

April 2013 – July 2013

Children and Families Policy Development Group

# Response to Children and Families Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Group's Care Leavers Report

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# **Contents**

- 1.0 Executive Summary**
- 2.0 Outline of Review**
- 3.0 Care Leavers Review: Outcome**
- 4.0 PDG's Recommendations for Future Policy Direction**
- 5.0 Task and Finish Group Recommendations/PDG Findings**

## **1.0 Executive Summary**

- 1.1 The Children and Families Scrutiny Committee established a Task and Finish Group in 2012 for the purpose of carrying out a comprehensive review of the processes which supported care leavers at Cheshire East. The Task and Finish Group made a number of recommendations in respect of improvements to the service for consideration by Cabinet in its report of November 2012 (Appendix 1).
- 1.2 At that time, Council established a number of Policy Development Groups whose remit was to -  
  
*i) develop new, and review existing policies with a cross-service approach wherever possible; ii) make reports and recommendations to the Portfolio Holder and/or Cabinet; and iii) make recommendations for service improvement.*
- 1.3 The Portfolio Holder for Children and Families invited the Children and Families Policy Development Group ('the PDG') to comment on the Task Group's recommendations prior to consideration of the paper by Cabinet. This report sets out the findings of the PDG in response to the Task and Finish Group's recommendations and submits a set of recommendations of its own for Cabinet to consider.

## **2. Outline of Review**

- 2.1 The Children and Families Policy Development Group initially considered the Care Leavers report at its meeting on 23 April 2013 at which it agreed to convene a special meeting to consider in detail the recommendations contained therein.
- 2.2 Two meetings were eventually held for this purpose on 13 and 29 May 2013 at which time the PDG debated the proposals put forward, having mind to the improvement work already been undertaken by the Children and Families Service.
- 2.3 The Chairman of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group Councillor David Neilson, together with other members of the T&F Group (Councillor Bebbington, Councillor Livesley, Councillor Mahon and Councillor Silvester attended the first meeting, together with Julie Lewis (Principal Manager Cared for Children) and Sandra Slater (Group Manager Cared for Children). Councillor Neilson and the Principal Manager also attended the meeting on the 29 May.

### **3. Care Leavers Review: Outcome**

- 3.1 The Task and Finish Group focused on what improvements could be achieved on a practical basis whereas the PDG's discussions had taken a more aspirational stance, making suggestions which it accepted, were desirable, but may not be achievable in the present climate as a consequence of the implications on resources.
- 3.2 Its initial findings from the May meetings were submitted for final approval by the PDG on 1 July 2013 and subject to some minor amendments were approved.
- 3.3 Paragraph 5 of the report sets out in the first column the original recommendations of the Task and Finish Group, whilst the third column lists the PDG's conclusions in response to the issues raised. It should be noted that the legal and financial matters associated with the recommendations/findings have not been yet been considered.

### **4. PDG's Recommendations for Future Policy Direction**

- 4.1 The role of the Policy Development Group is to i) develop new, and review existing policies with a cross-service approach wherever possible; ii) make reports and recommendations to the Portfolio Holder and/or Cabinet; and iii) make recommendations for service improvement.
- 4.2 Having considered the Task Group's report, the Chairman of the PDG, Councillor Philip Hoyland tabled a paper at the May meetings for consideration entitled 'Questions, principles and policies' which looked at the issues raised from a more creative perspective without applying current restrictions.
- 4.3 Having considered the points raised, the PDG approved its own set of recommendations for Cabinet to consider i.e.
  - a) Cheshire East Council lobbies government to amend legislation where necessary to enable local authorities to continue providing the level and type of care required for all the young people in its care, up to the age of 25 if they require it;
  - b) Cheshire East Council aspires to continue providing the level and type of care required for all the young people in its care up to the age of 25 if they require it;
  - c) Cheshire East Council liaises with partner agencies, government and charities to secure the required resources;
  - d) Within 12 months, Cheshire East Council adopts as policy that it will continue providing the level and type of care required for all the young people in its care up to the age of 25, if the young person requires it and it is in their best interest;

- e) If adopted and it is not possible to achieve this policy for any individual an explanation is provided within their Care/Pathway plan; and
- f) Cabinet note that the Children and Families Policy Development Group has established a Task and Finish group to assist with any research, lobbying or additional background work required to facilitate the implementation of this proposal.

