

Young Asylum Seekers and Refugees and Supported Housing

The following practice notes are intended for social workers, community support workers, personal advisors, supported housing key workers, managers and those responsible for commissioning services and contracts with supported housing providers. The aim is to highlight areas that should be considered when young people move into supported housing.

There are different types of supported housing such as foyers; shared accommodation with other young people with outreach support; lead tenant accommodation (where a young person shares the accommodation with a responsible adult vetted by the housing providers, known as a lead tenant); placements where young people live on their own with outreach support provided, either in supported lodgings or in 'landlady, landlord' schemes.

The primary aim of supported housing is to provide the young person with a safe and supportive environment in which to build and develop their practical independence skills. By the time they leave supported housing they should be ready to take the next step into independence.

The accommodation: Before the young person moves in

Before young people are left in their new accommodation, there are a number of areas that we suggest should be checked by the allocated worker or placing worker, together with the key worker. This should be done in consultation with the department or individual within the local authority responsible for commissioning, contracts, standards and quality of supported housing provision.

The following is not an exhaustive list but sets out the main areas for consideration.

- The placement providers are responsible for providing accommodation that is fit for purpose. However, there may be specific needs that have to be catered for over and above what is generally provided, for example if a young person has a disability that requires special adaptations to the property. These should be sorted out before the young person moves in.
- Although the placement provider is responsible for ensuring that the accommodation has everything for a young person to be self-sufficient, comfortable and able to get on with day-to-day living, it is also worth double-checking that everything is in place. For example, check that there are adequate pots, pans, crockery, cutlery and cooking utensils available for the young person to use, that there is adequate furniture, and that locks are working properly.

If potential problems can be identified and resolved before a young person moves into supported housing, this prevents a great deal of time being spent on dealing with complaints once the young person has moved in and chasing placement or housing providers to get the work carried out.

The allocated worker (social worker, community support worker, personal advisor) may be able to sort out any minor issues with the housing or placement provider directly – for example if curtains need putting up or pots and pans need purchasing. But they should first advise the appropriate person, be it their manager or the local authority commissioning or contract department, of what they intend to do.

The accommodation: Continuing to ensure quality

Although the accommodation may be suitable at the point the young person moves in, it is inevitable that issues will arise as a result of general wear and tear, communal living and sometimes through accident or possibly wilful damage to the property. The regular visits made by the allocated worker and the statutory review process should, as a matter of course, consider these issues.

The young person should also be advised to let their key worker and social worker know if there are any problems with the accommodation as soon as they become aware of them.

The statutory review or pathway plan review process is another opportunity to look at issues pertaining to the property. The independent reviewing officer has the opportunity here to review the suitability and quality of the placement; and to give feedback on their findings and recommendations to the young person, the commissioning or contracts service, the allocated social worker or manager, and the placement providers.

Preparation for independence: The purpose of supported housing

Some asylum seeking and refugee young people will have practical skills they developed in their country of origin or within their family but may need assistance in putting these skills into practice while living in the UK.

Some young people may not have basic practical skills or knowledge about self-care, household tasks, basic health and safety, or how to operate equipment in a home. Stanley (2001 p114) asked why assumptions were made about young people's abilities and suggests that:

possibly there is an assumption that because young separated refugees have shown great ingenuity and maturity in making the journey to the UK they must have other life skills to match.

The other point to bear in mind is that, although one might have assumptions or expectations about the level of independence skills an average 16- or 17-

year-old brought up in the UK might have, expectations of young people of this age may vary in different cultures. A good starting point would be to talk to the young person and ascertain their understanding of what's expected of them within the context of developing independence in the UK, and their current abilities and skills.

When a young person moves into supported housing they need to know basic important things to ensure that they are able to manage in that particular supported living environment. There should be an induction period, and a welcome pack with important information translated into their first language, which the young person can refer to at anytime. The welcome pack will need to be tailored to the needs of the young person, for example if the young person cannot read, one might consider using pictures to get important information across.

Young people do not always take in what is told to them on first moving in to a community, especially if this is done without an interpreter. It is worth the investment of doing this properly, then following it up with regular checks to ensure that they have the skills and acquired the knowledge to live in supported accommodation. This should continue as part of an ongoing assessment of their preparation for independent living and should inform the pathway plan. The pathway plan should be regularly monitored, updated and reviewed through the statutory review or pathway planning process.

The following are suggested areas to be covered in the initial induction into supported living and in the programme of work for developing their skills and knowledge.

