

University experience for our Care Leavers in relation to the impact of Covid -19 and update on the Local Offer for Care Leavers

To: Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee

Meeting Date: 13th January 2021

From: Nicola Curley, Assistant Direction Children and Safeguarding

Electoral division(s): All

Forward Plan ref: N/A

Key decision: No

Outcome: Sufficient support put in place for our care experienced young people to achieve their potential, whilst being supported through Covid-19 restrictions.

Recommendation: The Sub-Committee is recommended to:

- a) Note the work being carried out to support our Care Leavers at University during Covid-19 and the innovative approach of the Local Offer for Care Leavers

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1. Summary

- 1.1 We have been aware of the implications of Covid-19 restrictions on our young people's engagement at University and have proactively worked to support them throughout, assessing the local restrictions in place for each and acting accordingly.
- 1.2 We have found that our care experienced young people have not been disadvantaged compared to their peers at University due to Covid-19 and have found in some cases, virtual learning has been a benefit to our young people's engagement.

- 1.3 We continue to work closely with our young people and react accordingly as restrictions change, offering guidance and support and communicating with the relevant professionals.
- 1.4 We have taken a new approach to the Local Offer for Care Leavers and this has allowed us to be more flexible and proactive when faced with issues such as Digital Poverty – the lack of access to IT equipment or internet services.
- 1.5 We are working to engage with local organisations, prioritising our care experienced young people and working on internal schemes to support our young people into employment.
- 1.6 There will be a focus over the next year to align Cambridgeshire County Council's Local Offer with Peterborough City Council to provide a seamless offer for Care Leavers across both authorities.
- 1.7 Our new approach for the Local Offer has been successful in strengthening the support available for our care experienced young people to overcome the obstacles they face and helping them to achieve their potential. Some examples of this have been:
- Receiving funding for bicycles to access education, employment and training
 - Support to cover the costs of driving lessons for our young people.
 - Care Leaver specific discounts at local stores.
 - Organisations providing 'Moving On Boxes' for our young people as they move out of Care.
 - Volunteering opportunities with local organisations
 - Low Income counselling opportunities
 - Pilot Mentoring Scheme.
- 1.8 Our Pilot Mentoring scheme is an example of where we are going beyond our statutory requirements in our Local Offer and putting on initiatives to inspire and support our young people to achieve their potential. Despite delays caused by the first national lockdown, we were able to successfully launch our mentoring pilot in early July. We have matched 10 care leavers to voluntary mentors who come from a wide variety of backgrounds, predominately based in Cambridge and the relationships are now well established. The mentors undertook initial remote training during lockdown so the project could launch when restrictions eased and are currently being supported by our partner agency Essex Community Development who won a procurement bid to administer the scheme. They have trained our mentors and provided ongoing supervision and some additional Saturday training sessions. Each mentoring relationship has the aim of increasing engagement in education, employment and training, whilst also taking into account personal aspiration. The relationships have all developed in a unique way but initial feedback has shown a positive increase in our young people's self-confidence and budgeting skills.

2. Background

- 2.1 There has been a lot of focus in the media of the impact of Covid-19 on University students and much speculation regarding student accommodation over Christmas in relation to the Tier system of restrictions in place and the impact that Covid-19 has had on some student's engagement with their course as well as the increased potential to drop out. We have been aware of our Corporate Parenting responsibilities to our young people throughout this time and have worked with them pro-actively.
- 2.2 We currently support twenty-four Care Leavers, who are studying at University, aged between 19-25 years old. Fourteen of these young people are over the age of 21 years old. Twenty-two are studying for Undergraduate Degrees, one studying for a Masters Degree and one studying for a Post Graduate Certificate of Education to become a qualified teacher. Our Cambridgeshire Care Leavers follow the national trend of attending university at a slightly older age than their peers.
- 2.3 Our Care Leavers at University have a variety of accommodation agreements, for example, twelve of our young people are in privately rented accommodation and five are in social housing. We also have two young people at local University's and in Staying Put arrangements with their former foster carers.
- 2.4 Cambridgeshire County Council has a statutory requirement to produce a Local Offer, supporting our care experienced young people with education, employment and training, accommodation, finances, health and wellbeing, participation and relationships, from the ages of 18-25 during their transition into adulthood and independence.
- 2.5 Over the past year and a half, we have taken an innovative approach to strengthen our Local Offer, forming links in the community and identifying our own resources to ensure we are not offering the minimum but are helping our young people to achieve their full potential.
- 2.6 The Local Offer has had to become fluid and pro-active to support our young people with the issues identified during Covid-19 restrictions, with a particular focus on Digital Poverty.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1 We have assessed the accommodation circumstances of all our Care Leavers currently attending University in relation to the Covid-19 regulations in place, to ensure they are supported in their return over Christmas and previously over the summer holidays. We have contacted the Universities that our young people attend and worked with them to pass on any relevant information about the Universities arrangements for Covid-19 testing to young people and their carers and also concerning the staggered return in the New Year.

A separate issue we identified earlier in the year before the University enrolment date was the potential for our young people not taking up their University place due to

Covid-19 uncertainties. We were, however, able to support almost all of our young people to attend.

