

**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 by the CMC on 13 June 2017 and held on 23 January 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.

Background

3. 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 through "self-build".
4. 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.
5. 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.

Membership

6. The following Councillors were appointed:

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

Evidence

7. 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)

Witnesses

8. 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

9. 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

- 1) Provision for Personal Advisor (PA) support would be extended for all care leavers up to age 25. The extension in provision means that care leavers will be able to continue to receive support until they reach age 21, or request PA support at any point up to age 25 (even if they had previously indicated that they did not want it). Scrutiny members expressed support for this extension.
- 2) The average number of responses received for each PA vacancy was approximately 16 applications. This was noted as a good sign of interest in the role and providing an excellent number of applicants.

Accommodation

- 3) 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.
- 4) 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.
- 5) Support was expressed in the 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.
- 6) 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 there is a concern of some form from the landlord. It was noted

that some requests are turned down where it is clear they would not be able to meet rent demands.

- 7) 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.
- 8) 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.

Employment

- 9) 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.
- 10) 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. It is charity based and would be match funded by Wiltshire Council. Scrutiny members expressed their support for this scheme.
- 11) 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.
- 12) 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.
- 13) 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.
- 14) 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.
- 15) Members felt that any work placements arranged should be checked to ensure they are appropriate both in their sector and the geographic location.

Support

- 16) 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.

17) Support was given to providing care leavers with free leisure passes. It was noted this could be done at minimal cost.

Finance

- 18) 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 and that more money should be made available to provide a minimum of £2500.
- 19) It was strongly recommended that care leavers be provided council tax exemption until the age of 25.
- 20) Strong support was given to funding an additional two Personal Advisor posts.
- 21) WiFi contributions were currently provided at a rate of 50%. It was requested that a potential care leaver's WiFi connection deal, provided through the digital strategy, be investigated.
- 22) Members queried whether value for money was being achieved through funding tuition fees for care leavers. It was noted that repaying student loans does not begin until an income threshold of £17,775 a year has been reached. It was considered that this funding could be used elsewhere to more effectively help care leavers.
- 23) Members suggested that a bus pass scheme should be developed for care leavers to assist them in attending education, interviews and employment.

Recommendations

10. The rapid scrutiny group recommends that the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills notes the following recommendations and comments:

- 1. The Rapid Scrutiny members expressed their support for the following:**
 - a. Council Tax exemptions for care leavers up until the age of 25;**
 - b. The recruitment of two additional Personal Advisors;**
 - c. Free leisure passes for care leavers;**
 - d. The introduction of the Grandmentors programme;**
 - e. The Building Bridges programme;**
 - f. The Rent Guarantor scheme;**
- 2. Training should be provided for housing associations to ensure that they are aware and understanding when it comes to Child and Adolescent Mental Health.**

3. Favourable access to Wiltshire Council apprenticeships should be highlighted to increase awareness of them amongst care leavers and their Personal Advisors.
 4. For members to receive a list of businesses approached by Wiltshire Council for apprenticeship opportunities.
 5. Measures should be in place to ensure that work placements and apprenticeships are appropriate both in their sector and their geographic location.
 6. Mandatory training for all officers should be advertised amongst mentors, and care should be taken so that the training is effective.
 7. The Care Leavers Grant should be increased to be both in line with the average grant levels in surrounding local authorities and at a minimum of £2500.
 8. A WiFi package for care leavers should be investigated through the Wiltshire Digital Strategy.
 9. The rapid scrutiny members considered that the funding for tuition fees should be used elsewhere for the benefit of care leavers.
 10. A bus pass scheme should be developed for care leavers to assist them in travel to education, interviews and employment.
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Cllr Chris Devine, lead member for the rapid scrutiny exercise

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

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Background documents None