

Sunderland City Council

NEXT STEPS

PREPARATION FOR INDEPENDENCE

Children's Services



Sunderland Children's Services Preparation for Independence Strategy and Context

The purpose of this document is to set out the framework and strategy within which Sunderland Children's Services seeks to prepare children looked after and care leavers for a successful transition from care to adulthood and independent living.

The broad aim of the preparation for independence, life skills and adulthood strategy is to ensure that all children looked after and care leavers are supported to develop practical, emotional and relationship skills that improve their overall resilience, confidence and self-esteem and give them the best possible opportunity to become self-determined young people.

The strategy recognises that preparing for adulthood begins from an early age for many children and young people living in their own families and with careful planning and thought, this approach can be replicated for children/young people looked after.

At present, when a child/young person becomes looked after, the development of age and maturity appropriate life skills such as basic cooking, household cleaning, positive relationship building, self-esteem and confidence building does take place in many foster care households, children's homes and semi-independent settings, but, in an ad-hoc and inconsistent manner.

By focussing on the transition to adulthood and independence process from an early age and over a period of time, the development of knowledge and skills can progress at the child/young person's pace and balance their status as a child in need, with that of a child/young person in care gradually preparing for adulthood and independence. Additionally, when a more structured focus on the transition to adulthood begins with the Leaving Care Assessment of Need at the age of 15½, the child/young person already has a good grounding of skills and knowledge on which to build.

The strategy seeks to place children/young people at its centre and acknowledges that robust assessments and person centred plans are essential to both understanding the individual needs of the child/young person, as well as to matching them to services and resources available to meet their assessed needs. In addition to the ongoing assessment, the strategy places importance on robust communications between all the different elements of Children's Services. This is particularly important where individual cases transfer between the Locality, Permanence and Next Steps

Teams and/or between the Disabled Children's Team and an Adult Service Team and also where children/young people move between placements.

The responsibility for co-ordinating the preparation for independence programme, Leaving Care Assessment of Need and Pathway Plan rests with the case holding social worker, within whichever team the worker is located. The responsibility for undertaking the preparation for independence programme is likely to be the person who has the most positive working relationship with the child/young person and may be their foster carer/staying put carer, residential keyworker, semi-independent support worker or social worker/leaving care personal adviser.

The transfer of information about the needs, abilities and progress of the child/young person is vital to ensuring that preparation for independence and life skills programmes are individualised and remain focused, task centred and not repetitive. A key principle of all the transition to adulthood strategy is to ensure that carers, staff, partner agencies and children/young people are consulted and are clear about the goals and tasks within individual preparation for independent programmes and the various roles each party plays.

It is widely acknowledged that using the term 'preparation for independence' can be unsettling for both children/young people and foster carers/staff and can be misinterpreted as 'preparing to move a child/young person out of the placement and to independence'. As such, workers/carers will need to be sensitive to misinterpretations and introduce and cover topics in an unstructured manner and as part of an everyday approach.

The introduction of Staying Put and the fact that young people can remain with their former foster carers on reaching the age of 18 can help to ensure a more gradual approach to preparation for independence is taken.

The strategy aims to promote the development of creative and practical resources such as transition checklists, worksheets, life skills games and quizzes, preparation for independence groups & activities as well assisting carers and staff to establish tangible means of engaging children/young people in preparation for independence work. This approach is enhanced by training for staff, carers and partner agencies aimed at assisting them to develop skills and innovative and flexible methods to work with, motivate and empower children and young people regarding preparation for adulthood and independence.

Preparation for independence, adulthood and life skills programmes must focus on the strengths of children and young people and progress at a pace that suits the individual child/young person and should identify the timescale that is required to make a successful transition to adult life.

The development of the department's preparation for independence strategy includes a key focus on seeking the views of children/young people in its formulation, in order that the strategy reflects their views and can enhance

and improve the life chances of children and young people in, and leaving care.

The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations and Guidance 2015 (Volume 2), the Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers Regulations and Guidance 2010, (revised 2015) (Volume 3), the Fostering Service Regulations and Guidance 2011/2013, the Children's Homes Regulations and Guidance 2015 all have an explicit requirement to have a flexible preparation for independence strategy. In addition, the Department for Education's Care Leavers Strategy consultation, underway in 2016 has key focus on individual local authorities improving their approach to preparing children/young people for independence and setting out a clear 'offer' regarding how they undertake this key task.

Key Principles underpinning the Preparation for Independence Strategy:

Preparation for independence has two key phases:

- 1 Informal preparation and life skills development from the day a child/young person becomes looked after;
 - 2 A more structure approach to preparation for independence and adulthood from the age of 15½ - 15¾ commencing with the Leaving Care Assessment of Need (Regulation 42).
- Preparation for independence should not be seen as a distinct phase; but rather a set of small tasks and steps that should be undertaken from the point the child becomes 'looked after' and reflect how children and young people learn within a family setting.
 - A more structured focus on life skills development and planning for the transition to independence begins with the Leaving Care Assessment of Need that begins at the age of 15½ and should be completed by the age of 16.
 - Preparation for independence, life skills and transition to adulthood programmes, leaving care assessments and pathway plans should aim to empower children/young people, taking account of individual and staged learning approaches and the fact that many tasks may need to be revisited or repeated.
 - Appropriate pathway planning, life skills programmes and services that can assist with this process must be based on robust assessments, achievable goals, clear plans and knowledge of available services and partnership approaches.
 - Individual preparation for independence, life skills and transition to adulthood programmes, leaving care assessments and pathway plans while being flexible, should highlight the tasks that need to be achieved

and the role foster carers, residential social workers, social workers, leaving care personal advisers, family members and partner agencies, such as health, housing, schools and colleges will play.

- Preparation for independence programmes should highlight and build on the strengths of children/young people, identify activities and tasks that will motivate the child/young person and also allow sufficient time to work on any identified activities and tasks at the child/young person's pace.
- To ensure a person centred approach, it is important to identify and/or develop a broad range of tools, resources and methods for working with children and young people in order to develop flexible, creative and individual approaches.
- Preparation for Independence, life skills and transition to adulthood programmes should address issues of health and development, education, training and employment, practical, emotional and relationship skills, placement and accommodation needs, community organisations and support networks and financial and budgeting skills.
- Preparation for Independence, life skills and transition to adulthood programmes should address particular needs arising from issues of identity, gender, class, sexuality, race, culture, religion, linguistic background and disability.
- Information for children, young people, carers, staff and partner agencies should be available regarding the process of preparation for independence, life skills training, the transition to adulthood and the services that are available in the community and from Children's Services.
- Particular attention should be paid to the types of placements that children and young people live in and how these may impact on their pathway plan and preparation for independence, life skills and transition to adulthood needs.
- Sunderland Children's Services has a range of materials to support preparation for independence work including the Sunderland Preparation for Independence and Pathway Planning Workbook launched in November 2015. The Workbook is used by Children's Services staff, foster carers and partner agency staff across all placement types and with all children looked after aged 14 and older. The aim of the Workbook is to focusing direct work with children and young people and provides a document to demonstrate the child/young person's knowledge/understand of life skills etc. Sunderland Children's Homes have a range of preparation for independence materials that complements the Workbook and can be used in conjunction with the Workbook.