



17 January 2024

Title	Leaving Care Action Plan update
Purpose of the report	To note the report for information
Report status	Public report
Report author	Hilary Loades – BFfC Head of Service, Corporate Parenting
Lead Councillor	Cllr Hoskin
Corporate priority	Thriving Communities
Recommendations	The Committee to note the progress made on the leaving care action plan and current priorities.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report details the progress made on achieving the actions identified in the BFfC Leaving Care Action Plan 2023/2024, which was drawn up in April 2023 in response to a review of the service undertaken by the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers, Mark Riddell MBE in March 2023. It details the actions already achieved, those that are being worked on and those that are proving more challenging to progress.
- 1.2. Overall, the actions identified in the Plan are being systematically addressed and progress is being achieved in most areas.
- 1.3. Moving forward, support is being sought from community partners in the hope of broadening some aspects of our care leavers' 'offer' and bi-monthly meetings bring together relevant BFfC managers and our Participation Officer to review the progress of the Plan, in order to ensure a co-ordinated approach and the involvement of our children and young people who are looked after in planning our services.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. BFfC's Corporate Parenting Strategy outlines the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities to Reading looked after children and care experienced young people.
- 2.2. This Strategy was reviewed in May 2023 and will be further updated in April 2024 as part of the company's rolling programme.

3. The Proposal

- 3.1. As of the 31st October 2023, the Council was responsible for 265 children in care and 180 care leavers aged between 18 and 25 years.
- 3.2. 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.

- 3.3. 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.
- 3.4. 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 championing and meeting the needs of children in care and care leavers. On the 13th July 2023 the action plan was endorsed by Corporate Parenting Panel, chaired by Cllr Hoskin, and it is supported by senior leaders across BFfC and RBC.
- 3.5. Work is ongoing around all areas of the action plan, although some have inevitably proved easier to make progress with than others.
- 3.6. Three key areas of activity have been that:
 - The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Corporate Parenting Panel have been updated in partnership with panel members and children in care and the department's revised 'Promise' to our children looked after now states BFfC and RBC's joint commitments to our children in care and care leavers and forms appendix 2 of the ToR.
 - The recommendation of the Care Leavers' Review that RBC's sliding scale of council tax exemptions that was previously in place for care leavers up to the age of 21 should be extended to 25 years (to reflect the corporate parenting duties of the local authority continuing to this age) has been costed with a proposal that the financial impact of this proposal be included in the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and 2024/2025 budget.
 - The Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England (May 2022) recognised the negative outcomes for care experienced young people¹ and adults and recommended that the Government should make 'care experienced' a protective characteristic. 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. Adopting this approach enables the Council to help tackle the inequalities that care experienced young people

¹ 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.

face, and in doing so support them to improve their outcomes, including accessing work readiness and employability skills; building their future careers and gaining experience; and championing access to apprenticeships and support through recruitment processes.

On the 17th of October 2023 the meeting of the Full Council considered and approved:

- The revised terms of reference for the Corporate Parenting Panel.
- The proposal to include the revised sliding scale of council tax dispensation for children looked after and care leavers in the Council's 2024/25 MTFS planning.
- The proposal for 'care experience' to be recognised as a protected characteristic by RBC.

3.7. Separately to these actions:

- Our young people who are looked after by BFfC or are recent care leavers, are being increasingly consulted around the development of BFfC's services that impact on them, and a group of young people now regularly attend the Corporate Parenting Panel.
- An increased housing offer for care leavers has been agreed for this year (2023/2024) with an additional 7 units being made available. It is also agreed that this will be reviewed prior to the future allocation for 2024/2025 being set.
- Progress has been made on developing our RBC apprenticeship 'offer' to care leavers, with five apprenticeship roles now identified in different departments which will be recruited to over the coming months.
- A clearer 'pathway' for care leavers transitioning to adult social care services is now established. The current capacity within the service means that young people are allocated personal advisers from the age of 17 or 18, dependent on needs, with an ambition that this will be brought forward to 16yrs.

3.8. Other areas of the action plan that are currently being prioritised include:

- Updating our BFfC/RBC care leavers' 'offer'. This includes:
 - o Revising our sliding scale of council tax dispensation and extending it to young people aged up to 25 years (see 3.6 above).
 - o Increasing our housing offer for care leavers (see 3.7 above).
 - o Increasing our personal allowance rate for care leavers to bring it in-line with the DfE recommended rate.
 - o Increasing the level of our settling in allowance for care leavers to bring it in-line with the DfE recommended rate.
- The first two of these commitments are to be funded by RBC and the second two by BFfC, subject to approval of the 2024/5 MTFS by Policy Committee. Work will be undertaken with Communications & Compliance and care leavers, to co-produce a new pictorial version of our care leavers' 'offer' which co-ordinates with our 'promise' to our children looked after. To allow time for a co-produced offer, this will be available for sign off by the corporate parenting panel by April 2024.

