

Setting Up: A Place to Call Home

The Care Leavers' Foundation UK Survey into Setting up Home Grants for Care Leavers

1. What is a Setting up Home Grant?

Many young people who have been brought up in public care are estranged from family and have no-one but the state, their 'corporate parent' to rely upon to help them get started in adult life. Setting up Home grants, also known as Leaving Care Grants, are intended to ensure that young people have the basic essentials to move into their first flat.

The average age at which young adults in the general population leave home permanently is 24 in the UK. Children leave care at 16, 17 or 18. So not only can they not rely on the parental home to provide some of the basic items collected by parents for their offspring in their 'bottom drawer', they are also not yet established in employment and have no access to disposable income which would enable them to take full responsibility for equipping their own homes.

A Leaving Care Grant should provide a young person with the means to establish themselves as young householders without worrying about not having essential items and having no possibility of being able to provide these for themselves.

2. Legal situation

The notion that local authorities should make some provision for children when they leave care is not new, and we hear many anecdotes from an older generation of care leavers along the lines of:

“They gave me £8.00 and waved me on my way. Me and my mate spent it on fish and chips, the cinema and popcorn. That was such a treat, we’d never had that much money before”

Fortunately we have moved on a little from those days and there has been increasing recognition through legislation and guidance that a more formalised and predictable system of helping young people set up home needs to be in place.

The 1989 Children Act gave local authorities new powers and duties in relation to children leaving care, but it was not until the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 that we had specific reference to the financial support needed by care leavers and a clear statement that this should be the responsibility of their local authority. The Green Paper that led to the 2000 Act stated that:

“Young people living independently for the first time need help with the start-up costs associated with furnishing their flat and starting work or higher education. Many local authorities give young people leaving care grants to meet these costs. We expect local authorities should meet these costs to help young people make a good start to living in dependently”¹

and the subsequent Guidance that was published in support of the Act went further:

“Many authorities operate a system of leaving care grants. ... the Pathway Plan should cover the help which the responsible authority is to provide when they leave care, such as the resources needed to set up home. Authorities should be clear about what they would expect to provide for this purpose. They will also need to recognise that not all young people will be successful

¹ Me, survive, out there? New arrangements for young people living in and leaving care July 1999

*the first time they try to live independently, and that they may need this help more than once.*²

Like so much that came from the 2000 Act, the problem was clearly identified but there was no requirement more than that local authorities ‘be clear about’ how they will support young people setting up home and ‘recognise’ that this may not be a one off need. A further piece of legislation, the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, has gone a long way towards redressing some of the gaps left by the Leaving Care Act, but on the matter of leaving care grants it remains silent.

Government generally takes the view that the job of legislation is to provide a framework within which local authorities must operate and that decisions about specific expenditure should be left to local government which has local knowledge and understanding of the needs of its particular populations. The problem with this approach is that in a climate of constantly competing priorities, that which does not have to be provided often isn’t provided. The Children and Young Persons Act does take the step of stipulating the minimum amounts that local authorities must pay for educational support (£500) and university bursaries (£2000) for care leavers. It is therefore particularly disappointing that no similar amount was specified for the leaving care grant.

3. What is the problem?

1. There is no agreement across the country about how much money a young person should receive as a setting up home grant when they get their first flat. In 2003 care leaver led charity A National Voice (ANV) recommended a figure of £1400 based on research undertaken with young people as part of the 2002 Amplify Project.

2. “A National minimum amount of £1400 for the Leaving Care Grant should be set with appropriate weighting reflecting local costs.”³

3. In 2004 as part of the National Care Leavers’ Week campaign ‘Facing a Brick Wall’ ANV conducted a further in-depth study into the many barriers preventing

² Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 Regulations and Guidance, October 2001

³ Amplify, ANV, 2003

young care leavers from settling in suitable permanent accommodation. The report that resulted from this work 'No Place Like Home' stated that:

*"The Leaving Care Grant varies enormously across English Authorities and this should be addressed. We recommend a minimum of £2000 to set up home."*⁴

As recognised in the Guidance quoted above, the process of setting up home is not straightforward. For many care leavers it will be a journey through temporary accommodation, failed tenancies, fleeing domestic violence and generally struggling to find stability and permanence. Some local authorities do recognise this and make the allocated leaving care grant available in instalments, maybe essentials like bedding and basic crockery for a hostel place, a bit more for pots and pans, a microwave, a wardrobe and a Hoover when they go into a semi-furnished room, some spent on moving, a contribution towards a deposit.....and then when they are finally allocated a tenancy of their own which is intended to be permanent, there is not enough left to buy basic essentials.