## 5. Task and Finish Group Recommendations/PDG's Findings

Care Leavers Review			
No	SCRUTINY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION	RESPONSE FROM POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP	PDG FINDINGS
13.1	<i>Changes to the processes that support care leavers</i>		
13.1.2	That the Council make attempts to delay the changing of the young person's Social Worker until after their exams have been completed and that an 'overlap' period be initiated in order to maintain a smooth transition. (p18 – para 6.8)	The Group acknowledged that changing Social Workers caused difficulties for the child, although occasionally it could be beneficial. It was suggested that Line Managers should take an overview of any change over to ensure adequate linkages. Noted that Agency workers often left without prior notice.	This is a pinch-point which creates work later if not addressed.
13.1.3	That the Council take steps to ensure that the Pathway Plan is an easy to use, easily understood and meaningful document for the young person. (p.19 – para 6.15).	The issue for young people was that Care Plans changed into Pathway Plans at 16, which was essentially the same thing. The PDG considered that the Care Plan and Pathway Plan would benefit from better linkage and should be renamed e.g. 'Pathway to Independence Plan'.	Care Plan and Pathway Plan could be amalgamated to improve transition.
13.1.4	That young people become more engaged in the leaving care process with more opportunities provided for them to engage with and question the process that affects their lives. To support this, the Council should look to appoint a Participation Officer. (p20 – para 6.16).	Noted that the Scrutiny Committee's description of a Participation Officer was, in the opinion of officers, the fundamental role of the Social Worker and Personal Advisor and that the introduction of a new structure and access to the Barnardos Advocacy Services would address concerns.	Social Workers and Personal Advisors need training and time to manage the Pathway to Independence Plan in order to involve the young person effectively in construction of the plan.

13.1.5	That Foster Carers be given a key role in the leaving care and pathway planning process. (p20 – para 6.17).	Noted that Foster Care Forums were now a regular event whereby issues were raised on a regular basis	PDG was supportive of this approach.
13.1.6	That the Council ensure that the policy to provide adequate luggage to move a young person's belongings is being fully adhered to and continued until the age of 25. (p45 – para 10.35).	The Group discussed this issue in detail. Sought reassurances from officers that steps had been put in place to purchase suitable luggage, which were given.	It is important that a young person can move with dignity. PDG is satisfied that the service is compliant.
13.1.7	That the Council ensure that the young person's voice is fully listened to in the spending of the 'Leaving Care Grant'. (p45 – para 10.36).		The PDG agreed with the recommendation.
13.1.8	That a comprehensive but easy to use information pack be developed and given to every young person leaving care – to include; information on what they are entitled to, how to complete administration (setting up direct debits etc) and contact details of various agencies who they can turn to for help/advice. (p45 – para 10.37).	A leaflet had been produced and was to be taken to CSMT. Members considered that a leaflet on its own was not adequate and that a pack of information was preferable as it showed a greater level of care. It was requested that a copy of the pack be provided to the PDG.	Consideration to be given to producing an e-version/app of the pack.

13.2	<i>Changes to how the support the Council provides to care leavers is structured</i>		
13.2.2	That alongside the Lead Member for Corporate Parenting, a non-Executive Councillor, with no Chairmanship duties, be appointed as a 'Cared for Children' champion to liaise with cared for children and to drive through the Corporate Parenting agenda and to monitor the outcomes of the Task Group reports on cared for children. (p21 – para 7.4).	The Scrutiny Committee viewed this role as a person who would be an advocate for/monitor children in care, liaise with the Children in Care Council and be a point of contact for a child. The Group considered that this would not be an easy role to deliver and that the behaviours highlighted should be embedded in all elected members as part of their corporate parenting role.	That this matter be referred to the PDG for further discussion and consideration.
13.2.3	That opportunities be provided for cared for children/care leavers to engage directly and informally with officers so that positive relationships can be established. Ideally, small satellite bases be made available in the North (Macclesfield) and in the South (Crewe) of the Borough enabling access to kitchen facilities and to Personal Advisors/youth support staff/careers advice. Consideration be given to increasing access to these teams through utilising Skype facilities. (p21 – para 7.4).	There were costs involved with this approach but work was underway to establish two centres in Crewe and Macclesfield utilising existing resources.	PDG was supportive of this approach.  Consider the use of technologies such as skype to reach rural communities.
13.2.4	That the Council explore recruiting more Personal Advisors to bring down high caseloads (p22 – para 7.7).	Service needs and budgets were being reviewed to improve the position which was caused by the amount of travel a Personal Adviser had to undertake to reach the young person.	Make more use of technologies as a means of communication to reduce travel times.



13.2.5	That the Council recruit a specialist Personal Advisor who is qualified to work with disabled young people. (p22 – para 7.10).	A gap had been identified in the service which would avoid a number of people having to replicate the role. The PDG considered that the recommendation was reflective of the aspiration to give whole life care and considered that further work was needed in this area	That this matter be referred to the PDG for further discussion and consideration.
13.2.6	That the Council explore the appointment of a funding co-ordinator to have a strategic and practical lead in maximising income for children and adults coming through social care and health systems, including GPs and hospitals. (p28 – para 8.16).	Noted that the issues highlighted would be considered by the Health and Wellbeing Board.	
13.3	<i>Training and support</i>		
13.3.2	That the Council provide easy to read and accessible guidance explaining the benefits entitlements of care leavers and current employability schemes offered under New Deal and Flexible New Deal. That this be developed with the support of the DWP and distributed to care leavers, leaving care teams, benefit and Jobcentre Plus Offices. (p28 – para 8.16).	Members acknowledged that whilst there was a need to ensure that young people were aware of their entitlements, it should not be at the expense of making them dependent on them.	

