

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Report

Ward(s) affected: All

Report of Director of Community Services

Author: Helen Steward, Housing Strategy and Enabling Manager

Tel: 01483 444242

Email: helen.steward@guildford.gov.uk

Lead Councillor responsible: Angela Goodwin

Tel: 01483 824616

Email: Angela.Goodwin@guildford.gov.uk

Date: 10 September 2019

## Support for Care Leavers

### Executive Summary

This report provides information on the support provided to care leavers living in the Borough. It follows a request by Surrey County Council (SCC) to consider enhancing the services available to care leavers under the age of 25, specifically in regards to meeting their financial, social and emotional needs.

The key options to be considered are:

- Provision of a council tax exemption for all care leavers living independently up until the age of 25
- Free access to swimming and leisure centre services
- Discounts on classes/specific facilities at leisure centres (e.g. tennis courts, football pitches etc.)
- Additional support through housing policy.
- Working with the county to support the delivery of a life skills programme.

Leisure service concessions will ideally be delivered through a non-stigmatising process of application and 'membership card' arrangement.

As of February 2019, SCC informed us that they had placed 31 care leavers into the Guildford borough, with over half this number being placed out of the county. Of those placed in the borough, 18 of these were in education, 4 were employed and the remaining 9 were not in education, employment or training.

### Recommendation

The Committee is asked to recommend options to increase the services to support care leavers.

Reason(s) for Recommendation:

1. To meet the requirements of the motion carried by Council on 26 February 2019.

## **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 This report has been prepared to meet the requirements of the motion agreed by Council on 26<sup>th</sup> February:

Care leavers have had their childhoods punctuated by instability and trauma, they leave home earlier and have less support than other young people. As a result, care leavers have some of the worst life chances in the country.

A 2016 report by the Children's Society found that when care leavers move into independent accommodation, they find managing their own finances extremely challenging. With no family to support them and insufficient financial education, care leavers are falling into debt and financial difficulty.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 places corporate parenting responsibilities on borough and district councils for the first time, requiring them to have regard to children in care and care leavers when carrying out their functions.

To ensure that transition from care to adult life is as smooth as possible and to mitigate the chances of care leavers falling into debt as they begin to manage their own finances, this Council

### **RESOLVES:**

(1) That the financial, social and emotional needs of care leavers under the age of 25 living in Guildford Borough, and the attendant services and help provided by this Council, be examined by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its earliest convenience, and recommendations to the Executive made as appropriate.

(2) That the Council also agrees to look at ways of supporting care leavers further to ensure they fulfil their potential.

- 1.2 Accordingly, this report sets out the current provisions available to care leavers and options for expanding the offer.

## **2. Strategic Priorities**

- 2.1 The proposals support the place making and community themes of the Corporate Plan by supporting the more vulnerable and less advantaged people in our community and providing the range of housing that people need. They also contribute to the delivery of the Councils values for its residents.

- 2.2 The proposal to increase access to leisure services supports the priorities of the Sports Development Strategy 2016-21 themes of participation and inclusion, and the objectives of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy to increase physical activity and reduce social isolation.

### **3.SCC services and ambitions**

- 3.1 SCC are seeking to develop a consistent offer from councils across Surrey for care leavers to support a smoother transition into adulthood. They hope to deliver this by giving care leavers the opportunity to learn how to financially support themselves and encourage concessions that mitigate the chances of care leavers falling into debt.
- 3.2 SCC has requested that all councils provide a council tax exemption for all care leavers living independently up until the age of 25 as well as offering:
- Free access to swimming
  - Free access to the leisure centres
  - Discounts on classes/specific facilities at leisure centres (e.g. tennis courts, football pitches etc.)

and for this to be delivered consistently through a non-stigmatising process of application and 'membership card' arrangement.

- 3.3 SCC provide each young person in care with a social worker to help them to plan for their future. When they reach 17, each young person is also allocated a personal advisor who is there to provide support after they leave care. Grants are available to help care leavers with further education costs and the costs of setting up a home.

### **4. Current concessions across Surrey**

- 4.1 The current offer in Surrey varies between each district & borough. Waverley, Woking and Mole Valley offer free access to swimming or leisure centres across the area and discounts for leisure activities via a discount card which can be used with a range of other partners in the area.
- 4.2 Woking has offered a council tax reduction to care leavers since April 2018, and Surrey Heath and Mole Valley both introduced reductions from April 2019. Elmbridge committed to implementing a reduction in June 2019.

