

ADVISER SUPPORT HELPS A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION FROM CARE

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Personal advisers help children in residential care transition to independent living.



Personal advisers help young people get the accommodation that is right for them. Picture: JJ'Studio/Adobe Stock

- **Levels of support are tailored to the specific needs of individuals particularly those with complex problems**
- **The initiative has reduced spending on residential care and cut levels of homelessness among care leavers**

ACTION

A bespoke support service in Nottinghamshire is helping young people with complex needs successfully transition to supported accommodation from residential care.

Initially launched as a pilot three years ago, the county council's Transitional Personal Adviser (TPA) service was introduced to ensure its provision supported all young people regardless of their level of need.

This new model of commissioning supported accommodation has allowed the council to specifically target those leaving care before 18 that might have complex needs or with an offending background.

Following a year-long trial, the implementation of the service was approved by the authority in 2018, creating three personal adviser posts on a permanent basis.

Cases for TPA support are selected by a panel that includes leaving care managers and those from the council's looked-after children and placements teams.

Nominations are made using a request form submitted by professionals such as social workers or independent reviewing officers.

With a cap on caseloads of up to eight young people per personal adviser, the service allows the most vulnerable young people to receive intensive support, explains Matt Wesson, a manager for the council's leaving care team.

"They've still got their personal adviser from the leaving care team and their social worker – all of the people that are involved in their life – but as the TPA service we are able to identify any issues they might have when they move on," he says.

Wesson believes the service fills a critical gap in support for young people with complex needs compounded by high social worker caseloads and a large care leaver population across the county.

Despite developing a closer working relationship with supported accommodation providers to improve the type of provision available, he believes there was still a need to address varying levels of support for these care leavers.

"We realised we didn't have those facilities post-18 so we asked our accommodation providers for properties that were more suitable for our care leaver population.

"We also thought about what we could do to make that an easier transition and support our providers to maintain that accommodation.

"But we saw that even though we had done this there was a gap between those young people leaving residential care and being ready for independence. We were also not intervening enough especially for our more complex cases.

"The idea behind the TPA service is that we can work with these young people to make sure transition happens as successfully as possible so we are not setting young people up to fail," says Wesson.

With around 227 units for its main 16+ provision, the county council offers housing options that are either "core" or "cluster" accommodation.

The core services are staffed 24 hours a day while cluster units may be self-contained or shared houses where staff provide visiting support.

The TPA service helps to assess whether young people with higher needs would cope with being placed in a core or cluster property with the option to change their accommodation if needed.

Weekly meetings are held between the council and accommodation providers to discuss any difficulties arising from placements as well as identify current capacity issues.

Wesson says personal advisers might visit young people as much as twice a day as part of a "bespoke support package" with a view to stepping down contact to more infrequent intervals such as once a week or every two weeks.

He cites the example of one care leaver that was persuaded to move into supported accommodation by their personal adviser.

“He was very keen to get his own place but we asked him to stay in supported accommodation so if he needed it, the support was on hand,” explains Wesson.

He says one of the authority’s housing providers found the young person a cluster property and his personal adviser agreed to stay on for a further three months while he transitioned into supported accommodation.

“It was a challenging case but we said to this young person, have that support on hand at first and prove to us that you can do it,” adds Wesson.

Another factor that underpins the success behind TPA support is encouraging young people to take “ownership” of the supported accommodation services provided to them.

“We let them choose things like their own furniture. It saves so many problems and cost in the future giving them a sense of pride in where they live. It also makes them more responsible for who they let into the accommodation,” says Wesson.

He says greater partnership working with the county’s seven district councils has helped overcome previous challenges preventing young people moving more freely around the county.

“Our care leavers can now identify whichever area they want to live in Nottinghamshire which is also freeing up the availability of supported accommodation.

“So a young person might eventually want to live in the Newark area but recognises the best accommodation for them might be in Ashfield for six or 12 months while they are learning their independence. That’s no longer a barrier for us,” explains Wesson.

He says not only has the TPA service enabled young people to be placed in accommodation appropriate for their level of need, but has also highlighted efficiencies to be made from providing lower levels of support.

“The purpose [of TPA] wasn’t to necessarily save money and get young people out of residential care but to make their journey a better transition.

“So when we looked at whether their needs were actually being met and the high support costs we were paying and how they weren’t needed for that person, it was evident how much we had saved as a local authority by putting that investment into the service in the first place,” explains Wesson.

IMPACT

A county council report into the TPA pilot which ran from September 2017 to May 2018 showed personal advisers supported 22 young people, of which 10 had transitioned from higher cost provision including residential placements.

As a result of the transitions from residential care, the council achieved a net saving of £140,769 in 2017/18, exceeding the original savings forecast.

The report states in May 2018 a cost avoidance of more than £300,000 was projected should those young people participating in the pilot continue to stay in the placement they had transitioned into.

Such a calculation assumes these young people would have stayed in residential care until they were 17 and a half.

Feedback from those involved in the pilot indicated there was evidence of improved outcomes for young people, with Ofsted positively referencing the initiative following a focused visit in January 2018.

Wesson says in addition to these financial savings, the council has seen a “dramatic” reduction in its homelessness presentations among its care leaver population.

He believes this has been helped in part by central government funding that allowed the council to employ a homelessness prevention personal adviser to focus on helping those in care and care leavers.

Care leaver champions were also established at each district council to help improve understanding of a care leaver’s personal journey, he adds.

“There’s not one simple solution for our young people but it’s about having an offer that we can tailor for young people but also to recognise other agencies have a responsibility and a role within that too,” he says.