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GUIDANCE CIRCULAR

Guidance on Maintaining Age Ratios in Jointly Commissioned Young Adults Supported Accommodation Projects	**Circular Reference: FCPD Communication 03/2019** **Date of Issue: 1 February 2019**
For action by: Chief Executive, HSC Board Director of Social Care and Children, HSC Board Chief Executives, HSC Trusts Directors of Children's Services, HSC Trusts Chief Executive, RQIA **For information to:** Chief Executive, NIHE Director of Social Housing Policy and Oversight, DfC Director of Housing Supply Policy and Delivery, DfC Deputy Director of Social Housing Policy and Oversight, DfC Chief Executive, Council for the Homeless NI Chief Executive, NICCY Director Fostering Network Northern Ireland Director, Include Youth Chief Executive, VOYPIC	**Related documents** Standards - Leaving Care Services in Northern Ireland Standards for Young Adults Supported Accommodation Projects in Northern Ireland (2012) FCPD 01/2015: Guidance on conditions to be considered on the continued placement of an 18 year old in a registered children's home (2015) **Superseded documents** N/A **For immediate implementation** **Enquiries** Any enquiries about the content of this Circular should be addressed to: Looked After Children and Adoption Policy Unit Department of Health Room A3.7, Castle Buildings Stormont Estate BELFAST BT4 3SQ ☎ 028 90 765604 ✉ Brenda.shields@health-ni.gov.uk **Summary of contents** This guidance provides clarification for commissioners and providers of supported accommodation for young adults on the maintenance of age ratios in supported accommodation projects.

Purpose of this guidance

1. This guidance seeks to clarify for commissioners and providers the occupancy split, in terms of age, which should be maintained within supported accommodation for young people.

Supported Accommodation

2. Supported Accommodation is an integrated model of housing support and social care provided for young people aged between 16 and 21+[1] years to enable them to live independently in good quality, safe accommodation as they prepare to leave, or have left care. There are a number of supported accommodation projects across Northern Ireland. They are jointly commissioned and jointly funded by the five Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Supporting People Programme. While there are two types of supported accommodation services – supported accommodation projects and supported lodgings – the content of this Circular relates only to supported accommodation projects.

3. Supported accommodation projects aim to support vulnerable young people aged 16-21+ to develop the skills to be able to live independently in the community[2]. These projects offer an alternative to mainstream care placements to children aged 16 and 17, as well as to young adults aged 18-21+ where it is assessed that their needs can best be met in a living environment which affords age and developmentally appropriate experiences in preparation for adult life.

4. By their nature, these projects also recognise the need for an appropriate level of supervision and continuing care, alongside the provision of housing-related support under the Supporting People Programme. These projects are designed to work in partnership with each young person and deliver a tailored support package aimed at enabling a gradual transition from residential, family or foster care to living more independently.

Minimum Standards for Supported Accommodation Projects

5. In 2012, the Department of Health published minimum standards for supported accommodation projects which provide housing support, care and accommodation[3]. These minimum standards outline the arrangements, services and procedures

[1] It is possible for young people to remain in supported accommodation beyond their 21st birthday. This will be on the basis that their interests are best served by remaining and must be permitted by the Statement of Purpose of the supported accommodation.

[2] Article 27(2)(f) of the Children (NI) Order 1995.

[3] Standards for Young Adults Supported Accommodation Projects in Northern Ireland (2012) which is available at https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/standards-young-adults-supported-accommodation-projects-northern-ireland

which need to be in place and implemented within supported accommodation projects to promote the delivery of high quality, safe and supported living for the young adults, aged 16-21+, who reside in them.

6. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority [RQIA], in exercising its review and reporting functions[4], may carry out inspections and report on jointly commissioned supported accommodation projects for young people. Inspections by RQIA of supported accommodation projects are carried out with reference to the minimum standards. In addition, each provider must comply with the minimum standards and must ensure that they remain compliant with the requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework which sets out the standards expected in the delivery of the NIHE Supporting People programme.

Occupancy Split of Supported Accommodation

7. As supported accommodation projects meet the accommodation needs of children (those who are aged 16 or 17) and young adults (those who are aged 18-21+), that is, young people in a mixed age-range, this accommodation is not intended to be provided wholly or mainly for children aged 16 or 17. Accommodation provided wholly or mainly for children under the age of 18 is classified as a Children's Home and is subject to standards, regulatory and inspection regimes specific to children's homes.

8. Article 9(2) of the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 defines a children's home as follows:

    - *An establishment is a children's home (subject to paragraphs (3) and (4)) if it provides care and accommodation wholly or mainly for children*

    Article 2(2) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 defines a child as:

    - *a person under the age of 18*

    It is the age of the person which determines whether they are considered to be a child, not their legal status.

9. To ensure that a jointly commissioned supported accommodation project does not fall within the definition of a children's home and subject to the standards, regulatory and inspection regimes which govern a children's home, the ratio of children (those aged 16 and 17) to young adults (those aged 18-21+) residing there must not routinely exceed 50%. In other words, on a *routine basis*, there should never be a greater number of children in the accommodation than the number of young adults. By *routine basis*, we mean more often than not in any 12 month period.

[4] Article 35 of the The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (NI) Order 2003.

10. There may be occasions in a 12 month period when the ratio of children to young adults exceeds 50%. Where this occurs the service provider should inform the RQIA. However, this should never be the norm and there must be justifiable reasons for it happening. In the main, justification is likely to involve meeting the specific needs and best interests of individual children. Where the expected maximum ratio of children to young adults is not maintained, the provider of the jointly commissioned supported accommodation must undertake an assessment of risk both in relation to the children in the accommodation and the young adults residing there. Where risks are identified, a risk management plan should be developed, implemented in full and subject to routine monitoring until the proper balance, in terms of age ratios, is restored. It is the responsibility of the relevant HSC Trust to have a copy of the risk management plan in respect of the child aged 16/17 being placed there, and to satisfy itself that the plan adequately addresses any safeguarding issues relating to the child.

Inspection of Supported Accommodation

11. Under an agreement with the Department of Health, RQIA undertakes annual inspections of supported accommodation. As part of its annual inspection programme, RQIA will seek to satisfy itself and assure the commissioners (the HSC Trusts and NIHE/Supporting People) that the accommodation is meeting the requirements in terms of age ratios as outlined in this guidance.

12. In addition, the HSC Board, in conjunction with the NIHE Supporting People programme, is developing guidance which sets out the governance arrangements relating to jointly commissioned supported accommodation, describing the roles and responsibilities of the HSC Board, HSC Trusts, the Supporting People Programme and the providers of these services. It also articulates the role of RQIA in relation to inspection of these projects. When finalised, this will be shared with HSC organisations in a separate circular.

Action required

13. You are asked to note the contents of this Circular, to cascade to staff within your organisation as appropriate, and ensure that the guidance contained within it is adhered to in full.

Yours sincerely

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