

Wiltshire Council

Children's Select Committee

19th June 2018

Rapid Scrutiny Exercise: Children in Care Leavers

Purpose

1. To report to Children's Select Committee (CSC) the outcome of the rapid scrutiny exercise established on 13 June 2017 and held on 23 January 2018 and 27th April 2018 to consider Wiltshire's Local Offer for Care Leavers under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (which will be referred to as "local offer" in this report).
2. To make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills.
3. **Note:** The Lead Member was asked by the Members to note in this report the vast amount of relevant experience residing within the review body in relation to Care Leavers and related matters, which included one member with current long-term experience as a Foster Parent. As such the final recommendations are based on the evidence received and the abovementioned experience in this area.

Background

4. It was resolved at the 13th June 2017 meeting of Children's Select that a meeting be set up between the Chair and Vice-Chair of Children's Select and Martin Davis, Cllr Laura Mayes, and Cllr Pauline Church to discuss a potential piece of scrutiny on children transitioning out of care.
5. At the above meeting it was resolved that a rapid scrutiny exercise be arranged to examine the draft of Wiltshire's Care Leavers Covenant. The covenant sets out Wiltshire Council's corporate responsibility for care leavers.
6. The rapid scrutiny exercise met on 23rd January to examine how the local offer intends to meet its goals and to address any perceived gaps or potential improvements.
7. At the 6th February 2018 meeting of the Children's Select Committee meeting it was requested that the rapid scrutiny exercise reconvene to consider further information and refine their conclusions and recommendations. This meeting took place on 27th April 2018.

Membership

8. The following Councillors were appointed:

Cllr Chris Devine (lead member)
Cllr Mary Champion
Cllr George Jeans
Cllr Melody Thompson

Evidence

9. The following paper was made available prior to the meeting:

- Children and Social Work Act 2017, Care Leavers: A Local Offer (Briefing Report to Rapid Scrutiny 23.01.2017)
- Children and Social Work Act 2017, Care Leavers: A Local Offer (Further Briefing Report to Rapid Scrutiny 27.04.2018)

Witnesses

10. Members of the rapid scrutiny would like to thank the following councillors and officers for attending the meeting and providing evidence:

Cllr Laura Mayes, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills
Cllr Pauline Church, Portfolio Holder for Children's Safeguarding
Martin Davis, Head of Care and Placement
Lucy Townsend, Director of Family and Children Services

Deliberations

11. The local offer was introduced to the scrutiny members. During the ensuing discussion, several questions were asked and aspects of the policy further explored, including the following:

Personal Advisors

12. Provision for Personal Advisor (PA) support would be extended for all care leavers up to age 25. Care leavers currently receive support from their PA until they reach age 21, the new statutory requirements entitle care leavers up until the age of 25 to request support from a PA. Scrutiny members expressed support for this extension.

13. Officers explained that advertisements for vacant PA posts generate significant interest and applications received are usually of good quality. Officers expressed confidence in being able to recruit to additional PA posts if funding is identified to increase numbers.

Accommodation

14. It was acknowledged that there was a lack of accommodation across all of Wiltshire for care leavers. If housing in Wiltshire was not provided for care

leavers then more expensive accommodation would have to be sought out of county. As such, support was given to a housing pilot scheme to demonstrate the potential for success and attract housing developers.

15. Whilst no care leavers are currently in unsuitable accommodation, there were a number being housed outside of the county. As noted above, this is arranged at extra cost, both financial and through the distance from their communities. It was noted by the members that it is important that these individuals be encouraged back into Wiltshire-based accommodation.
16. Support was expressed in securing the commitment to treat care leavers as a priority banding, and it was acknowledged that this could be done with no direct need for additional funding.
17. Under the Rent Guarantee Scheme Wiltshire Council can act as a rent guarantor for care leavers. Currently this was in place for 10 care leavers. The scheme is designed to assist care leavers who can afford rent but where the landlord requires additional reassurance. It was noted that some requests are turned down where it is clear they would not be able to meet rent demands.
18. Members asked if communities surrounding the accommodation offered to care leavers are sufficiently vetted for suitability. Assurance was given that the officers from Housing are in contact with the Emerald Team to ascertain whether there are any concerns in the local area.
19. Concerns were raised over the possible lack of training and awareness from housing associations when it came to potentially housing care leavers with mental health issues (**recommendation 6**).

Employment

20. A Building Bridges programme is currently in place to help disadvantaged children out of unemployment. Under the programme coaches are allocated to each child to help them find suitable employment within their local communities.
21. A new Grandmentors programme was detailed which would provide support for care leavers throughout their transition into independent living. The programme allows volunteers age 50+ to share their experience and knowledge with care leavers. Under this scheme Grandmentors contribute 50% towards operational costs with Wiltshire Council required to match fund.
22. Members sought assurance regarding the vetting procedure for potential Grandmentor volunteers and were informed that there would be a Volunteering Matters Co-ordinator in charge of this process and that the Council would ensure that safeguarding arrangements were robust before entering into a formal agreement and contract with Grandmentors.
23. Care leavers who meet the eligibility criteria would be guaranteed an interview for Wiltshire Council apprenticeships. Members felt that this favourable

access should be highlighted and published to ensure all care leavers and their Personal Advisors are aware and maximum take-up from care leavers can be achieved. (**recommendation 8**).