There are other reasons why care leavers find themselves without all the things that they need when they move from a temporary or supported placement to their first long term tenancy. Moves can often be very quick. In many areas where a bidding scheme operates for social housing allocations young people have to take up their new tenancy within 4 days. Can you imagine moving house with just 4 days notice? It isn't just a case of moving possessions but notifying all the right people, sorting out cancellation of utility accounts and setting up new ones etc. many young care leavers have no access to suitable transport. Those still receiving a support service may have access to a van and a driver, maybe limited to what they can get in the van in one journey rather than someone who has the time and is willing to travel back and forth. Thus many young care leavers, perhaps partly as a result of chaotic lifestyles, but exacerbated by the real practical difficulties that they face, are not able to hold onto all of the household goods that they do acquire along the way.

⁴ No Place Like Home, ANV, 2004

Even for young people who are able to access the whole of their leaving care grant for the purpose of establishing themselves in their first permanent tenancy, the amount paid across the country varies enormously from £500 to £2,200.⁵ It is neither sensible nor fair that some young people get up to four times as much in their leaving care grant as others. We do not believe that local authorities should lose the power to make common sense decisions based on their knowledge of their young care leavers and use their discretion to spread out some of the grant if necessary. However it is time that Government set a minimum amount to ensure that, as intended within the spirit of the Leaving Care Act, young people are able to begin their lives as young householders with a full compliment of basic essentials.

4. The Care Leavers' Foundation

The Care Leavers' Foundation has been making small grants to care leavers up to age 29 since 1999. Our grants are made on the principle of 'good parenting' and support aspiration as well as ameliorating the worst effects of poverty. When we set up the fund we were always aware that older care leavers, into their twenties, may need 'second time around' support with household essentials. We felt that there would always be a proportion of care leavers who had struggled in the first few years after leaving care who may well have had a full leaving care grant at 17 or 18 but had since moved so many times for a variety of reasons that they would not have been able to hold on to all of their household items.

We have been dismayed at the increasing number of grant applications we receive that do not come from young people themselves but are written by leaving care workers in authorities where very low leaving care grants are provided by the authority and the workers are given the brief to ring round as many charities as they can to top this amount up. I don't know how successful they are with other charities but we are not in a position to make these grants as we cannot as a registered charity make payments to replace that which should be provided on a statutory footing. We would also be unable to help the older care leavers that the Foundation

⁵ Survey by Children and Young People Now February 2009

was established to support if we allowed our funds to be depleted by subsidising local authorities.

Nonetheless, these young care leavers are clearly in need and as a result of this increasing trend we decided we would do our own investigation into what should be a national minimum setting up home grant. We were supported in this endeavour by Children and Young People Now magazine who conducted a survey of all 150 local authorities in England to find out about their current policy towards leaving care grants.

5. The Setting up Home Survey

We began with the lists of 'essential items' provided by four different authorities and from these compiled a single shopping list that formed the basis of our survey. We are working on the assumption that a young person is going into a one bedroom unfurnished flat. We included on our list an allowance for floor coverings as it seems to be the case that most social housing tenancies are now provided without any floor covering. In years gone by there would be carpets left by previous tenants. Current policy – presumably based on health and safety requirements -appears to be that all old carpets etc. are pulled out when flats are cleaned for re-letting. We did not make a provision for decorating allowance. It is our understanding that where this is required the council or housing association would normally provide an allowance to cover this. Our list included everything from bed to teaspoons, mop to cooker. The assumption was that the young people would start with nothing and were unlikely to have any savings, or be receiving more than a minimum wage, benefit payment or education maintenance allowance at that stage in their lives therefore the possibility of saving to supplement their initial inventory of household basics with additional items as they went along was very limited. The list of items also closely matched that used by ANV in their original survey in order to provide an accurate basis for comparison. The reality in so many families is that these items often come from the family or family home as a natural part of seeing your child into "independence". Rarely is a family-reared child starting with nothing. Our full shopping list is appended to the report.

