

SCRUTINY PANEL A

Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Thursday, 7th June, 2018 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Rachel Madden in the Chair;

Councillors Tony Brewer, Don Davis,
Nicolle Ndiweni, Phil Rostance and Mike Smith
(as substitute for Lachlan Morrison).

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Lachlan Morrison.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy and Craig Scott.

SA.1 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests.

No declarations of interest were made.

SA.2 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 23rd January, 2018 be received and approved.

SA.3 Introduction to Consideration of New Scrutiny Topic - Council Tax Exemptions for Care Leavers

The Chairman introduced Craig Scott, the Council's Service Manager for Revenues and Benefits, who was in attendance at the meeting to advise the Panel in relation to the new review topic.

The report attached to the agenda detailed the proposals for Council Tax exemptions for care leavers under the age of 25 including the recommendations from the report produced by the Children's Society in November 2017.

Craig Scott presented the report to the Panel Members and explained the definition of a care leaver as a person leaving Nottinghamshire County Council care provision at the age of 18. The proposed exemptions had been recommended to assist care leavers as they transitioned back into normal society and to give them some support whilst they established appropriate living arrangements and work opportunities.

The financial difficulties that care leavers often faced had been recognised by the Government within their latest Care Leavers' Strategy and in response,

The Children's Society had produced their own document in November 2017 which included a list of recommendations to shape the National Offer as follows:-

1. Make sure that care leavers are exposed to a less severe sanction regime to better support them into work.
2. Allow low-income working care leavers to claim the same in-work benefits as older adults without children to boost their income in recognition that they may have greater financial responsibilities than other young people of their age.
3. Extend the higher rate of housing benefit they may receive until the age of 25 to promote stability.
4. Exempt all care leavers under the age of 25 from council tax in recognition of the corporate parenting role of the local authority.

Recommendation 4 was within the remit of local authorities and the Council could therefore decide how it wished to assist care leavers under this exemption.

Members acknowledged that the exemption, if applied until 25 years of age, would not be means tested in any way or based on the ability of the particular care leaver to pay should they be receiving a higher salary. Should the care leaver be residing with another party this living arrangement would, again, not be taken into account as part of the exemption benefit offered.

The Council already had in place a Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Ashfield District Council were one of the few remaining local authorities that still provided a 100% reduction within their Scheme for claimants means tested on the lowest income levels.

Care leavers were already able to access some of the exemptions in place as part of the Scheme that were of particular relevance to young people i.e:-

- people on some apprentice schemes (earning less than £195 per week);
- 18 and 19 year olds in full time education;
- full time college and university students;
- young people under 25 who receive funding from the Skills Funding Agency or Young People's Learning Agency;
- student nurses.

Whilst the Panel were considering their options for providing the exemption for care leavers, it was necessary to also consider the potential cost. Nottinghamshire County Council had been asked for current data in relation to care leavers within Ashfield but as of today, the Council were still awaiting their reply.

An estimate of the number of care leavers within Ashfield was 104 but the data would not be complete until information had been received regarding their ages, position within the system, and current living arrangements etc. Based on the 104 estimate, the cost to the Council would be around £10,000 to £15,000.

Panel Members took the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the issue as follows:-

- the methods to be utilised to enable the Council to identify care leavers and offer them the appropriate support and acknowledgement of an arrangement with the County Council to advise the Council as care leavers depart the system;
- the importance of providing care and support to care leavers who have ongoing mental health issues;
- the decisions made by neighbouring authorities in relation to providing Council Tax exemptions for care leavers as a comparison marker;
- how the Council Tax exemption would apply to care leavers moving into hostels as opposed to fully independent living;
- whether the Council currently works with other agencies who provide care and support to care leavers;
- acknowledgement that the exemption, if applied until 25, would not be means tested and contact with the young person(s) would be minimal if they did not present with further benefit requirements;
- suggestions for limiting the Council Tax exemption should the care leaver have access to a student loan to undertake university studies or earn over £30,000;
- acceptance that the Council would be unable to contact DWP for information regarding the care leaver's working arrangements whilst the blanket Council Tax exemption applied;
- a need to understand the financial implications better once the data has been received from the County Council;
- a suggestion that the County Council could also provide some baseline data regarding the annual number of care leavers over the past 10 years to enable the Panel to ascertain if the numbers were increasing and its potential impact on costs for the Council in applying additional exemptions in the future;
- acknowledgement that the Cabinet would be considering this issue at its meeting on the 9th July, 2018.

RESOLVED

that the Scrutiny Manager be requested to undertake the following in readiness for the next meeting of the Panel:-

- a) to ascertain the Council's level of involvement with other agencies offering support and advice to care leavers within the County;
- b) to ensure the care leaver's data from the County Council including a request for further historical data for the previous 10 years regarding care leaver numbers, is obtained to enable more accurate costs to be evaluated and presented to the Panel at the next meeting;
- c) to invite the Cabinet Member responsible for the Revenues and Benefits function, Councillor Robert Sears-Piccavey, to the next meeting of the Panel to assist with the review process.

The meeting closed at 7.47 pm

Chairman.