summary young people are able to make their own housing applications however they will not receive a band 2 priority nomination until the social worker or personal advisor completes the supporting statement and the Head of Service agrees and signs the priority nomination. These are then submitted to senior managers in Housing Solutions who check the supporting evidence and then authorise the band 2 priority nomination for care leavers.

31. The Care Leaver Service has an Experienced Practitioner for housing who can act as a bridge between the housing and social care departments. The Care Leaver Service has recently made an appointment to a Move On Officer post, responsible for assisting young people move on from The Salvation Army and OASIS accommodation. We are also pleased to report that The Salvation Army has also now appointed to a newly created role to focus solely on assisting young people to move into independent living accommodations.

Pets

32. The committee heard a wish from young people that they could be allowed pets in their accommodation.
33. There are no pets allowed to reside in any of the homes provided by The Salvation Army and OASIS Community Housing. This is also the situation in the vast majority of semi-independent homes where care leavers live. The main reason is these are usually communal living environments where residents have a room and share communal spaces. It is considered impracticable for larger pets to live in one room and there would also be a potential risk of an animal attacking another resident along with issues relating to cleanliness etc.
34. Currently pets are also not allowed to reside with tenants in many social housing accommodation settings. Therefore having such a pet could mean a care leaver may be considered ineligible for a Southwark tenancy or they might be found to be in breach of their tenancy agreement if found to have pets in the property.
35. For smaller pets there have been instances where residents have requested a fish or a hamster for example and each request is considered on its own merit.
36. When young people move into independent living settings they are required to follow the conditions set out in their tenancy agreement by their landlords.
37. OASIS advises that they have held pet therapy workshops; support is also in place via the Experienced Practitioner for Education, Employment and Training to source opportunities for work or courses that involve close contact with animals in a variety of settings.

Monitoring placement quality

38. The committee wanted to know about arrangements for quality of placements and dealing with problems
39. Searches for SIA are undertaken through the Commissioning Alliance (CA) framework. This is a platform used by a number of local authorities

seeking to maximise choice and quality, as well as manage spend effectively. The CA has an accreditation process in place for SIA, which sets out minimum quality standards.

40. Where young people or professionals raise significant, non-safeguarding, concerns about a provider, the CA is asked to visit the placement and to investigate.
41. Sometimes SIA is sourced outside of the CA framework where no suitable match was found through the framework. When significant, non-safeguarding concerns are raised about these placements, the council's Contract Monitoring Team are asked to visit the placement and to investigate.

Additional support

42. For some young people additional support is put in place to help manage their behaviour during difficult moments in their lives. Additional support can take the form of 1:1 or 2:1 support for anything from an hour or two a day to round the clock support.
43. Where informed consent is not provided by young people aged 16 years or older, additional support risks falling within the framework of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) and needs court approval. This is because 'constant supervision' is one criteria that requires a DoLS order.
44. Where additional support is suitable, and is put in place, it is kept under review within agreed timescales and presented to senior management at the High Cost or Complex Needs Panel.

Young inspectors

45. The committee were interested in plans for young inspectors and how they might be involved in respect of some of the issues/concerns identified
46. Prior to the pandemic funding was in place to recruit care leavers to join an extant group of Young Advisors to undertake important peer-led inspections and feedback of local SIA placements. The cohort of young inspectors were due to sit within the Commissioning Division where they would be trained to work alongside the Contract Monitoring Team during their scheduled visits to SIA placements. Some young inspectors were recruited however in April 2020 progress was halted due to the pandemic. Recruitment was started again in early 2022 and the scheme is currently being relaunched.

Shared quality accommodation

47. The committee were interested in plans for the provision of shared quality accommodation and the need to look at procuring this provision for young people to help them move onto the next stage in their lives.
48. The council is in the process of setting up an in-house supported lodgings (SL) scheme. SL is an accommodation scheme for young people leaving care, aged 16–21, who are not yet ready to live on their own. The scheme is also offered to young people who have been offered University placements but whom need a place to live during holiday times. The aim of the scheme is to offer young people the opportunity to live in the home of a trained and approved person who will help them prepare for independent living. This is done by:
- Teaching the young person to cook, clean and generally take care of themselves and their home environment
 - Helping with budgeting
 - Guiding them to use washing machines, household appliances etc.
49. There are currently have three separate individuals in assessment to provide supported lodgings with another assessment due to begin shortly. It is anticipated that the first case will be presented at to a Supported Lodgings Panel at the end of July 2022.

Policy framework implications

50. The Borough Plan has a commitment to *“give young people in our borough the best opportunities in life”*. The service works with ART and Commissioning to ensure this happens as far as they are able to.

Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts

Community impact statement

51. Southwark is committed to ensuring all care leavers have access to high quality help and support to include accommodation that is of good quality and meets their needs.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement

52. This report encompasses services for all Looked After Children and Care Leavers in Semi Independent Accommodation both in Southwark but also in accommodation in other areas.

53. The council is committed to providing fair and just services, addressing inequality. The provision of good and effective services to Looked After children and care leavers is an important way the Council and its partners demonstrates their commitment these principles.

Health impact statement

54. The health of looked after children and Care Leavers is an important aspect of their care. It is hoped that the attention we give to the health and well-being of children and young people makes an important impact on the community both now and in the future in relation to their health, wellbeing and transition to independent adulthood.

Climate change implications

55. There are no overt implications regarding climate change, however it is noted that all dwellings and energy usage contribute to climate change.

Resource implications

56. The 16 Plus Project consists of commissioned accommodation with The Salvation Army (Springfield Lodge staffed accommodation and dispersed accommodation with floating support) and Oasis / DePauls. The intention is to maximise usage and build upon local support services in order to reduce reliance on expensive spot purchased semi-independent accommodation.

Legal implications

57. The council is committed to its responsibility to be a good Corporate Parent to Looked After Children and Care Leavers; these duties are set out in The Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Financial implications

58. There are no financial implications arising specifically from this report which is intended to provide a response to issues raised by young people during the workshop on 2 March 2022.

Consultation

59. This report is provided in response to issues raised directly by young people

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Director of Law and Governance

60. Not applicable.

Strategic Director of Finance and Governance

61. Not applicable.

Other officers

62. Not applicable.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
None		

APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	David Quirke-Thornton, Strategic Director of Children's and Adults' Services	
Report Author	Andrew Fowler, Head of Service, Children in Care 16+ and Care Leavers	
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Dated	27 June 2022	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Director of Law and Governance	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance and Governance	No	No
Cabinet Member	No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team		27 June 2022