### **5. Guildford Borough Council's existing offer**

#### **Council Tax**

- 5.1 There are no existing concessions aimed directly at care leavers, although they can benefit from the broader schemes providing discounts for students and those on low income or unemployed. A discretionary fund is also available for anyone adversely affected by the Local Council Tax Support Scheme. Applications for this are considered on a case by case basis.

## **Leisure**

- 5.2 The Council's leisure services offer concessionary or discounted prices for a range of eligible residents both directly and through the leisure contract with Freedom Leisure. However, there are no existing concessions directly for care leavers across either leisure provider.
- 5.3 Concessions and eligibility varies across the services and includes;
- Disability Living Allowance
  - Elements of Universal Credit
  - Income support
  - Job Seekers Allowance
  - Housing benefit
  - Personal Independent Payments
  - Students
  - Over 60's
- 5.4 The existing contract with the Leisure provider has a provision for a change mechanism to the existing arrangements within it which could be used to facilitate access at a cost to the Council.

## **Housing**

- 5.5 Assistance is available to care leavers via the Council's Housing Service to enable them to secure suitable housing when they leave care. For some this may be a move into social housing. Care leavers are first encouraged to move into transitional supported housing while they learn to live independently. When they are ready to move on to independent living, they are normally awarded a higher priority band to enable them to secure a housing offer within a 6 month period.
- 5.6 There are several existing provisions within the borough that provide hostel or supported housing accommodation depending on an individual's needs. 11 bed spaces are provided in shared houses for care leavers between the ages 18-25. The Foyer provides 21 bed spaces for higher support with care (care provided by the SCC), and 13 bed spaces for individuals with lower support needs. Extra capacity is available at the YMCA in Bridge Street.
- 5.7 Once care leavers reach 21 years of age their application is reviewed and will then be considered as any other housing applicant. If the care leaver is no longer eligible to remain on the housing register, and there is no continued contact from them, their application will be removed from the housing register.

## **Community Wellbeing**

- 5.8 There are not any services particularly aimed at care leavers, however the service enables all residents to access community led support groups aimed at helping relieve social isolation, promote physical and mental health and build skills and learning so people can become more confident in finding work.

- 5.9 Support is available to help those managing mental health issues, alcohol and drug dependencies or that have offended in the past with the aim of enabling residents to live well and achieve their goals.

## **6. Options considered and financial Implications**

### **Council Tax**

- 6.1 In February 2019, officers considered the proposal to provide a council tax exemption for care leavers. At this time officers' recommendation was that an exemption was not needed as it was assumed that existing arrangements would help alleviate hardship suffered by care leavers. These arrangements were set out as;
- student exemption for those in full time education (which is a national exemption) and
  - full or partial discount under the Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTSS) for those on low incomes or in receipt of benefits.

There is also a fund for discretionary help where a claimant does not qualify for full Local Council Tax Support due to our local rules. For example if a care leaver lives in a Band E property.

- 6.2 Trying to identify the likely financial impact of adopting the exemption is difficult, as we do not know where in the borough the individuals are living, the age profile of the care leavers, whether they are claiming the existing exemptions and discounts, or whether they are currently not liable for Council Tax. For these reasons officers are uncertain of the costs of implementing such a scheme, but estimated the overall costs could be in the region of £5,000-£46,000 per annum based on 31 Surrey County Care Leavers living in the Borough.
- 6.3 Not all care leavers in the borough will have been under Surrey County Council's care, as other counties will house those in care near relatives. We have no information on the numbers. Consideration should be given to whether any reduction offered will be open to all care leavers in the borough that meet the criteria not just Surrey County Council care leavers.
- 6.4 Guildford Borough Council can only grant a council tax reduction to care leavers under section 13A of The Local Government Finance Act 1992. Any reduction is applied after any other discounts, disregards or exemptions – for example single person discount, local council tax support or student exemptions. The reduction can be from 1 to 100% of the Council Tax liability.
- 6.5 Legally Guildford Borough Council is liable for the full cost of any section 13A reduction. The police have advised that they do not have the powers to contribute. The County considered the matter at Cabinet on 16 July 2019 and resolved to pay 75% of the cost for their own care leavers, with a review of the funding in 2021 and every four years thereafter. Where Surrey care leavers live outside of Surrey they can claim 75% of their council tax from the county.