We asked eight young people to do the shopping survey, two in London, two in the Midlands, two in the North of England and two in Wales. We asked each shopper to produce three sets of prices based on:

1. Priced using a budget home shopping catalogue like Argos or an on-line catalogue such as Tesco Direct
2. Priced on the high street using a variety of shops, pound shops, markets, supermarkets, hardware suppliers, second hand shops etc. to get the cheapest available prices
3. Using a more eclectic approach choosing one or two items where some value for money items would be chosen, not just the cheapest. So for example better quality towels or bedding which could be relied on to give six years of service might be favoured over something that would be worn out within six months. Or going for a second hand washing machine might enable the purchase of a slightly better bed

Across all the pricing results, the mean average cost for purchasing the majority of items on the list came out at £2,556 which was in line with our projected figure. The ANV survey did not include carpets, so taking this into account and an inflationary uplift for each of the 5 years since their last survey we had estimated £2,500 to be the minimum leaving care grant required to set up a home from scratch.

We found that young people were sensible and frugal in the items that they priced. They were not in any way demanding and some did not include the small number of 'luxury' or decorative items we had included such as pictures, mirrors, ornaments. We did not find any particular variation in the different parts of the country, rather the individuals who did the survey appeared to have been the biggest factor in making the extra savings through hunting around for their bargains. So for example whilst it might be reasonable to expect that the cost of items in London could be higher overall than in the north, this seemed to be balanced by the fact that shoppers there may have had easier access to a wider variety of retailers, including street markets and second hand shops. About a third of the lists did not include any allowance for carpet or floor covering so if anything this average amount could be regarded as slightly low.

6. Practice Examples

We also noted that whereas a number of years ago, many councils used to keep a 'store' of items that had been donated, suites, beds, cookers, fridges, etc. which could be made available to any council tenants in need, such as those leaving refuges or hostels or leaving care, this practice no longer exists, presumably again for reasons to do with health and safety. Some local authorities that we spoke to have good contacts in their communities with suppliers of good quality reconditioned second hand white goods or furnishings. Through these routes they are able to help care leavers get more for their money. Other authorities however assume that everything must be bought new.

We were made aware of one authority where care leavers had to buy everything from Argos and when they went into the local store they would select what they wanted then when they went to the desk had to say they were in care and wait whilst a telephone call was made to the leaving care team for approval. Not only was this authority not getting good value for their young care leavers – Argos long ago ceased to provide the cheapest option when benchmarked against other discounters – young people had no choice or option to take responsibility for shopping wiser and were stigmatised in the process.

In addition to the handful of care leaving teams who have had their job descriptions amended to include the role of charity fundraiser, an increasing number of authorities are setting their leaving care grants on the assumption that there will be a shortfall and that this will be made up from the Community Care Grant (CCG). The CCG is a notoriously difficult fund to prise money out of and criteria are very variable from one local authority area to another. It is also dependent on the applicant being in receipt of specific benefits, and awards are generally limited by availability as well as eligibility with expenditure capped for each month. Some applicants have also reported being refused CCG on the grounds that 'you are a care leaver so your leaving care team is responsible for you'. In most cases CCG is not awarded and for many care leavers their final recourse for items they really need is a social fund loan. What message are we giving to young care leavers if they are forced to be paying off debt for essential items and therefore surviving on even tighter and more

unrealistic weekly budgets immediately after they leave care? This situation is not conducive to surviving the initial shock of becoming a premature householder and holding onto hope for the future.

“Any good parent will continue to offer love and support to their children well beyond 18, giving them the greatest head start in life that they can. The Government expects no less for young people in care”⁶

There are of course other boroughs where practice is good. One of our shoppers stated that:

“We at Westminster receive £2000 which is good, however in order to satisfy a young person’s needs I reckon £2,500 is a better figure for today’s prices.”

Of the 9% of responding authorities who paid £2,000 or over as a leaving care grant, it might be fair to assume that these authorities had taken up the recommendations of ANV in setting that figure and we would therefore hope that those authorities at least will take up the revised figure and amend their leaving care grants accordingly. For the remaining authorities, who already fall below the minimum amount recommended in 2004, we would like to see an urgent review in those authorities of the amount available and urge them to use the figure provided in this report as a benchmark.

7. What our shoppers said

We asked the care leavers who undertook the information gathering to comment more generally on their findings and on what they thought about leaving care grants.