- Seeking support from the RBC directors and officers to develop specific aspects of our care leavers 'offer', e.g., provision of 'setting up home' grants, or covering the first two months' rent for care leavers taking on their first tenancies (until benefit payments are in place).
- Establishing a physical care leavers' hub, possibly co-located with other services in a one stop type approach.
- Exploring options to host a key partnership event in March 2024. This is in the early stages of planning; however, the intention is to seek practical, material and/or financial support from partner agencies and businesses across the Reading area, in order to enable RBC/BFfC to broaden the support offer available to Reading care leavers.

3.9. A key area of the action plan that has yet to be addressed is:

- Developing a set of themed sub-groups as part of the Corporate Parenting Panel based on the priority areas for care leavers and chaired by panel members who are then 'champions' for the themed area, i.e., housing, health, mental health, education, employment & training (EET) etc.
- Champions will be identified at the next Corporate Parenting Panel in January 2024. Themed sub-groups will be developed when a specific need is identified and would be led by the relevant panel Champion who would engage with the relevant operational officers.

3.10. The areas of the action plan that are currently proving more challenging to make progress on include:

- Employing a participation apprentice /champions on a full-time basis in the participation unit or leaving care team, to drive the local offer from each key partner agency and to engage with care leavers aged up to 25 years and represent their views.

This has funding implications which are proving hard to prioritise given the financial constraints that BFfC is operating under at the current time.

- Obtaining free prescriptions, and dental and eye care for care leavers aged up to 25 years.

This will need to be achieved through our health partners, however, whilst discussions are ongoing, they are clear that they are not currently able to fund this initiative and this offer is not currently available across the ICB BOB footprint. This will be explored further at the next Corporate Parenting Panel in January 2024.

3.11. In conclusion, the actions identified in the BFfC Leaving Care Service Action Plan 2023/24 are being systematically addressed; reasonable progress is being achieved in most areas, accepting the current financial pressures place restrictions on what can realistically be achieved in some areas at the current time. Support is being sought from community partners in the hope of broadening some aspects of our care leavers' 'offer'.

3.12. Bi-monthly meetings bring together relevant managers within BFfC and our Participation Officer to review the Plan. This supports a co-ordinated approach and the involvement of our children and young people who are looked after in planning our services.

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. 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?’*
- 4.2. Children looked after, care leavers and care experienced young people face unique challenges. As corporate parents it is the role of the Council and BFfC to advocate on behalf of our children looked after, care leavers and care experienced young people, and to empower them to make their own decisions in preparation for adulthood. Such that our children and young people achieve their full potential and the best possible outcomes.
- 4.3. Leaving care, like leaving home, is a critical transition for our young people and supporting them through this transition into adulthood is critical. 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 to develop resilience, achieve a positive sense of self and have positive options for their futures.
- 4.4. The proposals within the BFfC Leaving Care Action Plan and detailed within this report align with the Council’s Corporate Plan and Corporate Parenting Strategy and BFfC’s Business Plan.

5. Environmental and Climate Implications

- 5.1. There are no material environmental or climate implications resulting from the recommendation 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 have been involved in the review of our care leavers’ ‘offer’. This includes our financial offer to care leavers.
- 6.2. Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel, including a representative group of children and young people who are or were previously looked after by BFfC have been involved in the review of the Panel’s Terms of Reference.
- 6.3. Working with managers across Children’s Social Care, our BFfC Participation Officer ensures that BFfC children looked after and care leavers are increasingly engaged in consultations around the services provided to our children looked after, our care leavers, and their families.
- 6.4. BFfC is seeking to engage with partners in the Reading community to gain their support around expanding different aspects of our ‘offer’ to our Reading children looked after and care leavers.

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. Some children looked after, care leavers and care experienced persons will also have other protected characteristics recognised under The Equality Act 2010.

- 7.3. In the last quarter, RBC / BFfC have committed to recognising care experience as a protected characteristic alongside other protected characteristics set out in The Equality Act 2010. It is intended that this will have a positive impact for children looked after, care leavers and young people with care experience.

8. Legal Implications

- 8.1. 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 Council either has, or shares, parental responsibility, or provides care and accommodation on behalf of their parents.
- 8.2. Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 - The Children and Social Work Act 2017 outlines the seven key corporate parenting principles which local authorities should have regard to when exercising their functions in relation to looked after children and young people.
- 8.3. Part 3 of the Children Act 1989 (the Act) provides Government guidance for Councillors and emphasises their role in ensuring that all children looked after receive a good standard of care and are able to achieve the high-quality outcomes that every parent would want for their own children or children within their family. As well as local authority responsibilities towards children looked after, the Children Act 1989 placed a duty on partners including Health, Education and Housing services to assist Children's Services to fulfil their functions under the Act – providing help, support, and services in order to meet Corporate Parenting responsibilities.
- 8.4. The Council 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.

9. Financial Implications

- 9.1. There are no new proposals within this report that have not been considered elsewhere in terms of any potential financial implications.

10. Timetable for Implementation

- 10.1. Separate target dates are set for different parts of the action plan; these are kept under review on a two-monthly basis.

11. Background Papers

There are none.

Appendices -

- 1. BFfC Leaving Care Service Action Plan 2023-2024 (updated November 2023) (Appendix 1)**