- 6.6 The creation of a reduction for care leavers may increase requests for a similar reduction from other groups such as former members of the armed forces.

### **Leisure**

- 6.7 In December 2018, Surrey Senior Leisure Officers' Group (SSLOG) received a briefing paper from Surrey Corporate Parenting Board, setting out a leisure proposal for all Looked After Children and care leavers.
- 6.8 Officers in Parks and Leisure Services have identified the following areas that could be considered for concessions:
- extension of eligibility to include a consistent offer across all leisure activities
  - extension of concessionary pricing for care leavers
  - extension of access times for concessionary offers (currently Monday to Friday, term time only)
  - extension of the range of activities included in concessionary pricing
  - increased concessions linked with affordability
- 6.9 Further scoping would be required to determine the financial, practical and social implications of an improved or extended offer. Consideration would need to be given to the Council's forward plan and the annual fees and charges setting process.
- 6.10 To measure the impact of any concessions, it is proposed that information on the take up of the service is collated, as well as annual reviews on the impact of the concessions on care leavers through feedback from care leavers' personal advisors.

### **Housing**

- 6.11 To increase the offer from the Housing Service we could consider expanding provisions for care leavers within the allocations policy. This could include allowing care leavers to remain on the register after the age of 21, and details of the existing housing options available for care leavers and a defined set of routes for support.
- 6.12 Further concessions could include ring fencing a set number of homes being made available for general needs renting through the housing register and Choice Based Lettings. Changes to the allocations policy could be implemented without a financial implication to the Council as this concerns the prioritisation of opportunities for social housing.

### **Community Services**

- 6.13 Community Services can work with the county on services that support the transition of care leavers into independence through providing life skills training.

## **7. Recommendations**

- 7.1 To provide the county with an overview of the existing concessions available to help sign post care leavers to eligible concessions.
- 7.2 To put in place a mechanism for measuring the outcomes of the new concessions in partnership with the County Council, to ensure that the concessions are improving the transition to independent living for care leavers.
- 7.3 To ensure any new services are meeting an existing need it is recommended that past and current care leavers are consulted on what new services and help they need in order to support them to transition into adulthood.
- 7.4 The Council supports many groups that are struggling with multiple disadvantages. If further services are made available to care leavers, a review of service provision to other disadvantaged groups would be appropriate to ensure that access to services and support is fair and equitable.
- 7.5 Consideration should be given to whether concessions or new services are also made available for care leavers that have a 'staying put' arrangement.
- 7.6 Were the decision taken to proceed with the adoption of a council tax reduction for care leavers it is recommended that;
- An accurate review of the potential costs to Guildford Borough Council in applying the reduction is carried out. This will require the county to share more information on the location of care leavers, and their housing arrangements.
  - A policy and procedure is adopted that provides for applications to be verified
  - The policy clearly defines what a care leaver is and when the discount ends
  - The policy provides for the reduction to be withdrawn in exceptional circumstances, for example the care leaver benefits from a significant capital payment or is on a high income.
- 7.7 If changes are considered for housing services, it would be recommended to review the housing allocations policy in its entirety, to ensure that it remains effective. As care leavers can be resident across the County, it would be advisable to clarify whether there are other vulnerable groups whose provisions should be reviewed to ensure that Guildford residents are not placed at a disadvantage.
- 7.8 Set the parameters and areas of the leisure offer to be scoped further, giving consideration to the financial, practical and social implications of each.

## **8. Equality and Diversity Implications**

- 8.1 This duty has been considered in the context of this report and it has been concluded that there are no specific equality and diversity implications arising directly from this report.

## **9. Legal Implications**

- 9.1 The Council has power in accordance with Section 13A Local Government Finance Act 1992 to grant Council Tax reductions in accordance with a scheme which specifies persons or classes of persons who are considered to be in financial need. Any new exemption will require a change to be made to the current scheme.
- 9.2 In accordance with Section 19 Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, the Council may provide access to recreational facilities provided by it either free of charge or on payment of such charge as it thinks fit.
- 9.3 The Council has an allocations policy which governs the allocation of housing accommodation. Any alterations to the allocation of housing will require an amendment to the scheme in accordance with S166A Housing Act 1996.

## **10. Summary of Options**

- 10.1 Options to increase support to care leavers could include;
- providing a council tax reduction
  - Providing concessions for leisure services
  - review of the housing allocations policy to provide additional services or priorities for care leavers