



<b>Title</b>	Corporate Parenting
<b>Purpose of the report</b>	To note the report for information and for decision (recommendations 1 & 3)
<b>Report status</b>	Public report
<b>Report author</b>	Hilary Loades – BFfC Head of Service, Corporate Parenting
<b>Lead Councillor</b>	Cllr Graeme Hoskin
<b>Corporate priority</b>	Thriving Communities
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. That the revised Terms of Reference for Corporate Parenting Panel are approved</li><li>2. That the proposal to include the revised sliding scale of council tax dispensation for Children Looked After and Care Leavers in the Council's MTFs planning is noted</li><li>3. That the proposal for Care Experience to become a Protected Characteristic is approved</li></ol>

## **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1. In March 2023 Mark Riddell MBE, the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers, undertook a two-day formal visit to Reading and reviewed services for care leavers, delivered by Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC), RBC and the partnership. The review focussed on:
  - 1..1. Corporate Parenting Panel
  - 1..2. Education, employment and training
  - 1..3. Housing
  - 1..4. Health
  - 1..5. Transition to adulthood
  - 1..6. Local offer to care leavers
- 1.2. The formal feedback received following Mark Riddell's visit identified strengths and areas for improvement and a partnership action plan was implemented to ensure that, collectively, BFfC, RBC and the wider partnership are both championing and meeting the needs of children in care and care leavers. The action plan has been endorsed by Corporate Parenting Panel, chaired by Cllr Hoskin, and is supported by senior leaders across BFfC and RBC.

- 1.3. The recommendations outlined in this report are aligned with the outcome of the review of care leavers.
- 1.4. The terms of reference for Corporate Parenting Panel were under review at the time of the care leaver review. These have now been updated in partnership with panel members and children in care and require formal sign off by Council.
- 1.5. The care leaver review recommended that the sliding scale of council tax exemption in place for care leavers up to the age of 21yrs be extended to 25yrs to reflect our corporate parenting duties up to 25yrs. The financial impact of this proposal is being included in the MTFS planning for the 2024/25 budget.
- 1.6. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England (May 2022) recognised the often negative outcomes for care experienced young people and adults and recommended that the government should make care experienced a protected characteristic.
- 1.7. Care experienced individuals have had unique experiences of being children in care. For many this also means significant experience of disadvantage and discrimination. In recognising this, BFfC works to ensure that our care leavers have a voice and influence how services are delivered, to remove barriers and ensure that they have equal access to opportunities in an inclusive community.
- 1.8. As a national movement gathers pace, over 50 Councils have now independently recognised that children and young people can face discrimination throughout their lifetime, due to being care experienced, and have made care experience a protected characteristic. By doing this, these councils are recognising the unique experiences of this group and their corporate parenting responsibility for them.

## **2. Policy Context**

- 2.1. Brighter Futures for Children's Corporate Parenting Strategy outlines the local authority's corporate parenting responsibilities to Reading's Children Looked After and Care Leavers.
- 2.2. This strategy is currently being reviewed and updated as part of the company's rolling programme. The revised strategy incorporates proposals made by Mark Riddell, including the need to update our 'local offer' to our care leavers. It will be signed off by Corporate Parenting Panel by the end of the year.

## **3. The Proposal**

### **Revised Terms of Reference for Corporate Parenting Panel**

- 3.1. The Corporate Parenting Panel is a well-established forum within the Council's constitution. A timely review of the Panel, chaired by the lead member for children's service, Cllr Hoskin, was initiated at the beginning of the year.
- 3.2. The review involved Panel members and children in care. The updated Terms of Reference place a greater emphasis on corporate parenting responsibilities. This is strengthened by a review and expansion of Panel membership to ensure that all services responsible for delivering corporate parenting duties are represented on the board at a senior level.

- 3.3. Most significantly, the membership was expanded to include children in care and care leavers as full members of the Panel. Children and young people have been part of three panels to date. They have also rewritten the Promise (formerly the Pledge) which is our commitment to children in care and care leavers.
- 3.4. A Child Friendly version of the Terms of Reference is being drafted to make available to the Children Looked After and Care Leavers.
- 3.5. Following these updates, the Terms of Reference require formal sign off by Council.

### **Sliding scale of council tax dispensation for Children Looked After and Care Leavers**

- 3.6. In February 2020 the 2020/21 Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy to 2023 stated: *'To mitigate against the cost of Council Tax increases and help some of our most vulnerable residents the Council has budgeted to help all its Care Leavers (on a tapering basis) pay their Council Tax. ...'*
- 3.7. At the same time, in February 2020 the RBC Executive Director of Resources report on setting the Borough's council tax payments records: *'The council has recognised its responsibility as a "corporate parent" with regard to children leaving its care – care leavers. Budget proposals, as outlined in the Medium Term Financial strategy (MTFS) and budget report ... include proposals to provide financial support towards meeting the cost of the Council Tax bills for care leavers between the ages of 18 and 21. The proposed support is tapered such that 18-year olds will receive a 100% contribution to their net bill (after applying all other exemptions and discounts), and would reduce to 66% for 19-year olds and 33% for 20-year olds.'*

The cost of this budget proposal was forecast at £50k and was met from the Council. A separate budget, also of £50k, was also proposed to provide equivalent support for Reading's care leavers who resided out of borough and were thus not eligible for the Council's own discount. This was to be administered by Brighter Futures for Children on behalf of the Council.