We asked each participant to estimate how much the shopping list would cost before they undertook the pricing task. Responses varied from £400 to £2,600. All but one were surprised at how much it all came to when the exercise was complete:

⁶ Care Matters: Time for Change June 2007

“I was very surprised at how all the little things added up”, and one person commented “A young person has no idea of cost of things and could not guess”.

We asked those who had already left care how much they had received for their leaving care grant and if it was enough. Some of our participants were in semi-furnished supported accommodation and had just received a few hundred for their additional needs which they felt was enough at the time but were unsure how much more they would be able to access when they moved into unfurnished accommodation. Others had received £2,000 and £1,200 and both felt this was not enough. One participant could not remember how much he had received but remembered that it was not sufficient and others had not yet left care.

In spite of the results they got, in answer to the specific question about how much they felt should be given as a leaving care grant, most of our shoppers scaled this down and asked for amounts between £800 and £1600 suggesting that they had no way of transferring what they had just learned to their own situation and that expectations generally were very low. They expected to get less than they needed and, perhaps not having experienced full independence yet themselves, could not really understand the implications of not having what they needed to set up home. One respondent came up with a more realistic response:

“I reckon £2,500 is a better figure for today’s prices”

and just one set an aspirational figure that would enable them to have choices and go beyond the basics:

“I think we should get about £5,500. Everything is so expensive – the cost would need to be reviewed as this is based on today’s prices”

Participants also asked their leaving care workers what they thought was a reasonable amount and here again we saw great variation. Most fell between the £1,000 and £2,000. One care leaver told us:

“They [leaving care worker] reckon £2,500 is more than enough with careful spending. Managing the money is crucial .for a young person so helping them with their spending is crucial.”

However in another team our young informant reported as follows:

“With prices going up all the time £800 one said, £900 another one said”

This betrays either a worrying naivety among the adults about what things cost, or an acceptance within this particular team that care leavers will not get enough and will have to struggle.

In terms of expectations, most of our shoppers were not against having second hand goods and had sensible comments to make in this respect:

“Not everything has to be new but it has to be within the health and safety standards”

“TV and beds will last a long time so there is no point buying a new one if the previous one is up to date”

“It depends on the condition that the item is in”

“It is acceptable with bigger electrical items”

“Some you wouldn’t mind second hand like a wardrobe or a fridge because you can clean them up but I wouldn’t want a bed that someone else has had before and slept in”

Just one of our sample expressed the alternate view:

“No I do not think second hand items are acceptable. Some stuff may be the cheapest but may not be value for money”

Everyone agreed that it was the responsibility of the local authority as their ‘corporate parent’ to ensure they had a sufficient grant to set up their first home, and to advise and assist them to spend wisely, but not to make all their choices for them.

Thoughts and feelings generated by doing this piece of work included:

“Excited”, “surprised”, “not impressed with local authorities who give lower leaving care grant”, “All the stuff on the list was needed. And there were additional items I thought should be on the list. Having one of everything is sometimes not enough”

"I did not realise how hard it is and how much time it takes and how dear everything is. Stressed", "surprised", "exhausted," "It should be the same for everyone, it isn't fair that I get enough to start my flat and someone else just gets a couple of hundred quid", "It shouldn't depend on where you live how much you get".

We asked young people if they thought, like others starting out in life, it might be better if they just had the barest essentials to begin with, and had to work hard for what they needed so that they would appreciate it more.

"Well if you have no carpet the risk of catching a cold will increase which in the long run will lead to .poor health conditions making them again jobless and unhealthy. Young people should be given the best start in life, so not giving them a carpet or no table to work on then this will undoubtedly worsen their conditions"

"In some ways yes it is and in other ways no"

"The basics need to be there. Coming out .of a home or foster care into living like that could cause people to get depressed. Should have the essentials then if they want better things they can work for it"

"If I wanted to study I would not be able to work to buy these items. I would not have the time to be able to do both"

"No – I don't think that it is true – people need these essential items. This might be true for more luxury items - lamps, DVD player etc."

"You need the full grant because it's the only way of getting money to buy things you need and be independent".

One person answered yes to this suggestion. However the reality is that circumstances are not comparable for young people leaving care. Youngsters leaving the family home usually do so after completing their basic and further education. They do not have to study and work and keep a roof over their head whilst still 17, 18 or 19 and in further education, or still at school studying A levels. In general young people leaving care are less likely to have savings accumulated over many years, topped up by family, and enhanced by a disposable income often provided via a Saturday job or parental allowance. In the future care leavers will benefit from the additional savings generated through the child trust fund, however we are a lot of years from seeing the first beneficiaries of this scheme coming out of care.

