

# The Holdings

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tenancy helping  
care leavers live  
independently

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Young people leaving care are some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society.

As well as being less likely to have good GCSEs and vocational qualifications, care leavers are more likely to have to deal with social exclusion, abuse and neglect or to enter custody.

It is therefore crucial that they receive good quality support and guidance in their transition process between the care system and independent living.

Bournville Village Trust (BVT), a housing association based in Birmingham, has been providing just this.

For the last 15 years a small but life changing project called The Holdings has been housing, supporting and giving crucial skills to young people in this transitional period of their lives.

BVT has always had care and support for residents at the heart of its DNA.

Its founder, George Cadbury, had a deep seated social concern for the way people were forced to live in the overcrowded back streets of Birmingham and it was this concern that directly influenced the creation of Bournville.

The garden village, which has been managed by BVT since 1900, was, and continues to be, home to a mixed community, with homes for affordable rent and sale, and a range of supported housing projects.

Today, the bulk of BVT's almost 8,000 homes are located in the Birmingham area, including Bournville, with a new village based on the principles of Bournville currently in development in Lightmoor, Telford.

The Holdings itself is a group of 9 self-contained flats, located in the heart of Bournville.

The residents of The Holdings come from an even mix of foster care and children's homes, and are aged 16-18.

It provides a 'stepping stone from care to independence' for young people who have left the care system and will soon be living independently, often alone, in their own property.

A core part of The Holdings program is the support provided in general life skills such as budgeting, keeping safe, healthy eating and even maintenance.



We spoke to Alison Wilkinson, Youth Services Manager at BVT, to find out more about how The Holdings helps young people to move into successful independent tenancies through providing furniture and essential support.

#### How did The Holdings start?

The Holdings was set up 15 years ago as a response to a need identified by Birmingham City Council. The council collaborated closely with BVT to provide a place for care leavers to live whilst learning these vital independent living skills.

#### What were the initial challenges that you encountered when you set up The Holdings, and how did you overcome them?

Originally The Holdings was not provided to tenants as a fully furnished tenancy.

One flat was fully furnished as a 'training flat', and potential residents were placed into this flat for an intensive four week training period.

For some the training period proved enough to provide them with the skills and confidence to make the transition to independent living. For others it was a stepping stone to a tenanted property at The Holdings.

However, often the young person would have to wait for a flat to become available, which could prove emotionally and physically disruptive to the young people's lives, and for individuals who had often spent their whole lives constantly moving around between properties, this was something that should be avoided if possible.

We have adopted a new approach, where all flats are fully furnished and able to offer the four week assessment period, during which both the young person and support staff assess whether the project can best meet the individual's needs.

If the young person does stay, they can remain within the same flat, which has proven to be conducive to more effective support provision and positive outcomes for the young people.

One of the other challenges to providing the furnished tenancy was the question of where to source the furniture.

The supplier would need to be cost effective and someone who would potentially be able to supply furniture at short notice if one of the residents moved out.

We decided that a local supplier would be the best option, because we could also bring the new residents along when we were buying the new furniture, giving them more ownership over the process.

Local independent suppliers were also easier to form relationships with so that the support workers and residents could secure the most competitive rates and individually tailored solution for each young person.

## About the furniture

The items that are provided in The Holdings are:

- Single bed, wardrobe, bedside table, chest of drawers
- Table and chairs, sofa bed
- Vacuum cleaner, iron and ironing board, washing line
- Microwave, fridge freezer, cooker
- No washing machine but they have use of a heavily discounted laundrette
- Pots, pans, plates
- Carpets, light fittings and blinds
- Toilet seats

Televisions are purposely not included in the package.

This is for a few different reasons:

- They are expensive.
- Residents often arrive at The Holdings with laptops, and television and other entertainment can be accessed using this rather than another TV.

The initial furniture package received by tenants is all brand new. We encourage the residents to then supplement this furniture using pre-loved furniture or donations from the community. This pre-loved furniture can then be upcycled and given a fresh, more personalised look by residents.