- A full induction must include the aims of the placement; the expectations; the rules of the house; what support will be on offer; how to get help and advice outside of the time that the key worker might be visiting; the roles and the responsibilities of the key worker and placement or housing provider; and information about key work sessions and house meetings.
- It would be expected that young people are advised, as soon as they move in, of how to work general appliances in the house, such as how to use the heating system, the purpose of smoke alarms, and what to do if they are set off either as a result of fire or accidentally.
- Young people also need to know about the importance of keeping the front door locked and what to do if they lose their key. This is of particular importance if there is no specific insurance in place to cover the young person's belongings as a result of theft.
- Young people need to know exactly what to do in an emergency and, for less urgent matters, who to contact and where to go. This would include anything related to the house: fire, flood, disputes within the household, difficulties or disputes with neighbours, and what to do in the event of a break-in or burglary. Also include issues pertaining to individuals: health matters, such as where and how to seek medical attention, personal safety issues, and what to do in the event that they are a victim of crime, bullying, harassment or discrimination.

- Young people need to be given information and shown where local facilities such as shops, places of worship, community resources, transport links, the post office, leisure facilities, and the children's services (social services) and other important council offices are in relation to their accommodation.
- They need to be made aware of how to keep themselves safe when outside the accommodation, where there would be less adult supervision, as well as inside. Supported housing placements can become targets for adults in the community who might seek to exploit the accommodation or the young people themselves. Supported housing can also become a place that other young people, who do not live at the property and who congregate around it, wish to exploit to the detriment of the young people in the placement.
- Young people need to know how to do basic cooking so that they can provide for themselves. They need to be taught how to live on a budget. They may need assistance, especially in the early days, with where to shop, what to shop for and how to cook healthy, balanced meals on a budget. Special issues such as dietary needs have to be considered, for example where to buy Halal meat.
- Young people will need to be taught about basic cleaning chores, such as those in the bathroom, toilet, and kitchen – and in particular about cleaning the cooker, fridge, kitchen floors and surfaces.
- Young people need to be told about the safe use of fridge-freezers, how to store food properly and about the dangers of food poisoning. They will need to know how to defrost a fridge-freezer and how to safely freeze and defrost food.
- Young people need to know about basic health and safety issues in the home: what to do in the event of a fire, how to prevent a potential fire, and what fire hazards to be aware of. They also need to know what to do if there is a flood; the dangers of electricity and water; and which electrical appliances should and should not be turned off when not in use, for example to turn off an iron but not a fridge.
- Learning and developing skills in budgeting is an important aspect for all young people. One cannot assume the level of a young person's budgeting skills or knowledge about how to manage money, especially in the context of the UK. The UK may differ from their country of origin in terms of the currency, financial transactions and terminology it uses, for example cheques, credit cards, accounts and banking systems. Young people should be made aware of how money is managed in general in the UK if they don't already know, for example by explaining about bank accounts and how some benefits, wages and local authorities' subsistence money is paid directly into a person's individual bank account. This should form part of the work of developing financial knowledge and management skills. If an asylum seeking young person wishes to open a bank account or savings account, it can be very difficult, as banks are not always willing to open accounts them. They will need help and proof of identity and address, such as utility bills, current Home Office leave to remain documentation, a medical card

and a letter from the local authority confirming that they are supporting the young person.

- If utilities are not included in the placement costs and the young person is expected to contribute towards these costs, they will need help in learning how to organise for these to be paid. They will need to be taught the costs and how to pay bills, whether it is a key meter, card payment system, or monthly or quarterly bills. Special attention should be paid to informing the young person about TV licences, as this concept is unknown to many and can lead, if not explained, to a hefty fine.

The aim of supported housing is to provide the stepping-stone to independence. It should offer a taste of what it might be like to live independently, and create the opportunity to learn and make mistakes within a safe, supported, environment.

The induction into living semi-independently needs to be thorough. It should include equipping young people with the skills to manage the early days, getting used to fewer boundaries, more freedom and of course more responsibilities. The programme of work with a young person while in supported housing should ensure that they are ready and able to move into independence with confidence and with the basic skills to survive in the adult world.

Ian Scott and Sheree Kane

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Ian Scott is an independent reviewing officer specialising in asylum seeking and refugee children and young people.

Sheree Kane is the Principal Officer for Children in Public Care at the National Children's Bureau.

References

Stanley, K (2001) *Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England*. Save the Children.