

TO: EXECUTIVE
DATE: 14 FEBRUARY 2017

CORPORATE PARENTING SUPPORT FOR CARE LEAVERS
Director of Corporate Services / Director of Children, Young People and Learning

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report outlines the case for Bracknell Forest Council to proactively discharge its duty as Corporate Parent in effecting and supporting Care Leavers (aged 18 – 21).

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 **The Executive note the positive work the Council is doing in its role as Corporate Parent.**
- 2.2 **As part of the ongoing support to care leavers in its role as Corporate Parent, that Council Tax exemption be granted to care leavers aged 18-21**

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Bracknell Forest Council's role as Corporate Parent to care leavers justifies this group of young people being seen as a priority for this exemption. Corporate Parenting is the term used for the collective responsibility of the Council and partners to ensure the care and protection of children and young people in care, and care leavers. This term refers to all elected members and council employees, regardless of the department they are employed in.
- 3.2 A range of Local Authorities across the country have introduced measures to exempt care leavers from Council Tax, (examples below), following publication of The Children's Society's 'Wolf at the Door' report 2015, which shows care leavers to be a group who are particularly vulnerable to falling into Council Tax debt when they move into independent accommodation for the first time.
As responsible Corporate Parents we want to assist our care leavers to work towards managing independent living in a positive and supportive way.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 Not providing this exemption was considered but agreed that this would not meet the Council's objectives as a corporate parent.

5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 5.1 The underlying principle of Corporate Parenting is that the Local Authority will seek outcomes for children and young people in care that every good parent would want for their own children or children within their family. This will encompass the chance to have stability and form healthy attachments; their health, safety and emotional wellbeing; their education and training opportunities; having opportunities to engage in leisure and community activities; being able to celebrate their culture, and identity, and having the right support to move on into adult life. Most importantly, corporate

parents, when making any decisions relating to services for children in care should always ask themselves ‘would this be good enough for my child?’

- 5.2 In the Government’s care leavers’ strategy, Keep on Caring, published in July 2016, Councils are encouraged to consider the role of a corporate parent ‘through the lens of what any reasonable parent does to give their child the best start in life’. In relation to this, local authorities are encouraged to consider exempting care leavers from Council Tax using the powers already at their disposal. In August 2016, through their report into homelessness, the Communities and Local Government Select Committee recommended to Government that care leavers be made exempt from Council Tax up to at least the age of 21.
- 5.3 All young people setting up home for the first time need particular support and guidance at this period of transition, especially those who are leaving care and often have little choice or control. Care leavers go from being looked after and having their needs met, to living independently with a whole new set of often overwhelming responsibilities without the family support that most other young people can rely upon. Once care leavers have a tenancy, they can find it difficult to keep their independent accommodation. Many are not realistically prepared for the realities of managing their own household budget, or handling negotiations with a landlord. Care leavers can be vulnerable to homelessness, particularly when they struggle to maintain tenancies.
- 5.4 For young people Leaving Care within Bracknell Forest, the Pathway Planning process seeks to engage young people in establishing Permanency for themselves which includes living in safe, stable and appropriate accommodation in a locality of their choice. The Bracknell Forest Leaving Care Service (LCS) works in partnership with agencies such as Housing, The Department of Work and Pensions, Adults Social Care, Health Services, National Careers Services, Adviza and the Voluntary Sector to ensure that young people leaving care are provided with opportunities and appropriate Pathways to achieve Permanence, which for LCS refers to a goal of "Successful Independence". The LCS provides each young person with a tailored package of support, led by their Pathway Plan, to ensure that their progress to achieving successful independence is timely and sustained.
- 5.5 In Bracknell Forest all care leavers are allocated a personal advisor from the Leaving Care Service to support and advise them and we endeavour to make leaving care and living alone a positive opportunity for them to start rebuilding their lives, putting down roots for the first time, particularly those who have had many moves during their childhood. Feedback from care leavers has told us that this would be a positive step for them in their journey to independence: “I think council Tax should be exempt for care leavers to stop them getting into debt and introducing some sort of financial education – it saves the council money by having to chase these vulnerable people by getting bailiffs involved and with that money they could use it to educate young people in how to manage finance. In my experience I faced financial challenges due to my status and not being able to work – but I strongly recommend the proposal as it will take some strain off these young people who like I already said struggle financially”.

Local Impact

- 5.6 As the corporate parent, the Council will want to do as much as possible to support care leavers to find and maintain suitable accommodation and learn how to support themselves in time without falling into debt. By granting exemption from

Unrestricted

Council Tax the Council will be providing real practical help to those leaving care who are starting out in life on low incomes, whilst they are working with the Leaving Care Service to develop budgeting and independent living skills.

- 5.7 A growing number of Local Authorities have introduced measures to exempt care leavers from Council Tax, e.g. Cheshire East, Wolverhampton, North Somerset Councils. Cheshire East Council have anticipated that this exemption will result in a decrease in emergency payments made to care leavers in crisis as well as further reducing the dependency of these young people on other services.
- 5.8 Based upon previous and current caseload profile and predicted profile for 2017, the number of care leavers who would be aged 18,19 and 20 and be required to pay Council Tax due to them living independently is 18. The calculation below is based on a person occupying a small property, i.e. a 1 bedroom flat in Bracknell.
- 5.9 An occupant of a one bedroom flat (Band B) would be required to pay £1123 council tax per year, before any discounts, exemptions or Council Tax support. It is likely that a young care leaver would be eligible for a single person discount; this means that a young care leaver living independently would have a Council Tax liability of £842 per year.
- 5.10 Based on an average of 18 individuals, the overall reduction in revenue to the Collection Fund from implementation of the proposed scheme would potentially be around £15k per year. This represents 0.03% of the total annual Collection Fund.
- 5.11 However, it is also likely that many of these individuals would qualify for Council Tax Support, reducing the amount even further and they would pay circa £170 per year, with the balance being a cost to the Council. This proposal would reduce the Council Tax liability to zero, meaning that there would be no cost to the Council in providing Council Tax Support. The net financial implication will therefore be in the region of £3k - £6k, subject to the number of individuals who would otherwise qualify for Council Tax Support.
- 5.12 There would be additional administrative effort to manage the scheme, however this is able to be absorbed given the small number of individuals affected.

6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Borough Solicitor

- 6.1 The Council has the power to devise a care leaver policy that exempts them from Council Tax. North Somerset already uses the power to exempt care leavers up until age 22. The guidance "Keep on Caring" encourages these types of initiative as part of the over all corporate parent strategy to give care leavers the best chance of living independently, successfully.

Borough Treasurer

- 6.2 The direct financial implications of the proposal are set out in the body of the report. The Executive will need to give consideration to claims from other groups for similar treatment, which could potentially have more significant financial implications.

Equalities Impact Assessment

6.3 This initiative is aimed at a disadvantaged group of young adults.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

6.4 None

Background Papers

http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/wolf-at-the-door_council-tax-debt-collection-is-harming-children_PCR027a_WolfAtTheDoor_Web.pdf

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/535899/Care-Leaver-Strategy.pdf

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/40/40.pdf>

<http://democratic.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/documents/s97128/Corporate%20Parenting%20Strat%202016.pdf>

<http://boris.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/permanency-strategy-2016.pdf>

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