

**DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
IMPROVEMENT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – PEOPLE
22 July 2020**

**Report of the Chair of the
Improvement and Scrutiny Committee- People**

Review of the Derbyshire Care Leavers Offer – Final Report

1. Purpose of the Report

To inform Members of the outcomes of the scrutiny review of the Derbyshire Care Leaver's Offer

2. Background Information

The review focussed on three discrete aspects of the Derbyshire Care Leaver's Offer: Council Tax, Accommodation and Financial support. During the review a series of working group meetings were held to ensure that Members were kept informed about partnership working undertaken by the Young Peoples Department to develop a more consistent offer throughout Derbyshire. The information gathered at these meetings is set out below.

2.1 Council Tax

- It is not a statutory requirement for care leavers to be exempt from council tax. However, in some parts of the country, for example Nottinghamshire and Surrey, there are policies in place to exempt care leavers from council tax.
- In August 2018, out of a desire to offer similar financial support to Derbyshire care leavers, Cllr Alex Dale (Derbyshire County Council's, Cabinet Member for Young People) wrote to all Derbyshire District and Borough councils to facilitate an in-principle agreement to exempt care leavers from council tax.
- Since that time, regular roundtable meetings have been held with district representatives, culminating in a consistent policy across Derbyshire to offer council tax discount to all Derbyshire care leavers between the age of 18 to 24 (from 1 April 2020).
- To be consistent with tax legislation the preferred terminology is "discount" and not "exemption".
- The discount covers a 100% of the care leavers council tax bill.
- Joint press briefings were planned to raise awareness of this significant change to the Derbyshire Care Leavers Offer but due to priorities emerging from the Covid19 crisis the publicity was been delayed.
- As stated above, similar discounts are not mandated nationally so the policy is not consistent across the East Midlands region or the UK. For example, Nottinghamshire offers a discount to all care leaves regardless of their local connection, whereas Derby City offers a discount to their own Derby City care leavers but not Derbyshire County Council care leavers.

- To ensure all Derbyshire care leavers are treated equitably the County Council has undertaken to pay the council tax of eligible care leavers if they live in an area that doesn't offer a council tax discount.

2.2 Accommodation provision

- The leaving care provisions of the Children's Act require that relevant children are provided with, or maintained in, suitable accommodation unless the local authority is satisfied that their welfare does not require it. To be suitable, accommodation must be reasonably practicable for the young person given their needs and the local authority must be satisfied as to the suitability of any landlord. These arrangements should be detailed in the young person's active pathway plan.
- Accommodation may be available through: Social Housing, Housing Associations, Private Accommodation and Semi-Independent Accommodation Providers. A care leaver may also choose to live with a family member.
- The County Council's role is to work with partners to find suitable accommodation.
- The support that a young person requires is determined by their circumstances. An individual may transfer "seamlessly" from semi-independent living into social housing or there may be more challenging circumstances. For example, a young person may have lost their tenancy due to unacceptable behaviour, in which case the Leaving Care Support Worker may have to present the young person to the district as homeless. On other occasions a young person may not use the district housing service at all and will go into private accommodation.
- Currently the County Council commissions 75 placements in semi-independent accommodation for older children in care and care leavers. The providers work with each young person to help them move on to appropriate long-term housing.
- The 75 placements offering semi-independent living are in significant demand and therefore there is a need to ensure that the flow of young people through this provision remains dynamic and timely.
- District housing departments treat all care leavers between the age of 18 and 24 as a priority group in terms of their duty to assess them.
- An agreement has now been reached that a Derbyshire care leavers local connection will be to Derbyshire as a whole and not to an individual district.
- The removal of the local connection from the districts to the whole of Derbyshire is a significant change that will open-up more possibilities for finding accommodation for care leavers.
- Previously it was difficult for a young person to move to a different part of Derbyshire. For example, a young person who had been living in Bolsover would have been regarded as not having a local connection if they applied to live in Chesterfield, even if they had been successful in securing work in Chesterfield.
- Another significant change is that districts have agreed that they will not make a care leaver "intentionally homeless" without having a clear discussion with the leaving care service before a decision is made.

- Current performance data shows that 97% of care leavers are in suitable accommodation. There are situations when the service struggles to get young people into long term sustainable accommodation. A small cohort of young people are sofa surfing and a number of care leavers are in custody, so by definition are in unsuitable accommodation. Currently the Derbyshire Leaving Care Service does not have any street homeless young people.
- The service has been designed to be able to give support to the most vulnerable young people. There is a qualified social worker in each team who is assigned the most vulnerable and hard to reach young people. This is unusual for a Leaving Care Service and has proved successful as there has been a reduction of young people in unsuitable accommodation.
- Providing accommodation support has been challenging during the Covid19 pandemic. District housing departments are not accepting new referrals as readily as they were prior to the pandemic. A challenge for the service is to think creatively to find alternative suitable accommodation.

