

A guide to leaving care

How we will support
you on your journey
to independence



City of Westminster

The prospect of leaving care can seem daunting but you are not alone. Westminster City Council will support you every step of the way on your journey to independence.

Developed and designed by care leavers, in this leaflet you will find information about the continued support we will provide you. This includes the services you will have access to such as housing, budget management, employment and training.

Your rights

- You will be involved in all decision-making processes about your plans to leave care
- You will be offered access to an independent advocate if you are not happy with the care we give you
- You will be able to see the information we keep about you, including the files and record written about you whilst in care.



Who's eligible for support?

In order to access these services, you need to meet one of the following criteria:

1. You have been in care for at least 13 weeks between the ages of 14 and 16.
2. You have been in care for 13 weeks after your 16th birthday.

The process

Around your 16th birthday we will contact you to start to create a personal plan for you so that you are ready to leave care.

This will involve:

1. **Being matched with a personal adviser.** A personal adviser is a support worker who is not a social worker. Together you will explore what your aspirations are for when you leave care and how we can support you to achieve your goals. You can ask for support from a personal adviser up until the age of 25. The amount of support you receive will depend on your circumstances.
2. **Creating a pathway plan.** With your personal adviser you will create a pathway plan that sets out your needs, views and future goals. The plan will also include a commitment from us as to what support you will receive from the council, this can range from financial support to housing. Your pathway plan will be regularly reviewed so that it is kept up-to-date and reflects the level of support you want and need.

The role of your personal adviser

Your personal adviser will be introduced to you before you leave care as part of your pathway plan. Your personal adviser is there to offer you support, advice, guidance and to assist you as you become more independent.

You should see your personal adviser at least every 3 months, but we aim for more regular contact if that's what you want.

After you leave care you will be able to continue to receive support from your personal adviser up to the age of 25. This will be available to you regardless of whether you are in education and/or training.

So that you understand your rights, the law states that;

- **For care leavers aged 16 and 17 the local authority (in this case, Westminster City Council) is under an absolute duty to support you (as well as providing you with a personal adviser), which does apply once a young person reaches the age of 18**
- **For care leavers aged 18–20 there is a proactive duty on local authorities to keep in touch with care leavers**
- **For care leavers aged 21–25 there is a duty on local authorities to assess care leavers' needs and develop and keep under review a pathway plan, only where a young person requests support.**

Personal advisers get involved in discussions about your needs and your pathway plan after consultation with you and important people in your life. Your pathway plan, sets out your needs, views and future goals, and exactly what support you will receive from the council. We review your pathway plan with you regularly so that it is kept up-to-date and reflects the level of support you want and need.

Your leaving care team will consider with you what extra support you may need. You might, for example, need extra support because:

- **You have special educational needs or a disability**
- **You are an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC) and your immigration status is unclear**
- **You are in, or leaving custody or you have had contact with the criminal justice system**
- **You are a young parent; or**
- **You are going through a difficult time in your personal life.**

Services you will have access to

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one health and emotional wellbeing

Your personal adviser can:

- Give information on healthy living
- Give information on getting help to pay for prescriptions
- Give information on intimacy and healthy relationships
- Give information about health drop-in centres
- Support you to register with a GP
- Support you to register with a dentist
- Support you to move from CAMHS (Children and Mental Health Services) to adult services
- Give information about counselling services that are available locally
- If you are a young parent, we will take an interest in your child/ren and support you to access appropriate services and do the best for them
- If you want support with drug or alcohol use, your personal adviser can provide you with advice, guidance or support in accessing services that are available in your area.