24. Concerns were expressed that some care leavers were missing out on employment opportunities due to not meeting “functional skills” requirements (i.e. maths and English), which weren’t relevant for their potential employment. Officers had spoken to Wiltshire College on the definition of functional skills and would be waiving this requirement in certain situations.
25. The rapid scrutiny noted that it would be useful to know from the Human Resources team which businesses are being approached by Wiltshire Council for apprenticeship opportunities.
26. Members felt that any apprenticeships and work placements arranged should be checked to ensure they are appropriate both in their sector and the geographic location to make sure that care leavers can access the opportunities and that they are receiving opportunities suited to them (**recommendation 9**).

Support

27. Mandatory training would be developed for all Wiltshire officers to promote a positive “cultural shift”. Members suggested this be advertised to all mentors and hoped it would go beyond a short online course (**recommendation 7**).
28. Support was given to providing care leavers with free leisure passes. It was noted this could be done at minimal cost.

Finance

29. The Leaving Care Grant provided to all care leavers was currently £2000. This grant is held by Wiltshire Council and any spends went through a care leaver’s Personal Advisor. Whilst it was noted that Personal Advisors are resourceful and good at sourcing value for money, it was noted that the grant was relatively small. It was asked that research be done into the amounts provided in other nearby local authorities, it was discovered following this that other local authorities currently pay the same £2000 rate as Wiltshire. Scrutiny members suggested that more money should be made available through a discretionary amount which could be given on a case by case basis, as determined by the team managers (**recommendation 2**).
30. It was strongly recommended that care leavers be provided council tax exemption until the age of 25. In the interest of providing care leavers with the best start possible it was felt that removing this cost for them constituted a sensible and effective use of the funding available (**recommendation 1**).
31. Strong support was given to funding an additional two Personal Advisor posts to expand the support offered to care leavers (**recommendation 1**).

32. WiFi contributions were suggested to be provided at a rate of 50%. It was requested that a potential care leavers WiFi connection deal, provided through the digital strategy, be investigated. This would reflect the current reliance on WiFi, especially for people of a typical care leaver's age (**recommendation 4**).
33. Members queried whether there would be value for money if the Council were to fund tuition fees for care leavers. It was noted that repaying student loans does not begin until an annual income threshold of £17,775 has been reached. It was considered that this funding could be used elsewhere to more effectively help care leavers (**recommendation 5**).
34. Members suggested that a bus pass scheme should be developed for care leavers to assist them in attending education, interviews and employment (**recommendation 3**).

Additional Meeting

35. At the additional meeting members were informed that the Corporate Parenting Panel was consulted on 13th March 2018 and asked whether they supported the developments outlined in the draft offer. The Panel provided positive feedback and indicated that they agreed with priorities that had been identified.
36. The members of the Rapid Scrutiny were informed that Personal Advisers had also been consulted on the priority order for developments in the local offer which require significant additional investment. Members were informed that following this Children's Services had resolved to fund its contribution to the Grandmentors scheme.
37. The Corporate Parenting Panel, the Personal Advisers, and the Rapid Scrutiny members identified their order of their priorities as follows (**recommendation 1**):

	Corporate Parenting Panel	Personal Advisers	Rapid Scrutiny
1 st	Funding for 2 extra Personal Advisors	Funding for 2 extra Personal Advisors	Funding for 2 extra Personal Advisors
2 nd	Grandmentors	Grandmentors	Grandmentors
3 rd	Free Bus Pass	Free Bus Pass AND Contribution to Wifi costs	Free Bus Pass (to assist care leavers in attending education, interviews and employment) AND Contribution to Wifi costs
4 th	Council Tax Exemption	Leisure Centre Pass	Leisure Centre Pass
5 th	Extra Care Leaver's Grant	Council Tax Exemption	Council Tax Exemption

6 th	Leisure Centre Pass	Extra Care Leaver's Grant	Extra Care Leaver's Grant with the addition of "to include a discretionary amount that could be given on a case by case basis, as determined by the team managers"
7 th	Tuition Fees	Tuition Fees	
8 th	Contribution to Wifi costs		

Recommendations

With regards to the Wiltshire Local Offer for Care Leavers the rapid scrutiny exercise recommends that the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills:

1. Prioritises the additional investments in the Local Offer as follows:

1 st	Funding for 2 extra Personal Advisors
2 nd	Grandmentors
3 rd	Free Bus Pass (to assist care leavers in attending education, interviews and employment) and Contribution to Wifi costs
4 th	Leisure Centre Pass
5 th	Council Tax Exemption
6 th	Extra Care Leaver's Grant with the addition of "to include a discretionary amount that could be given on a case by case basis, as determined by the team managers"

2. Explores the creation of a bus pass scheme for care leavers to assist them in travel to and from education, interviews and employment
3. Increases the Care Leavers Grant to fall in line with the average grant levels in surrounding local authorities and to allow a discretionary amount that could be given on a case by case basis, as determined by the team managers.
4. Explores the creation of a funded Wi-Fi package for care leavers through the Wiltshire Digital Strategy.
5. Ceases the funding for university tuition fees so that the funds released could be used more effectively elsewhere for the benefit of care leavers.

Regarding care leavers in general, the rapid scrutiny exercise also recommends that the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills:

6. Promotes training for housing association employees to ensure adequate levels of Child and Adolescent Mental Health awareness.
 7. Advertises the mandatory training available for all officers amongst mentors and ensures that the training is and has been effective.
 8. Promotes the favourable access available for care leavers to Wiltshire Council apprenticeships to the care leavers and their Personal Advisors.
 9. Ensures measures are in place so that the work placements and apprenticeships offered to care leavers are appropriate both in their work sector and their geographic location.
-

Cllr Chris Devine, lead member for the rapid scrutiny exercise

Report author: Adam Brown, Senior Scrutiny Officer, 01225 718038,
adam.brown@wiltshire.gov.uk

Background documents

None