2.3 Financial sustainability

- Children in care receive financial guidance over an extended period of time and this is reinforced when appropriate situations arise.
- At the launch of the new Leaving Care Service an important change was introduced. Each young person is now allocated their Leaving Care Support Worker at the age of 16. Prior to February 2019 the allocation of a support worker did not occur until the young person was 17 years and 6 months old. The rationale for this policy change is that it allows more time for a good working relationship to develop between the young person and their support worker. It also means that there are more opportunities to offer clear guidance about financial matters and to deliver independence readiness work.
- The effectiveness of this new approach has not been formally evaluated but the general view of staff working within the service is that care leavers are now better prepared to manage financial challenges as they transition to the adult world.
- Staff, however, remain mindful what a huge step it is for care leavers to go from receiving extensive financial support whilst in care to managing their own finances independently and taking personal responsibility for their own budget.
- Leaving Care Workers have monthly supervision, and this provides an opportunity to record what information has been delivered. However, evidencing and recording support is an area that potentially could benefit from improvement
- A publication entitled "Care Leaver's 18-25year olds Financial Entitlements" is available online. It sets out the financial support Derbyshire Care Leavers are entitled to and could receive from Derbyshire County Council. The intention is that this document is shared with all care leavers and the relevant financial entitlements are detailed in each young person's pathway plan. There is a commitment to review this publication annually. The first review has commenced and will seek the opinions of care leavers.

- The new service is aiming to be more flexible, proactive and responsive to allocating discretionary funding to support the employment and training aspirations and endeavours of each care leaver.
- Under the previous commissioning arrangements discretionary funds were allocated in times of crisis for example to cover utility bill arrears. Now discretionary funds are spent on enablers like travel passes and clothing for job interviews. Another example of greater flexibility is the recognition that not all care leavers benefit from the scheme to match fund 10 driving lessons and that a less prescriptive travel fund is more appropriate.
- Not explicit in the financial entitlement booklet (but explained to all young people in their looked after child review from age of 16 1/2) is that the County Council will fund them for the first 5 weeks whilst they are waiting for Universal Credit payments (as Universal Credit is always paid in arrears) . It is possible for a young person to apply for a loan from the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) but this would mean the young person would be starting out their independent living arrangements in debt. The County Council has made the decision to gift the money, provided that the young person engages with the DWP in applying for Universal Credit.
- The DWP give care leavers priority so that they can prepare their Universal Credit applications in advance and submit them when they become 18. However, the young person still has to wait five weeks before they receive any benefit payments.
- It's a key priority for the service to support care leavers into employment education or training (EET). Currently 57.9% of care leavers are in EET. Although this is likely to drop because of the impact of the Covid19 pandemic.
- The service has been liaising with several large employers (e.g. Morrison's, Amazon, Dunelm Mill) and consequently ten young people have been supported into work.
- Up to the age of 21 care leavers receive birthday money and Christmas money and there are financial incentives for those at university.
- At the start of the Covid19 pandemic the service had to respond quickly to put in place additional financial support for care leavers. For example, for the 75 young people living in semi-independent accommodation, the Council has agreed to pay (for a specified time) the service charge that the individuals are usually responsible for.

3. First-hand accounts of the Leaving Care Service

Cllr Musson and Cllr George met with two care leavers (Adam aged 21 and Ben 20) to ask about their experiences of the Leaving Care Service. This was an informal meeting held online and their Leaving Care Support Worker (Claire) was present. Whilst the conversation focussed on issues relating to accommodation and financial independence, there was an open invitation to raise any issue and to share suggestions about how the service might be improved.

It is acknowledged that conversations were held with a small sample size, however the Councillors felt the comments made were insightful and for

this reason the Committee would like the opportunity to speak to more care leavers in the future. Below is a summary of reflections from a care leaver's perspective about the Leaving Care Service. To maintain confidentiality the names given are fictitious.

Adam talked about his experience of moving from semi-independent accommodation to his own borough council flat. This was a difficult transition and he described the support of his personal adviser as being "massively important". Without her support and knowledge of how to apply, where to apply, and what to apply for, he feels he would not have been able to make the transition to living independently at the time he wanted to do so.

On reaching 18 Adam wished to live independently. He had experienced many moves throughout his lifetime and did not want to have to move again to supported accommodation with a different provider. There was no flexibility for him to extend his stay where he was living, whilst he applied for a council tenancy. Therefore, on his 18 birthday he had to leave his accommodation. He understood this was due to a funding issue. Fortunately, he was able to stay at his partners house for four weeks whilst his housing application was processed. At the time, if Adam hadn't had somewhere else to stay the next step would have been for his Leaving Care Worker to present him to the district council as homeless and he would have been offered interim bed and breakfast accommodation.