The LAC Nurse will:

- Ensure you have a reaching 18 health assessment the month before you turn 18, this will include receiving a summary of your health whilst in care and information on accessing the health records held about you
- Contact you/your social worker for an update of your health post 18, just before you turn 19
- Always be available to support you with any health queries – call 020 7266 8774 or 020 7266 8862 for more information or to find out the number for your nurse
- Offer support to help you locate NHS services local to you
- Help you to access adult mental health services including counselling; attend hospital and community clinic appointments including sexual health services
- Help you to maintain a healthy lifestyle through advice and support on a range of topics and can support you to attend the local leisure facilities via gym membership
- Help you to access dental health services. You can get help if you are pregnant or have had a baby in the last 12 months or are still in full time education between the ages of 16–18. The NHS dental health charges change each year, these costs are available on nhs.uk
- Help you to access free eye tests and vouchers towards glasses/contact lenses if you are still in full time education between the ages of 16–18

- Help paying for prescriptions if you are still in full time education between the ages of 16–18.

If you are on a low income or in receipt of Income Support, Income Based Employment and Support, Job Seekers Allowance or Universal Credit you can apply for a Health Credit Certificate [HC2 or HC3] to support free dental care, eye care and prescriptions.

Additional Supports

The council funds on line confidential counselling which is provided by KOOTH.

The service and the accommodation providers in Westminster work closely with Alcohol and Drugs advisers and can refer you for advice and support.

The service and virtual school run different groups and events using the creative Arts, Food and Sport to help support physical and emotional wellbeing and your personal adviser can tell you more about these.

Resources you may find helpful:

- [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)
- NHS Go an app for Android and iPhones
- [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)
- LGBT Foundation: 0345 330 30 30

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making friends and developing relationships



We recognise how important making friends and developing relationships is to your overall wellbeing. As well as support from a personal adviser, we may be able to offer you additional practical and emotional support, such as:

- Providing you with a mentor/peer mentor
- Where appropriate, continuing to support contact with the 'Independent Visitor' you had while you were in care
- Help to maintain or regain contact with people special to you or who cared for you in the past, like former foster carers or social workers
- Providing information about regular groups that take place within the service, where you can meet and interact with other care leavers, for example Tuesday Group and the Children and Young People's Panel (CYPP).

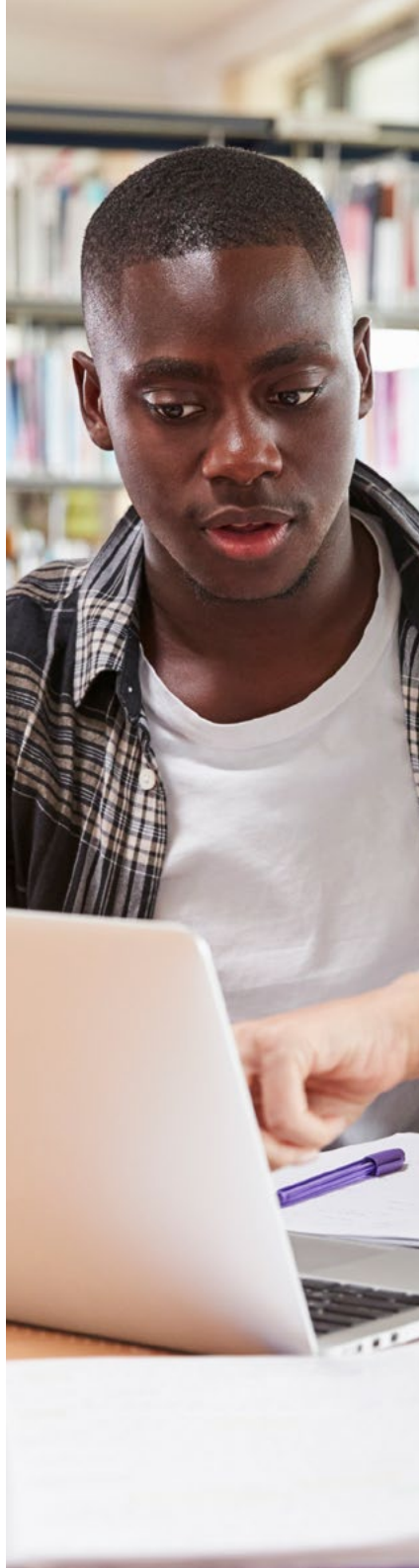
three managing your finances

We will try to help you financially, in a similar way to how parents would support their own children. Our help includes:

Financial Support

- Providing a financial gift at birthdays and Christmas or other celebrations (for LAC under 18)
- Support to gain important identification documents, such as a passport and/or provisional driving licence, before your 18th birthday
- Support to open a bank account
- Helping you to save in preparation for when you leave care and supporting you in deciding how to use your savings
- Providing a leaving care grant to help you buy essential things when moving into your own home. Westminster will offer a Leaving Care Grant of £2,000: £1500 will be issued for purchasing essentials for your home
- You can access up to £500 to support you in your semi-independent living or to manage any financial emergencies you may experience such as being in debt
- Whilst we will strongly encourage you to pursue employment, education and training post 18 there may be times when you need to claim benefits such as universal credit and we will give you financial support and help with your rent whilst this claim is being progressed

- If you need financial assistance or what we call a crisis loan the arrangements will be explained to you in more detail and you will be asked to sign an agreement
- You will be asked to pay us back any monies for which you receive a backdated payment and if you choose not to this may be deducted from your leaving care grant
- Crisis loans/emergency payments will affect your 'Leaving Care Grant' if you are unable to pay back the loan and your personal adviser will need to discuss your situation with a manager if you are at risk of using more than the £500 flexible element of your Leaving Care Grant.



Advice & Guidance

- Providing or telling you about relevant money management courses
- Information on how to access your Junior ISA, if you have one (a fund of money set aside by the government and the council)
- Your Personal adviser and key worker will undertake budgeting work with you and offer general advice on financial matters
- There is a Benefits Adviser in the team that can offer support and advice around your benefits and particular circumstances
- As you near independent living our Employment and Housing Coach will offer you advice and support around maximising your income and maintaining a tenancy. This will include inviting you to a Tenancy Workshop.

Benefits

- Exemptions to or discounts on paying council tax. Eligible for 3 consecutive years whilst in final stage accommodation if you are in employment or on a paid apprenticeship
- Support and guidance around Welfare Benefits.

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housing and accommodation

Close to your 16th birthday your social worker will start to develop your pathway plan to independence. Your pathway plan is an agreement between yourself and your social worker as to what will happen once you reach 18 and become an adult. This includes where you will live.

There are different types of housing and accommodation available for young people leaving care and you will be involved in the discussions around what arrangement would be best for you. The core types of accommodation arrangements are as follows:

Staying in your current accommodation

In 2014 the Children and Families Act formalised the practice of allowing young people to remain with their foster carers post 18.

If you wish to and your carer(s) and the council agree, you can choose to stay with your foster family after you turn 18.

This may allow you to complete your education or offer you extra time to make your transition to independence.

Semi-independent housing

This kind of accommodation is only available to people aged 16 and up. There are different types of resources both within and outside of Westminster. These typically include hostel accommodation, shared living spaces and trainer flats. When you live in semi-independent accommodation you will have your own, lockable room but may have to share other facilities such as a kitchen and bathroom if it's a hostel or shared living space. Depending on the level of support required there will either be key-workers based at the accommodation who are there to work with you to achieve your independence goals or who come in to see you on a regular basis. Support and independence training typically involves learning to cook, budget management, cleaning, managing relationships, paying bills, looking after your health and to ideally be in education, employment or training. This support will be a mixture of key worker meetings with you, one to one or group training and practically doing things with you like enrolling at college or registering with a GP.

Independent housing

There are different types of independent housing but usually independent housing means that you have signed a tenancy or license agreement and as such are responsible for paying rent, being a good neighbour and keeping the accommodation clean and in good repair.



As you develop your personal adviser will speak with you about moving to independent accommodation and together you will decide when this is right for you.

Usually this starts with assessing your eligibility for Westminster social housing and registering you when you're 18 if it is agreed that you are likely to want to return to and have independent accommodation in Westminster. If not, then your personal adviser will explore other options with you which could include returning to live with a family, private rented accommodation, or application for social housing in the area that you are living.