8. What we have learned from our grants scheme

It is not uncommon for The Care Leavers' Foundation to receive applications from first time householders who have not been enabled to fully set up their first home through their leaving care grant. These are all quotes from applications received from care leavers aged 17 – 19 who have recently moved into their first permanent flat:

"My local authority bought me a cooker a washer and a fridge with my leaving care grant and I need money to get a bed and some furniture as I have nowhere to sleep and there is nothing to put my clothes in"

"I would really like to be able to afford just two chairs. I can sit on the floor and I don't mind but I am embarrassed to ask any friends back and I can't ask my grandmother to visit here with nothing for her to sit on"

"I would like to be able to buy some curtains so that people don't look in all the time. I am on the ground floor".

"I don't mind too much not having a bed but it is starting to get very cold sleeping on the floor now winter is coming. If you could help me to buy a bed to sleep on I would be very grateful"

"I think if I had a carpet I could keep the house warmer and I could save on electricity bills and look after myself better. I get a lot of coughs and colds. I have put cling film round the back door and the windows to keep out the drafts but the concrete floor is very cold."

"My baby will be crawling soon and I will be afraid of him hurting himself on the concrete so I would like to get a carpet for his bedroom and the living room."

"I would like to have a cooker so I can shop more cheaply and cook better nutritious food for me and my daughter instead of having to buy ready meals for the microwave all the time. I know it's a lot to ask but I think I could be more healthy and save more money in the long run."

9. How much do Local Authorities pay?

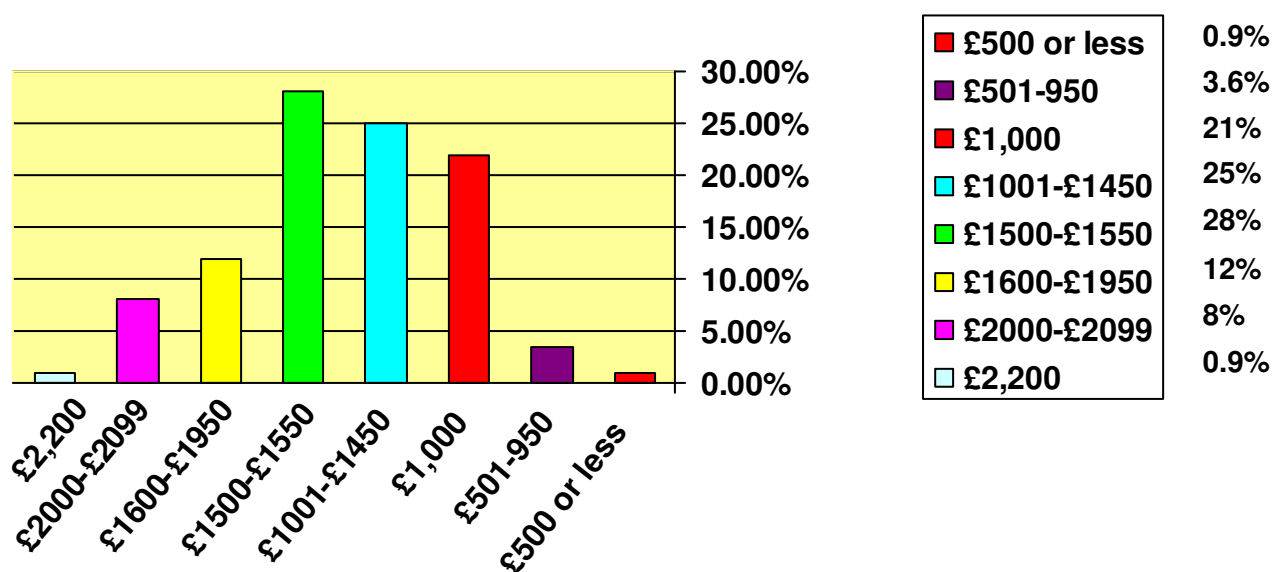
Whilst our shoppers were out on the streets of Britain finding out how much a leaving care grant should be, Children and Young People Now Magazine was busy conducting a survey of what local authorities are actually paying.

