



# **CLEARmark Access to Records Quality Mark:** A Framework for Improved Services for Care Leavers



## The Organisation

The Care Leavers' Association (CLA) is a national charity run by care leavers\* for care leavers. It is the only organization of its kind within the UK.

### **Our Purpose:**

To end the economic and social disadvantage of those who were in care by achieving significant, positive change.

### **Our Vision:**

Care leavers fully represented and participating at all levels of economic, social and public life.

### **Means of Achieving Our Purpose:**

- Provision of an arena where care leavers can work together to achieve common goals;
- Supporting care leavers who have suffered neglect or abuse;
- Helping with access to childhood case records, so that care leavers may understand their past;
- Provision of other support and information services to care leavers;
- Advocating for the improvement of leaving-care provision, so that current and future care leavers may enjoy better life outcomes;
- Highlighting discrimination when it occurs, so that care leavers may enjoy the same rights and opportunities as others;
- Challenging negative stereotypes, so that care leavers do not suffer from the ignorance of others;
- Promoting, conducting and publishing research so as to raise public awareness of the needs of care leavers.

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\* For the purposes of this document the terms 'care leaver' and 'care leavers' are used to refer to any person, over the age of 18, who spent all or part of their childhood in the care of a local authority or voluntary organisation



***I welcome the Care Leavers Association new Access to Records Quality Mark as a positive step forward*** – Kevin Brennan, Minister for the Third Sector & Social Exclusion, 2008

## **CLEARmark Overview**

The Care Leavers' Association Access to Records Quality Mark is open to all local authorities and voluntary agencies within the UK that provide access to records services to post-care adults.

The purpose of the quality mark scheme is:

- to ensure better services for care leavers who want to access their childhood care files;
- to involve care leavers in the evaluation and improvement of service delivery;
- to work with professionals in this area to ensure best practice.

The quality mark is awarded to service providers who meet the requirements of the quality mark. These requirements were drawn up by care leavers and as part of the Care Leavers' Association's (CLA) campaign, *It's Our History, It's Our Right: Reclaiming Our Past*. This quality mark scheme has been developed entirely by care leavers and care leavers will be involved in all aspects of the scheme, including:

- Evaluation
- Accreditation
- Management and
- Reviews

Through the quality mark it will be possible to identify those local authorities that are performing well in this area and who recognize the importance of this work for many people who grew up in care. It is also hoped that it will encourage other local authorities to improve their services.





## The Benefits

### **For professionals:**

By achieving the CLA Access to Records Quality Mark you will demonstrate to care leavers accessing your service that you take a professional and positive approach to meeting subject access requests. You will also demonstrate that you recognize the value of childhood care records and have taken on board the opinions of service users themselves in developing your access to records service.

To other service providers, the quality mark will demonstrate that you are providing a high quality service, which meets the needs of care leavers.

### **For care leavers:**

When making access requests to an organization endorsed by the CLA, a care leaver can be sure that the organisation:

- Understands the importance of these records to care leavers
- Listens to care leavers and values their opinions
- Is dedicated to providing a good quality service
- Will respond to enquiries in an encouraging manner
- Is interested in continually improving its service.

## The Process

In order to obtain the quality mark, service providers must demonstrate that they meet each of the seven requirements listed on pages 5 and 6.

### **Step 1**

The service provider submits a completed Quality Mark Framework checklist along with their evidence.

### **Step 2**

The application is reviewed at the CLA head office. If the application meets the requirements, it is then referred to the assessment panel for approval.

### **Step 3**

An assessment panel reviews the application, along with the evidence and awards the quality mark. The assessment panel, which makes the final decision about an application, will be made up entirely of care leavers.



In making decisions, members of the assessment panel will adhere to the following code of conduct:

In considering an application, reviewers will:

- Be impartial and objective
- Treat each application equally
- Be fully prepared
- Respect confidentiality
- Use their expertise to make balanced judgments based on the evidence provided
- Adhere to the CLA's organizational values.

## The Requirements

### **1. Advertise the right for care leavers to access their records in at least one type of media. This could include: advertising through a leaflet or a poster; on the local authority, or voluntary organization, website; in the local press; in the voluntary agency's regular publication or in the council newspaper**

Currently, many care leavers, particularly those who left care ten, twenty years ago, or more, are unaware that they have a right to access the file that was kept on them whilst they were in care. Some do not even know that one exists. This requirement provides a simple and low-cost way for local authorities to raise awareness within their area.

### **2. Have a statement of recognition that care leavers have a right to this information**

Many older post-care adults are still unaware that they can access their childhood care files. A statement of this kind by a local authority or voluntary organization will make it clear to any post-care adult who approaches them that this information is available to them if it is held. Care leavers also believe that a statement of this kind would be found encouraging and would instill in people more confidence in making a request.

### **3. Recognise the positive importance of accessing files**

The information held within files can hold many answers to a person's past. Often it is their only source of information about their childhood and, in some cases, their family. Childhood care files can play an important role in a person's sense of identity. Recognition of this fact by service providers will raise awareness about the importance of this service within their own organizations and also reassure post-care adults who approach the organization that their request is being treated with importance.



#### **4. Have an ATR policy that is publicly available**

This will allow the general public to see, at a glance, the organisation's approach to access to records and be aware of the processes which surround subject access requests.

#### **5. Have a monitoring system on requests received and responses made (or to be demonstrably working towards such a system)**

In 2007, the CLA conducted a piece of research, using the Freedom of Information Act, on local authority access to records practices. This research revealed that nearly one third of those authorities surveyed had no monitoring system for access to records request.

A monitoring system would allow organizations to track both the number of requests received and the way in which these have been responded to. This is important, both for assessing the effectiveness of a service and to show the need for increased resources for this area of work.

#### **6. Provide a brief and accessible response letter and leaflet to encourage care leavers to see the process through.**

For many care leavers the decision to access their records can be a big step. It can also be a very unfamiliar and daunting process to enter into. It is important that care leavers' enquiries are dealt with in an encouraging and friendly manner. It is also important that care leavers are informed about how the process will work and what they might be able to expect.

#### **7. Monitor the effectiveness of the service through use of an evaluation form**

In order to continually improve the access to records services and ensure that it meets the needs of those using it, it is important to seek feedback. A simple evaluation form will provide agencies with a valuable insight into how well their service is working.



## Further Information

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