- 3.8. At the current time the council tax taper for care leavers is as follows:
  - 18 year olds – 100% taper
  - 19 year olds – 66% taper
  - 20 year olds – 33% taper
  - 21-24 year olds – No taper, the young people are responsible for meeting the full council tax payments for the property in which they reside.
- 3.9. In recognition of the difficulties that many care leavers face whilst transitioning into adulthood and learning to manage their financial affairs independently, and in recognition of the Council's ongoing corporate parenting responsibility to this vulnerable group of young people, it is now proposed that RBC's previous council tax offer to care leavers living within the borough and to Reading care leavers who live outside of the borough, is revised and enhanced.
- 3.10. It is proposed that from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 the tapered support changes to:

- 18 – 20 year olds – 100% taper
- 21 – 22 year olds – 66% taper
- 23 – 24 year olds – 33% taper
- 25 year olds and over – No taper, the young people are responsible for meeting the full council tax payments for the property in which they reside.

**3.11.** The proposed new taper has been costed. The current scheme costs approximately £40,800 per annum. The new proposed scheme is estimated to cost approximately £72,000 (assuming a stable cohort of care leavers) to care leavers living within the borough. There are approximately 56 care leavers living outside of Reading who will require council tax support in 2023/24.

**3.12. Care experience as a Protected Characteristic**

3.13. As of the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2023, the Council is responsible for 262 children in care and 182 care leavers aged between 18 and 25 years.

3.14. Statutory duties towards children looked after are clearly defined in the Children Act. Statutory duties also extend to care leavers. These are not all young people who have been in care, but those who meet the criteria defined in the Care Leavers' Act 2002.

3.15. Care experienced applies to anyone who has been in care for any period of their childhood. They do not need to have formal care leaver status to be care experienced. Care experience is a lifelong characteristic.

3.16. Children and young people who have been in care often face inequalities. Government data shows that care leavers have poorer outcomes and are three times more likely to not be in employment, education, or training than other young people. They are disadvantaged through not having family present to provide advice or support to help them in applying for jobs, preparing for interviews and understand the expectations of the workplace. They may not have family to support them to develop life skills, manage their money and attend to their emotional and mental health needs.

3.17. A protected characteristic means that it is against the law to discriminate against someone because of this characteristic. All protected characteristics have equal importance. Treating care experience in this way means that the Council can monitor and measure the impact that it is having to support our care experienced young people and adults in their life journey and make appropriate arrangements or adjustments to provide this support.

3.18. In adopting this principle, the Council and Brighter Futures for Children can tackle the inequalities that our care experienced young people face and, in doing so, support them to improve outcomes, including accessing work readiness and employability skills; building future careers and gaining experience; and championing access to apprenticeships and support through recruitment processes.

3.19. To help the Council understand the numbers of staff who are care experienced, a field could be added to the recruitment and HR system, and job applicants and existing staff could be invited to confirm whether they are themselves care experienced. Some may find it difficult or may prefer not to provide this

information, but going forward it could provide the Council with a picture of the impact of its work to support this group, which would form part of the regular workforce reporting. This practice has been adopted in other Councils.

- 3.20. Reading Borough Council and Brighter Futures for Children do provide a range of opportunities for young people with care experience, including support to enable them to access education, employment, and training to reach their career or educational aspirations and achieve their potential. However, the review of our care leavers confirmed that there is more to be done to fulfil our corporate parenting duties and be truly aspirational for our children in care, care leavers and care experienced young people.
- 3.21. As corporate parents, it is the Council's collective responsibility to support and champion children and young people who have been in our care, to receive the same opportunities that we would want for our own children. This support should include the promotion of good health and education, nurturing talent, and providing stability, thus enabling successful adult lives.
- 3.22. Services across the Council are committing to providing opportunities and support to young people with care experience to improve their outcomes and show a genuine and demonstrable commitment to providing them with the skills and experience to thrive. This will require some time and effort on the part of RBC and Brighter Future for Children's leaders and managers, and they will be supported in this by Brighter Future for Children's Leaving Care team and Children's Participation Officer, and the HR Service through practical advice, support and mentoring.

### 3.23. **Recommendations**

- 3.21.1. That the revised Terms of Reference for Corporate Parenting Panel are approved
- 3.21.2. That the proposal to include the revised sliding scale of council tax dispensation for CLA and Care Leavers in the Council's MTFs planning is noted
- 3.21.3. That the proposal for Care Experience to become a Protected Characteristic is approved

## 4. **Contribution to Strategic Aims**

- 4.1. Corporate Parenting is the term used to refer to the collective responsibility of the Council and our partner agencies to provide the best possible care and protection for children and young people who are Looked After; that is, children and young people for whom the authority has, or shares, parental responsibility, or for whom the Local Authority provides care and accommodation on behalf of their parents.

