

## **County Council**

**20 April 2018**

### **Agenda Item 10(b) – Notice of Motion by Mrs Millson**

#### **Care Leavers - Briefing Note**

The Government's Care Leavers' Strategy, 'Keep on Caring', published in July 2016, encourages councils 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', and this provides an approach to supporting care leavers through the challenging first steps of independent living.

The most recent statutory guidance published by the Department for Education in February 2018 – 'Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers' – helps local authorities to implement relevant legislation. This includes the Children and Social Work Act 2017, which, in addition to county responsibilities, places corporate parenting duties on district and borough councils, requiring them to have regard to children in care and care leavers when carrying out their functions. It is also incumbent on local authorities to ensure that relevant partners understand how they can assist in applying the principles in relation to the services those partners may provide. It is therefore clear that the orientation of public policy is towards giving all reasonable support to care leavers.

The West Sussex Corporate Parenting Panel is establishing a number of priorities for action to enhance the multi-agency offer to care leavers, with the aim of improving their life chances. These include: housing, apprenticeships, improving mental health and wellbeing, enhancing services to care leavers who become parents and improving financial literacy and stability.

The County Council currently supports 368 care leavers aged 18 to 21. These are all provided with a personal adviser to assist them to achieve a position of stability, with agreed objectives set out in an individual pathway plan. Regular information, advice and guidance are given. Within this context, help with managing finance is a critical factor.

#### **Why is it important to ensure care leavers have financial stability?**

Care leavers are young people whose early years are likely to have been difficult and lacking in stability. Nationally, 60% of children become looked-after due to abuse or neglect and they have poorer educational and health outcomes than their peers. As such they are much more likely than average to be vulnerable to a wide range of problems as they enter adulthood. One of these is a lack of awareness of financial matters, and how to meet their commitments on a fixed budget.

Significant national research supports the view that young care leavers are financially vulnerable. The Centre for Social Justice found that 57% of young people find it difficult managing their money and avoiding debt when leaving care. This is further reinforced by research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that outlines how 'accumulation of debt, threats to their tenancies and their inability to avoid this through careful budgeting' were issues of

continuing concern for care leavers. Care leavers are also frequently found not to be able to engage capably with the benefit system in order to obtain those benefits to which they are entitled.

Research undertaken by The Children's Society shows that care leavers frequently have little understanding of council tax, or their obligation to pay it once they move into independent living. This can rapidly escalate to arrears, debt and potentially the loss of accommodation and even criminal proceedings. Work undertaken by Rochdale Council found that 77% of their care leavers were behind with their council tax payments. In such circumstances, the prospects of building a successful adult life then become increasingly at risk.

Many councils have begun to offer care leavers an exemption from paying council tax, as a way of promoting greater financial stability.

Applying this approach equitably in West Sussex would require co-operation with all the West Sussex district and borough councils.

**Kim Curry**

Executive Director Children, Adults, Families, Health and Education