

SCRUTINY PANEL A

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

on Tuesday, 31st July, 2018 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Lachlan Morrison in the Chair;

Councillors Tony Brewer, Don Davis, and
Nicolle Ndiweni.

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Rachel Madden and Phil Rostance.

Officers Present: Mike Joy and Julie Robinson.

In Attendance: Councillors Paul Roberts and
Robert Sears-Piccavey.

SA.4 Appointment of Chairman

Councillor Lachlan Morrison was appointed as Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

SA.5 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

There were no declarations of interest made.

SA.6 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 7th June, 2018 be received and approved.

SA.7 Council Tax Exemptions for Care Leavers

The Chairman introduced the item and reminded Members that at the last meeting the Panel considered the introductory report in relation to the new review topic namely, Council Tax Exemptions for Care Leavers.

He informed Members that the Council's Service Manager for Revenues and Benefits was in attendance at the last meeting to provide the background to this issue and assist the Panel with the review process.

Members were advised that the definition of a Care Leaver was a person leaving Nottinghamshire County Council care provision at the age of 18. The exemptions proposed had been recommended to assist Care Leavers as they transitioned back into society and to give them a level of support whilst they established appropriate living arrangements and work opportunities.

In readiness for this meeting the Service Manager – Democratic and Scrutiny Services was requested to ascertain the Council's level of involvement with other agencies offering support and advice to Care Leavers within the County and, obtain data from the County Council regarding Care Leaver numbers to assist with the evaluation of costings.

Unfortunately, the Service Manager for Revenues and Benefits was not able to attend this meeting to provide an update however, Members were asked to consider and discuss the report presented to them, and in particular the draft proposed scheme as appended.

The Service Manager – Democratic and Scrutiny Services proceeded to outline the preparatory work undertaken to date in respect of the proposed scheme and in doing so referred Members to the original proposals which were set out in the Children's Society report in November, 2017, which would ensure that Care Leavers receive support and protections in light of the additional vulnerabilities they may face.

The report "A National Offer for Care Leavers – Preventing them from falling into financial difficulty" 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.

The Service Manager – Democratic and Scrutiny Services emphasised that recommendation 4 falls within the powers of local government. Consequently, in order to determine whether the recommendation should be adopted this Council should consider what help is already available within Ashfield.

Members were reminded that at the last meeting detailed information was still awaited from Nottinghamshire County Council. A joint meeting between the County and District Councils has now taken place and the County Council have agreed to supply monthly figures to the District Councils to allow them to apply the exemptions.

The Service Manager – Democratic and Scrutiny Services clarified that the task for the Panel was to consider approval of the move to apply exemptions to Care Leavers up to the age of 25, in line with the National Offer and the draft scheme, which was to be adopted by all the Nottinghamshire Councils.

Panel Members took the opportunity to ask questions and in doing so discussed a number of issues including:-

- the financial implications for Ashfield District Council and other Preceptors to implement such a scheme;
- acknowledgement that the exemption, if applied until 25, would not be means tested due to the resource implications and capacity to administer this process;
- how the exemption would apply to Care Leavers moving into hostels, as opposed to fully independent living accommodation;
- the Council being mindful of an individual's change in circumstances and the means by which this information is communicated;
- the importance of providing care and support to Care Leavers up the age of 25 as they are vulnerable individuals who are more likely to experience financial and life management difficulties;
- a strong commitment from the Council is required to ensure that effective signposting measures are put in place to assist and support individuals;

The Chairman also welcomed to the meeting Councillor Robert Sears-Picavey, the Cabinet Member with portfolio responsibility for the revenues and Benefits function, who was in attendance to listen and contribute to the debate accordingly.

To conclude, the Service Manager – Democratic and Scrutiny Services emphasised that for the purpose of this review, Members were asked to consider the details of the proposed scheme and note that additional areas associated with this review relating to support (outside of Council Tax Exemptions) should be considered as a possible separate workplan item.

RESOLVED

that the following recommendations be submitted to the next available meeting of the Cabinet for consideration:-

- a) Cabinet be requested to support the implementation and details of the proposed scheme, due to the social benefits far outweighing the financial cost;
- b) Cabinet be requested to review the position in approximately 12 months' time to consider any changes in the number of claimants, the impact on Council tax collection and, the costs of managing such a scheme;

- c) the Council consider circulating an annual change of circumstances form to recipients of the exemption, to ensure that the Council's position is effectively monitored;
- d) the Council be encouraged to make a strong commitment to providing a holistic support system to ensure that effective signposting measures are put in place to assist and support individuals;
- e) delegated authority be granted to the Director of Resources and Business Transformation, to award the reductions as deemed appropriate, to enable the Council Tax Team to deliver a fast and efficient process for implementing the reductions.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and valuable contributions towards the Panel's review.

The meeting closed at 7.25 p.m.

Chairman.