Our assessments have shown to us that our care experienced young people have not faced any Covid-19 issues unique to those experienced by all University students at present and are not disproportionately disadvantaged due to Covid-19. Most of our Care Leavers attend smaller Universities rather than big city institutions and many are on vocational courses, which has meant that they are continuing face to face teaching with appropriate social distancing in place.

We have noted that some of our young people have benefited from the anonymised space of online lecturers and seminars and it has affected engagement positively. Where young people have struggled to engage online, we have made contact and encouraged the young person to make contact with the University facilities.

Where young people have found self-isolating challenging, we have worked successfully within a professional network, including their tutor to provide additional support throughout. Some of our Care Leavers currently reside in the Universities' halls of residence in areas of the country that have been in Tier 3 for a long time and we have worked with them to identify any support they have needed through the lockdown.

- 3.2 During Covid-19 the Local Offer has needed to be responsive and pro-active, identifying issues that are unique to our Care Leavers throughout the pandemic and where there may be gaps in support nationally. Care Leavers were not identified on the Governments 'Vulnerable People' list and were unable to access the support hubs created. Internally we set up a Care Leaver Covid-19 Work stream to identify these issues and put in place arrangements to support.
- 3.3 One of the biggest issues that emerged in response to Covid-19 was 'Digital Poverty', with workplaces issuing 'Work from Home' orders and also Further and Higher Education institutions moving to delivering lecturers virtually. We identified that many of our young people lived in accommodation that did not have access to the internet and many of our young people did not have a suitable device.

We were successful in applying for grant funding of £5,000 to purchase laptops and connectivity devices for our young people. We supplemented this with a discount agreement from a laptop supplier to allow us to purchase more for our money and prioritised delivering these to our young people that were at risk of dropping out of their courses or those unable to work from home. We also worked internally to prioritise our young people on the allocation of laptops being offered by the Department of Education. We also made contact with organisations who focus on tackling Digital Poverty to put our young people on their radar and ensure our young people received an allocation of their devices. We also utilised our connections with local colleges to ensure that they were aware of the digital disadvantage our young people were facing so they could get further support from the colleges.

From the months of April through to December 2020, we were able to attain and distribute the following across CCC and PCC Care Leavers:

- 99 Laptops
- 35 Connectivity Devices + Pre Paid Data Allowance
- 10 Lenovo Tablets
- 10 Mobile Phones with contract paid by Vodafone until April 2021

On top of this we have also secured £2,500 worth of grant funding to have the ability to 'top-up' the connectivity devices with data if it is needed to enable our young people to attend their courses virtually or work from home if instructed, making sure it is sustainable for our young people. Due to the flexibility of the Local Offer to be able to react to this we have not encountered a single instance of a Cambridgeshire County Council Care Leaver having to drop out of their course due to Digital Poverty. We also identified that some of our young people were now able to access virtual courses which they had previously not been able to access. We have not had the anticipated increase in young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) that other Local Authorities have experienced. Alongside this we are working with Cambridgeshire County Council's IT department to repurpose second hand Laptops in order to provide a sustainable source of devices as we feel this blended style of working and learning will outlast the Covid-19 restrictions. It has highlighted the Digital Poverty that our Care Leavers face and we hope to see more sustainable solutions reached to alleviate our young people from Digital Poverty.

- 3.4 We have demonstrated that having this dedicated focus to our Local Offer is beneficial for our young people in their transition into adulthood and independence. We are looking to progress with our approach and appeal to more organisations to support our young people. We have a proposed Business Event "Care Leavers and Fostering 'Bridge the Gap' event, scheduled for April 2021, with guest speakers from the Department of Education and Cambridge United. The event will raise awareness of the issues our young people face and local organisations will be asked to pledge their support to our young people.
- 3.5 Internally we are working to prioritise our care experienced young people in the 'Kickstart Scheme' placements created across Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council in 2021. We have identified this as a 'stepping stone' into a permanent position or an Apprenticeship and want to lead the way as an employer to include our young people throughout the entry process and support them whilst in these roles. We need to ensure that when these placements end, there is opportunity to progress into Apprenticeships or permanent opportunities
- 3.6 As we work more closely with Peterborough City Council we are working to align our respective Local Offers more closely to ensure our young people living in Peterborough and Peterborough's young people living in Cambridgeshire have a seamless offer and are fully supported.

4. Alignment with corporate priorities

- 4.1 A good quality of life for everyone.
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 4.2 Thriving places for people to live
There are no significant implications for this priority.

4.3 The best start for Cambridgeshire's children
This report demonstrates work to improve outcomes for our Children in Care.

4.4 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2050
There are no significant implications for this priority.

5. Significant Implications

5.1 Resource Implications

The new approach to the Local Offer has significantly increased resources available for Cambridgeshire County Council to support our Care Leavers as noted in section 3.12.

There may be further resource implications of a joint Local Offer with Peterborough City Council mentioned in section 3.15, but this will be scoped in more detail as work progresses.

5.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications
N/A

5.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications
To not provide the service would mean not fulfilling statutory requirements.

5.4 Equality and Diversity Implications
To ensure care leavers have the same opportunities as their peers.

5.5 Engagement and Communications Implications
Officers from Cambridgeshire County Council are actively engaging with other organisations to strengthen the Local Offer for Care Leavers

5.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement
N/A

5.7 Public Health Implications
N/A

6. Source documents

6.1 None