## How does BVT fund The Holdings?

Rent and furniture are funded by housing and support payments received from social services.

We have found that this approach has reduced voids, as young people can move in much quicker. Also, knowing they own the furniture, they tend to take greater care of it and the property in general, thus reducing other costs.

## What happens after tenants leave The Holdings?

One of the exceptional things about our furnished tenancy program is the fact that tenants can take the furniture with them after they leave.

This enables them to use the grant they receive from social services, when they move to fully independent living, for other items, such as carpets.

Once tenants have reached the end of their time at The Holdings, some of the residents have gone onto shared accommodation with other young professionals or siblings, or into student halls. However, the majority enter a one bedroom property in local social housing stock.

Care leavers who make the move find the support network they have built up through The Holdings to be a valuable asset when they are experiencing the challenges associated with moving into your first home.

This is where the other parts of the service we provide - a support network, links with their peer group, and life skills around budgeting, maintenance etc, is really important. Residents leave with a reinforced sense of

confidence, independence and wellbeing.

Until 18, children's services are responsible for meeting the housing and support costs for care leavers and therefore support to move furniture and items to their new homes is met through the 18+ service. Young people have access to a removals company through this service.

#### How do you measure the success of The Holdings?

One of the ways that we know that The Holdings is working so well is the local council is advising other local housing associations to use our model.

However, for us the most important way to measure our success is the impact that we have on the young people we're trying to help.

They have told us how important The Holdings is to their wellbeing and ability to live independently.

The positive outcomes experienced by the residents include improvements in confidence and emotional wellbeing, more continuity and stability in their lives, and the sense of having an approachable anchor in the staff and other residents at The Holdings, even after they move on.

I think the most important outcome for residents is the sense of being valued when they arrive at the property.

Often for the first time in their lives, they have been entrusted with something that is truly theirs, and we are essentially giving them the message 'I trust you, you are worth this.'

That feeling starts from the very moment they arrive at The Holdings, and I think it is an important feature that underpins our relationship with them.

#### What are the main drawbacks of providing furniture to your residents?

Sometimes the residents experience a lot of anxiety around turning 18. It gets built up in their mind and they often don't want to leave or don't feel ready to.

The skills we provide them with over the course of their residency at The Holdings means that they are mostly ready to leave but it can be their stability and confidence that holds them back.

However, once they do leave, they often come back and visit, and can still use the staff as an important anchor in their lives.

For us as providers, the main drawback is the actual logistics of providing the furniture.

Over time we have developed good relationships with local suppliers and have made the process relatively slick, but at the beginning we did have some issues with getting hold of a new furniture package quickly once there was a void.

We have now learnt to keep a stock on site of relatively small items like hoovers that we can move in quickly if we need to.

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### What advice would you give to other housing providers?

I would say that often the smallest thing can make a difference.

Even if what you are offering is a very basic contribution to someone's new home, it is an important gesture to make. This could just be something as simple as a basic food starter package.

I would also recommend thinking more innovatively about partnerships. Local business can provide good deals, discount vouchers for your residents etc., so it is worth approaching them to see what agreement you might be able to come to.

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### What other anti-poverty services do you provide?

As an organisation, we are committed to helping the most vulnerable in society.

We have a dedicated welfare reform officer who supports residents who are experiencing financial difficulties. This help can range from assistance in maximising benefits to applying for grants.

In addition, we are also actively supporting residents to get online through our 'Let's Get Digital' campaign, as research by the National Housing Federation suggests that those who are digitally excluded are missing out on savings estimated at £560 a year.

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The Holdings is an inspirational example of how providing furniture for care leavers as part of an overall package can support young adults through one of the biggest transitions in their lives. The provision of furniture doesn't just mean that someone has physical items to make their lives easier; it signifies a level of trust, worth and respect that is worth so much more.

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