The Local Authority also has a duty and responsibility towards Care Leavers aged 16 to 25 years. These are not all young people who have been in care, but those who meet the criteria defined in the Care Leavers' Act 2002.

- 4.2. Reading Borough Council supports the view set out by the Department for Education regarding Corporate Parenting principles, which states: *'The role that councils play in looking after children is one of the most important things they do. Local authorities have a unique responsibility to the children they look after and their care experienced young people (relevant and former relevant children) ...*

*and the critical question that local authorities should ask in adopting such an approach is: ‘would this be good enough for my child?’*

- 4.3. Children and young people in care have the same needs – to be loved, cared for, and feel safe – as other children. We also recognise that many children looked after will have suffered abuse or neglect prior to coming into care and it is important that this is addressed whilst they are kept safe and their education, health and care needs are met. Children looked after, care leavers and care experienced young people face unique challenges and we are committed to ensuring that our corporate parenting principles are embedded in the wider work of Reading Borough Council, so that we can work collectively to help our children to address these challenges.
- 4.4. It is our role as corporate parents to advocate on behalf of our children looked after, care leavers and our care experienced young people, and to empower them to make their own decisions in preparation for adulthood. We want all our children and young people to achieve their full potential and to obtain the best possible outcomes, the same outcomes that we would want for our own children.
- 4.5. Leaving care, like leaving home, is a critical transition for our young people and supporting them through this transition into adulthood is a major responsibility for us as corporate parents. This is not simply a matter of helping young people acquire a checklist of life and independent living skills – although this is important – but also helping young people develop resilience, achieve a positive sense of self and have positive options for their futures. We need to recognise that young people mature at different paces and that some young people will take longer to develop life skills and struggle in independence. We need to aim to be there to pick up and back up our young people when we are needed.
- 4.6. The proposals within this report are all in line with the Council's strategic aims.

## **5. Environmental and Climate Implications**

- 5.1. There are no material climate implications resulting from the recommendation(s) of this report.

## **6. Community Engagement**

- 6.1. Representatives of children looked after and our care leavers have rewritten our Promise to children in care and been involved in our review of our Care Leavers' Offer. This includes our financial offer to Care Leavers (which includes the current council tax deductions).
- 6.2. Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel, including a representative group of children and young people who are looked after and care leavers have been involved in the review of the Panel's Terms of Reference.

## **7. Equality Implications**

- 7.1. The recommendations of this report are intended to promote equality of experience and opportunity for Reading's children looked after, care leavers and those who are care experienced.
- 7.2. Children looked after, care leavers and care experienced persons will also have other protected characteristics recognised under The Equality Act 2010.
- 7.3. It is foreseen that the recommendations in this report would have a positive impact upon children looked after, care leavers and care experienced persons,

through having 'care experienced' considered alongside other protected characteristics set out in The Equality Act 2010.

## **8. Other Relevant Considerations**

- 8.1. No relevant considerations have been identified that are not detailed elsewhere in this report.

## **9. Legal Implications**

- 9.1. There are no legal implications to the revision of the previous Terms of Reference for our Corporate Parenting Board.
- 9.2. There are no legal implications to RBC adopting the sliding scale of council tax dispensation for Children Looked After and Care Leavers that is proposed. This builds on the current sliding scale that was agreed for 2020-2023.
- 9.3. Section 4 of the Equality Act 2010 sets out 9 characteristics and people with those characteristics are protected from discrimination on the grounds of those characteristics. There is no legal reason why reading Borough Council cannot add care experienced to the list to be considered locally in its Equalities Impact Assessments. However, if in any assessment there is a conflicting impact between care experienced and any of the statutory protected characteristics, then the statutory protected characteristics must take precedence.

## **10. Financial Implications**

- 10.1. There are no financial implications for the Council in accepting the revised Terms of Reference proposed.
- 10.2. Accepting the sliding scale of council tax dispensation for care leavers that is proposed will have a financial impact for the Council. The calculated increase in costs when compared to the current agreed sliding scale for the current cohort of care leavers is approximately £31,200 per annum.
- 10.3. There are no financial implications for the Council in recognising care experienced as a protected characteristic.

## **11. Timetable for Implementation**

- 11.1. Target date for implementation of updated Terms of Reference – October 2023.
- 11.2. Proposed target date for implementation of updated sliding scale of council tax implementation – 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024, subject to MTFS planning.
- 11.3. Target date for implementation of care experienced as a protected characteristic – from the date of approval, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

## **12. Background Papers**

- 12.1. There are none.

## **13. Appendices**

- 1. Corporate Parenting Panel Terms of Reference**
- 2. The Promise**