7% of all 150 authorities in England had a Leaving Care Grant that was 'needs-led' or 'not fixed'. One authority had 'no maximum allowance' and another stated a 'minimum £800' but said 'we need a max.'

Of those that responded and provide a fixed amount:

- 51% paid £1000 or less
- 4% of the £1000 and under group paid less than £1000 with the lowest amount being just £500 to kit out an unfurnished flat from scratch
- just 9% provided £2000 or over
- only one came anywhere near our recommended survey amount at £2,200
- 12.5 % paid between £1600 and £1950
- 27% paid £1500
- The £1374 grant averaged across all those that responded is just 55% of the amount indicated by our survey as being the necessary minimum setting up home grant

Amount of LCG paid by local authority based on all those respondents that quoted a fixed amount



10. Summary and Recommendations

- The average cost for essential items needed to equip a one bedroom flat with the most basic items is £2,556
- All the local authorities we surveyed fell well short of this amount with less than 10% providing a grant of over £2,000.
- Young people did well with stores like Pound saver, Wilkinson's, Cash Generator etc. and non-chain stores, some of which local authority may have had a buying relationship with. Argos was significantly more costly on most items
- Young people's expectations are set very low. They are not greedy and demanding
- Even after doing the exercise, most of them actually asked for a lot less than the evidence told them they needed
- They have very little awareness of what things will cost and some responses seem to suggest adults in some LC Teams are also unrealistic in their understanding of the cost of furnishing and equipping a flat from scratch.

The Care Leavers' Foundation Recommends:

- 1. All local authorities should make available a minimum LC Grant of £2,500**
- 2. This should if possible be fixed in Guidance to the Children and Young Person's Bill**
- 3. Authorities should have flexibility to hold back or pay in instalments according to a young person's individual circumstances**
- 4. Deposits, bonds, initial rent and moving costs should not come out of the leaving care grant. Authorities should make separate provision for these**
- 5. Authorities should recognise, as stated in Guidance to the 2000 Act, that the first move may not be wholly successful and should be prepared to consider helping with essential items second time round even if the initial leaving care grant was paid in full**
- 6. Local Authorities should ensure members receive training with respect to leaving care grant so that they fully understand what is needed and might be persuaded to prioritise budgets accordingly**
- 7. Local protocols should be in place so that there is a joint understanding between agencies of what a care leaver can expect from a Community Care Grant and what should be provided through the setting up home grant.**

We are grateful to A National Voice who provided the blueprint for this exercise, all of the shoppers that undertook the pricing survey and the leaving care services that supported them and Voices from Care Cymru who facilitated the shopping exercise in Wales. Thanks also go to Children and Young People Now magazine for the local authority current pricing survey.

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**The Care Leavers' Foundation
March 2009**

Appendix

Items in list for pricing comparison

The list of items below constituted our 'shopping basket' for the pricing exercise and was based on an amalgam of lists currently used by 4 different local authorities.

Bin	Microwave	CD Radio/Stereo
Cutlery	Kettle	5 x bulbs and 5x
Bread bin	Toaster	lampshades
Crockery/dinner set	Iron	Smoke alarms (if not fitted)
Crockery/mugs	Ironing Board	Fire extinguisher and fire
Kitchen utensils	Double bed	blanket
Pan set	Mattress	Flooring
Airer for clothes	Wardrobe	Carpet for 2 rooms 10x12
Frying pan	Chest of Drawers	and 9 x 12
Oven dishes	Bedside locker	Vinyl for kitchen and
Cooker	Bedside lamp	bathroom 8x 9 & 9 x 12
Larder fridge	Clock	1 x rug for hallway
Fridge freezer	Mirror	Doormats (one inside one
Glasses	Mattress protector	outside)
Table and chairs	Bedset x 2	4 sets of curtains
Storage containers	Duvet	4 curtain rail sets
Washing machine	Pillows	Basic home insurance
Tea towels	Mirror	Fitting of cooker
Mop	Sofa	Smoke alarms (if not fitted)
Broom	TV	Calculator
Dustpan and brush	TV stand/unit	Plants
Vacuum cleaner	TV licence	File for bills
Washing up bowl	Coffee table	Ornaments/Vases
Dishcloths/sponges	Towels	Pictures
Bucket	Toilet Brush	Cushions
Mop bucket	Bathmat	Throws
Microwave	Bin	Bag(s) or suitcase(s)
Draining rack	Laundry bin/basket	