13.3.3	That the Council provide budget management training for cared for children. (p29 – para 8.16).	The Council relied on Foster Carers and schools to teach these skills to young people. Members suggested that providing links to sites such as moneysavingexpert.com may also be of assistance. It was also considered important to confirm that a young person was competent in this area.	That budget management training be embedded in the Pathway to Independence Plan.
13.3.4	That the Council explore initiating a mentoring scheme which would pair care leavers/young people with cared for children (p33 para 9.23).	Investigations were taking place to establish what schemes other authorities had access to. A member drew officers' attention to the 'Big Sister' campaign, run by the Crewe Local Area Partnership which might be a suitable starting point.	Investigations to continue into what mentoring schemes may be available.
13.3.5	That the Council explore initiating a mentoring scheme for foster carers with other experienced foster carers. (p38 – para 9.41).	It was noted that this initiative was already in existence having established the Foster Carers' Forum in the last 12 months. Carers who had resigned or retired were being approached with a view to continuing their involvement as mentors.	PDG was supportive of this approach.
13.3.6	That foster carers be strongly encouraged to attend at least one education based training event a year. (p38 – para 9.41).	Both the Foster Panel and the Foster Carers had accepted this recommendation would be highlighted during the appointment process and annual review.	
13.3.7	That training events be made available for agency foster carers for a small charge. (p38 – para 9.41).	Foster agencies were responsible for ensuring that staff were trained as part of the fee paid by the Council.	Agencies must ensure that training is addressed and that it meets the expectations of Cheshire East.

13.3.8	That the Council provide a range of tenancy workshops for those care leavers due to move into social housing – focusing on developing life skills, budgeting skills and information on good neighbour behaviour. (p44 – para 10.31).	The Foster Care Forum provided information through their tenancy support officers, whose responsibilities in this area would be widened as part of a new contract.	PDG was supportive of this approach.
13.3.9	That the Council provide ‘practical’ life skills training for cared for children e.g., cooking, cleaning, minor DIY tasks, prior to the pathway plan process. (p44 – para 10.33).	Whilst this was considered to be a role for Foster Carers, some did not provide such support. Members suggested that volunteer groups such as Wishing Well would be willing to get involved which would also be beneficial for the volunteers.	Would support the use of voluntary organisations to provide this support.
13.4	<b>Benefits</b>		
13.4.2	That the Council explore paying landlords directly for those care leavers who are deemed unable to manage their budgets. (p28 – para 8.16).	It was important to ensure that young people were not at threat of eviction whilst they took responsibility for their own budgets. This could be improved by ensuring that they were given their independence at the right time and not at a set age. The ability to budget was a particular skill required by children who had been in residential care and who may need additional support. The impact of the introduction of the Universal Benefit would need to be monitored.	<p>Personal Advisors should work with cared for children to encourage budget skills.</p> <p>Review of the impact of the Universal Benefit should be undertaken by Personal Advisers, their findings to be reported to Corporate Scrutiny Committee.</p>

13.4.3	That the Council encourage the Department for Work and Pensions to enable 'jam jar' accounts for Universal Credit Payments in order to help facilitate budget management. (p29 – para 8.16).	Both 4.3 & 4.4 were matters outside of the Council's control and would require the Council to lobby the DWP to make the changes suggested.	PDG was supportive of this approach.
13.4.4	That the Council work with the Department of Work and Pensions to enable young people to register for social housing at 17 years 6 months of age rather than at 18 to reduce pressure on the pathway planning process and double payment. (p28 – para 8.16).	The proposal at 4.4 was acknowledged as a major piece of work which would require political support to come to fruition; the PDG considered that the Portfolio Holder would be best placed to move this forward.	
13.5	<i>Housing</i>		
13.5.2	That the Council explore how to implement a policy so that a young person can remain in their foster placement to complete any training or qualification that they have started prior to their 18 <sup>th</sup> birthday. (p42 – para 10.20).	The Principal Manager Cared for Children updated members on changes to procedures which had already been put in place. The PDG was in favour of having a range of available options in respect of housing but wished to explore this issue in more detail.	That the Strategic Housing Manager be invited to discuss the Housing block of the report with the PDG.
13.5.3	That the Council explore extending the number of supported lodging placements that are available. (p42 – para 10.22).		Representatives of Housing Associations to be invited to attend the meeting, the Portfolio Holder for Prosperity and Economic Regeneration to also be informed.
13.5.4	That the Council explore providing semi-independent accommodation options for care leavers based on the following two models. (p43 – para 10.24): <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Small 3-4 bed units (staffed) with support available</li></ul>		That temporary accommodation (e.g. a flat) be provided for use as emergency accommodation for older care leavers, such matters to be dealt with by Cared for Children staff and not Adult Services.