Claire clarified that the system works well when, at 18, a young person moves on to semi-independent accommodation (or another type of funded 24hr supported accommodation). However, when a young person (on reaching 18) wishes to move into their own flat and is required to sign a tenancy agreement, this is more complex. It is not possible to start the process of finding independent accommodation until post 18 because the young person cannot be allocated a bidding number that will allow them to submit an expression of interest for a council property. Consequently, this leaves the young person in an uncertain position and feeling unsure about their "Move-on plan". There are now robust mechanisms in place to ensure that the situation that Adam described, of having to move out of his accommodation on his 18th birthday, would not arise. Since the new Leaving Care Service was brought in-house procedures have been put in place to ensure that, when required, arrangements are made well in advance to fund post 18 accommodation.

During the conversation a suggestion was made that it would be helpful if care leavers could access a bidding number a few weeks before their 18th birthday so that they could begin the application process. They would still have to wait to be 18 to sign a tenancy agreement but the opportunity to

enter the system and initiate their application in advance would be extremely helpful and would lessen their uncertainty.

Ben explained that when he first met his Leaving Care Worker he was living in a children's home and his plan had always been to move into supported lodgings around his 18th birthday. Before this move occurred, Claire offered guidance and encouraged him to budget and he found this work helpful as it "set him up" for when he had to start paying his own bills. After 6 months in semi-independent accommodation with Adullam, he got the keys to his flat and he has now lived there for two years. This was a smooth process thanks to the support he received from Claire and the team at Adullam. He was very glad that Claire was there to guide him through the housing application process. He "understood very little of what the district council was saying" and it was invaluable to have the support of someone who understood the system and could explain the letters that he received.

Both Adam and Ben placed great importance on the strength of their relationship with their Leaving Care Worker. They have been with Claire since the age of 17 and a half years old, and grown to value her reliable and consistent support. They both said that it is beneficial for a young person to get to know their leaving care worker well in advance of leaving care. This view is in-line with the change introduction at the launch of the new Leaving Care Service (in February 2019). Now each young person is allocated their Leaving Care Worker at the age of 16.

Adam said "having one stable and solid person at that vital time in my life when I was transitioning from being a looked after child to having my own place was crucial to gaining my independence. To know that I could rely on Claire to always be there whatever my circumstances was very important".

Both Adam and Ben highlighted that it can be difficult to raise issues and concerns with a member of the Leaving Care Service if you don't have a relationship with them and they don't know your history. They indicated that from their own experience there had been times that they had felt uncertain about reaching out for help when their allocated support worker was not available (because of personal circumstances). They described it as daunting to reach out to somebody that you don't know and implied that there might be a tendency to push things aside at the expense of a person's wellbeing. They suggested that it would be reassuring for the young people within the service if they had a "backup support worker" who also knew them. Although that person wouldn't be able to get to know them in such depth it would bring a sense of stability and security to know

that there was someone else who they felt comfortable raising issues with if their main worker was not available.

Another issue that arose during the conversation was the support available after the age of 21. Ben said that Claire had been his main support since he left the children's home and therefore it feels daunting knowing that regular contact will not take place and his "support bubble" will disappear. There will still be the facility to contact the service by phoning through to the duty worker, but it will be hard to transition to a different level of support that doesn't have the same degree of continuity. It was suggested that having access to ongoing support, from a person that they know, beyond the age of 21 would be beneficial to many care leavers.

4. Conclusions

The Committee acknowledges the significant progress that has been made in the development of the Derbyshire Care Leavers Offer. Members welcome the fact that there is now an equitable approach that ensures that all Derbyshire care leavers will receive 100% council tax discount up to the age of 25 and that their local connection (when applying for a council tenancy) will be deemed to be Derbyshire rather than an individual district. However, the Committee feels that there are still opportunities to develop the offer further. For example, there may be scope to expediate the process when at 18, a young person chooses to move directly into independent accommodation. The Committee would also support work to identify ways of ensuring that each young person has the opportunity to build a bond with an additional support worker so that they feel comfortable raising issues and seeking support should their designated support worker not be available. Enabling access to guidance or mentoring beyond the age of 21 is another area of work that Members feel would be beneficial to care leavers.

5. Recommendations

5.1 The Committee commends the partnership working that has led to the countywide improvements to the Derbyshire Care Leavers Offer. The agreement of all District and Borough Councils within Derbyshire to provide council tax discount will bring significant benefits to care leavers up to the age of 25 and will help their transition to independent living. The removal of the local connection from the districts to the whole of Derbyshire will open-up opportunities for care leavers when setting up home and seeking employment or training.

5.2 Publicity regarding council tax discount for care leavers, that was delayed as a result of the Covid19 pandemic, should be progressed as soon as practicable.

5.3 Children's services work in partnership with District and Borough Councils to identify an approach that would enable a care leaver to make an "expression of interest" for a property in sufficient time to allow them to move in when they reached the age of 18.

5.4 In addition to allocating each young person a designated Leaving Care Support Worker, the service explores the feasibility of identifying a second point of contact within the service. This would provide each young person the opportunity to get to know and feel comfortable with another member of staff who would be available for them in the event of their designated support worker being on leave or leaving the Derbyshire service.

5.5 The Leaving Care Service explores mechanisms that would facilitate care leavers having access to ongoing guidance or mentoring with a person that they know, beyond the age of 21.