In ensuring you have developed the required skills for independent living and to hold a tenancy your personal adviser and key worker/foster carer will look for clear evidence such as proof that you are paying bills and keeping relevant appointments. They will also need to see that you have been a good neighbour by not creating too much noise, being able to manage relationships or being able to take care of your space properly. They will also want to know that you can keep yourself safe and know how to respond to an emergency.

When your personal adviser has agreed a plan of independent living with you and you are nearly ready they will present it to Westminster's Leaving Care Accommodation Panel for agreement.

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support in education, employment or training

We want you to succeed in your education, training and employment. We will ask you how you are doing and be ready to celebrate your achievements with you.

We will offer you:

- **Support to meet your transport costs when travelling to training, school/college, apprenticeships or job interviews**
- **Support to buy tools, equipment, essential clothing, and books**
- **The chance to attend and help organise celebration events when young people achieve education, training and employment milestones (not including Post 21).**

Finances for Study

All young people aged 16–19 who are looked after and study full time are entitled to a bursary, which will be paid to you by your college, sixth form or training centre into your bank account. If you decide to continue studying at college from the age of 19, then there is advice available about Student Finance options to meet the costs of some courses which are no longer offered free after the age of 19. All colleges and sixth forms have a Designated Person who supports young people in care, and care leavers and they will be able to advise you about support available.

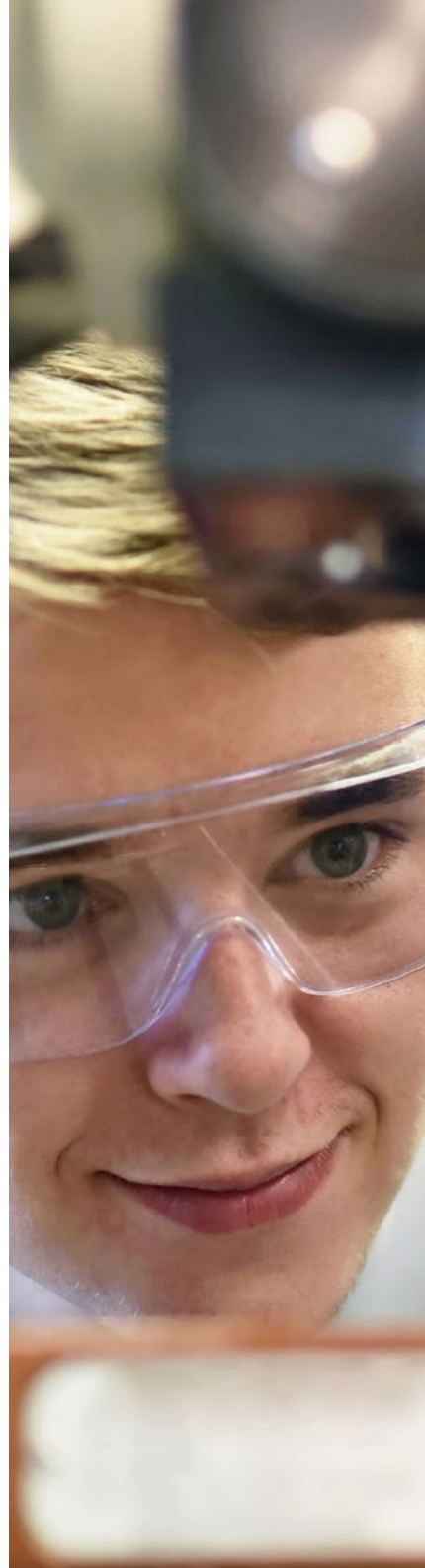
University

Should you choose to go to University, Westminster City Council will support you through the application process via your virtual school worker, social worker, personal adviser or college tutor/student support. In addition, we will:

- **Support if you choose to go to university, such as helping you obtain tuition fees and maintenance loans, care leavers grants and access to the hardship fund from university (not all universities provide this)**
- **Support you with the UCAS fee**
- **Help you choose the right course and university that matches your talents and interests**
- **Provide you with a Higher Education (HE) bursary/ 'Parental Contribution' of up to £5000 each year for the duration of your studies (up to a maximum of four years), which is a contribution towards 52 weeks' accommodation.¹ This is subject to completion of a Section 24 Finance request, relevant evidence and agreement with the terms and conditions of the funding²**
- **If you choose to remain with your foster carer as a staying put arrangement then the Parental Contribution is reduced to £2000 as the council makes a direct payment to the carer and your living costs are less.**

1 If a young person has decided to stay in a 'Staying Put Arrangement' an adjustment will be made in order to create greater equity with other Care Leavers in Higher Education. The maximum that can therefore be paid is £2000.

2 Conditions of receiving parental contribution include the following: that you provide full details of your course and that they remain correct throughout the academic year; that you provide full details of student financing and any additional grants you have been awarded; that you provide a 'letter or acceptance' from the university or proof of movement from Year 1 to Year 2 or Year 3; that you provide evidence of enrolment before finances start; that attendance and academic monitoring will take place each term; consent to contact the university or higher education institute; that you are expected to have a minimum of 90% attendance and complete all coursework; that you will inform the service of any 'change in your circumstances'; that you provide a copy of your rent agreement and rent statements as part of the termly monitoring.



Employment & Training

As well as your social worker or personal adviser, Westminster City Council have a team of staff who can support with your employment and training needs, this includes a specialist Employment, Education and Training Coach and staff from the The Virtual School.

They will provide you with:

- **Careers information and advice**
- **Opportunities for work experience, apprenticeships and employment within the council and with local employers**
- **Help with CV writing or job applications**
- **Help with interview preparation, which could include a one-off payment towards suitable clothing (up to £60)**
- **One to one or group coaching where needed.**

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participation in the community

We want you to feel a part of your community and to have all the chances in life that other young adults have. We can help you participate in the following ways:

- Providing information on groups, clubs and places of worship you may wish to join
- Attend our Tuesday evening club. Open to anyone who wants to come along every Tuesday, 6pm at our office in Crompton Street
- The Children and Young People Panel is a group of young people who meet regularly to talk about things that matter and to help inform and shape council services and policies that affect you – including this offer. If you would like to get involved please talk to your personal adviser or drop in to the Tuesday evening club. Our participation team run a number of arts classes, sports events and opportunities to get involved in social enterprises. Your personal adviser will have up to date information about what's on
- Informing you about relevant awards, schemes and competitions you can enter, in line with your talents and interests
- Encouraging and helping you to enrol on the Electoral Register, so you can vote in elections
- Informing you about voluntary work that we think you may be interested in
- Informing and possibly helping with the cost of leisure activities
- Giving you advice and helping you to challenge any discrimination you face as a care leaver.

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refugee and unaccompanied migrant young people

As a refugee or migrant young person you will have general access to leaving care support. Your entitlement to support can be effected by your immigration status and this will be set out in your pathway plan. We recognise that you may have some needs that are different to other care leavers and we will seek to support you with these. We will do this by:

- Giving you information and supporting you to access legal advice
- Giving you information about where to access advice about your immigration status
- Providing advice and support to access appropriate educational courses, for example ESOL classes
- Support with transitioning to adulthood
- Supporting you to access public funds and other services
- Giving you financial assistance whilst you are awaiting a decision from the Home Office.

Your right to be heard

If you feel you have been treated unfairly throughout the process of leaving care we will support you to challenge this.

Independent advocates are separate from the council's Leaving Care Service and can inform you about your rights and help you to be heard.

The Children's Rights Officer provides the advocacy service in Westminster. You can call on **0207 641 7585 / 07507 859761** or email **childrensadvocacy@westminster.gov.uk**

Don't forget: You have a right to see the information we keep about you, including the files and records written about you when you were in care. We make an effort to share this information with you at an appropriate time and help you to make sense of your individual experiences. We will make sure that a discussion takes place fully explaining this process before you access your records.