	<p>24 hours a day.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In agreement with social housing associations, a small number of single bed tenancies be provided to accommodate 16 – 18 year old cared for young people with floating support being provided by Residential Service Care Staff.</li> </ul>		
13.5.5	That the Council explore how foster carers and supported lodging hosts can retain meaningful relationships with a young person once they move into independent accommodation. (p43 – para 10.25).	See previous page	Monitoring of 13.3.5 should fall to the Fostering 16+ service, progress to be reviewed in 12 months and reported to Corporate Scrutiny Committee
13.5.6	That the Council ensure that care leavers in university can return to a foster/supported lodging placement during the vacation period. (p43 – para 10.27).	See previous page	See previous page
13.5.7	That the Council open discussions with the three housing associations that operate in the Borough with the aim of re-establishing a joint protocol to prioritise a quota of social housing for care leavers. (p44 – para 10.30).		

13.5.8	That the Council explore either appointing or seconding a housing officer to generate supported lodging/semi-independent placements, build relationships with housing associations and facilitate workshops for care leavers. (p45 – para 10.38).		
13.5.9	That the Council take steps to reduce the chance of loneliness for when a young person moves into independent accommodation, e.g. ensuring that housing placements are close to friends when appropriate and that social networks are facilitated. (p44 – para 10.34).		
<b>13.6</b>	<b><i>Education, Employment and Training</i></b>		
13.6.2	That the Council explore increasing the allowance that is paid to those care leavers who go to university to encourage increased applications. (p33 – para 9.23).	The PDG considered that it was important for a distinction to be drawn for young people between grants and loans. Questions were raised as to whether the amount of £2000 was realistic and it was suggested that enquiries be made of the National Students Union as per its recommendations in respect of reasonable living expenses.	Recommendations (6.2–6.7) be linked into the work of the Virtual School to provide support at key transitional stages.

13.6.4	That targets are set to demonstrate a year on year decrease in the numbers of cared for children aged 19 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).	See previous page	See previous page
13.6.5	That the Council extend the remit of the Virtual School from 19 to 25. (p33 – para 9.24).		
13.6.6	That the Council encourage secondary schools to retain a link with a young person in care once they enter further education. (p34 – para 9.24).		
13.6.7	That the Council encourage secondary schools and sites of further education to apply for the Buttle UK Quality Mark. (p34)		
13.6.8	<p>That the Council initiate a programme of support to better prepare cared for children for the demands of work. That this include (p34 – 35):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An incremental approach to work experience – beginning with taster days and ending with increasingly tailored and intensive work experience placements. Working with the Government's 'From Care2Work'</li> </ul>	<p>Apprenticeships offered to Children in Care had not been successful as i) the participants had not been prepared for the commitment required; and ii) supervisors had lacked sufficient understanding of the young person's needs.</p> <p>The PDG suggested that, because places were reserved, the young people may not have felt their place had value as it had not been earned. The following improvements were suggested -</p> <p>i) Approach Cheshire Fire and Rescue (who ran experience days</p>	PDG endorsed the proposals.

	<p>programme to support this.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council adopting a policy in which a work experience placement would be available to a cared for child every week of the year.</li> <li>• The Council strongly encouraging cared for children to participate and complete life skill development courses with existing (Prince's Trust) and newly developed partnerships.</li> </ul>	<p>for young people) to draw on their expertise;</p> <p>ii) Improve career advice in schools to help match expectations with experience;</p> <p>iii) Embed the work discipline in personal care plans;</p> <p>iv) Explore opportunities for the PDG to provided interview experience for young people in care;</p> <p>v) Explore options for work experience with Rotary Club/Town Councils.</p>	<p>Bullet point iii); should be built into Regulation 33 visits.</p>
13.6.9	<p>That the Council initiate the business case for Care Leavers accessing apprenticeships as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.</p>	<p>See above</p>	<p>See above.</p>
13.6.10	<p>That the Council ensure that Personal Advisors are provided with sufficient training so that there is a consistency of service across the team. That this includes training on care leavers' entitlements and need. (p22 – para 7.8).</p>	<p>Work was underway to redraft the job descriptions of Personal Advisors. The role would also be evaluated to establish if it was better suited to work with young people of 16+ than social workers.</p>	<p>PDG was supportive of this approach</p>