

Report of Director of Children's Services

Report to Executive Board

Date: 24th April 2013

Subject: Corporate offer to foster carers and care leavers



Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

1. Looked after children are the most vulnerable children in our community. Research highlights that looked after children have poorer outcomes than their peers. Considerable work has been done in recent years in Leeds to narrow this gap in outcomes. This paper provides an update to members on two important new initiatives that have been developed to improve the life chances of looked after children; the 'Corporate Offer to Care Leavers' and a 'Corporate Offer to Foster Carers'.
2. The development of these two corporate offers is significant. By working across all areas of the Authority the Corporate Offers provide a clear demonstration of the Council's commitment to be effective corporate parents to the children it looks after and to care for them 'as if they were their own'.
3. The Corporate Offers also provide a very clear example of how organisations can make a practical contribution to making Leeds a Child Friendly City and support the most vulnerable children in the community.
4. On the 31st of March 2013 Leeds City Council was the corporate parent to 1372 looked after children. Improving the lives of these children is a key priority for the

Council and its partners in the city, and is fundamental to the Children and Young People's Plan and the ambition for Leeds to become a truly child friendly city.

5. The majority of looked after children are placed with foster carers. Leeds Foster Carers, that is foster carers approved by Leeds City Council, are an integral part of the team around a looked after child and work closely with professionals to deliver the best possible outcomes for looked after children.
6. Leeds City Council currently supports 322 foster carer households. However, the local authority wants to significantly increase the number of foster carers and kinship carers to ensure that any child who is unable to live with their birth parents for any reason and for any length of time is able to remain within their community and their city.
7. Ensuring that all our looked after children are in stable and supportive placements in their local community will help to provide them with better life chances and outcomes.
8. The Leeds City Council Corporate Offer for Foster Carers acknowledges the important contribution that our foster carers make to the city by improving the lives of vulnerable children in Leeds.
9. On average 130 young people leave care in Leeds every year as they have reached eighteen years of age. Many of these young people have been looked after for a significant part of their childhood and consequently the local authority has a vital role in supporting them into adulthood. The Corporate Offer for Care Leavers has been developed to demonstrate the local authority's determination to do the best for 'its children' and to extend its responsibilities as a corporate parent to ensure that all young people leaving the care of the local authority have the support that they need to be active citizens of the city.
10. Although much has been done to improve services for care leavers in the city in recent years there is still much more to do. Research shows that in the UK, care leavers have significantly reduced lower outcomes throughout their lives compared to their peers. It also highlights that whilst the average child in a traditional family will leave home at 24, children in care 'leave home' at 18. This accelerated and compressed transition to adulthood means that many former looked after children struggle to cope with independence and are many times more likely to be unemployed, to be in prison, to be homeless or to die at an early age.
11. The Corporate Offer for Care Leavers is the latest step in improving services for care leavers. It is a whole council approach that provides better support to these young people sustained by their corporate parent until they have made the successful transition to adulthood.

Recommendations

In line with the aims of the Child Friendly Leeds initiative:

1. That Executive Board members note the current Corporate Offers for Foster Carers and Care Leavers.

2. That Lead Members, Directors and Chief Officers identify partners in the community, voluntary and private sectors that can offer a range of benefits which can be tailored to the needs of Foster Carers and Care Leavers.

1.0 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 To outline the need for a Corporate Offer for Foster Carers and Care Leavers and to state what these offers are and the further work which is taking place to improve the offers.

2.0 Background information

- 2.1 Every Elected Member and Officer of the Council is the 'corporate parent' of every child and young person that becomes looked after in Leeds. There has been significant effort and investment over the past 15 years in improving services and support for these vulnerable children. However, more needs to be done as outcomes for care leavers remain lower than their peers. One important way of improving support is in changing the Council's culture and approach through the powerful idea of corporate parenting. *"Corporate parenting cannot replace or replicate the selfless character of parental love; but it does imply a warmth and personal concern which goes beyond the traditional expectations of institutions."* (The Utting report, 1991)
- 2.2 Leeds Council is leading the development of a new approach to local government, as set out in the report of the recent Commission for Local Government. This report advocated a new approach for Elected Members as providing 'visible civic leadership' to engage all communities and organisations across the city towards a shared vision and aims. Moreover, the Commission recommended a new balance in the roles of individuals, families, communities and organisations in supporting vulnerable individuals and communities – a new 'social contract'. *'Collective action, led by local government, could be accelerated and communicated under the banner of a new social contract with citizens that would include support for the Troubled Families Initiative and encouraging schools to be part of a community that supports wellbeing.'* (Commission for Local Government, Final Report)

Foster Carers

- 2.3 The Council and its partners are committed to improving the outcomes for looked after children. The city has invested in Family Group Conferencing to help to ensure that more vulnerable children are supported within their wider family network, reducing the need for children to become looked after. However, where a child needs to be looked after it is important that they are provided with the best quality of care and are surrounded by a team of individuals that work closely together to provide them with the best possible outcomes.
- 2.4 Leeds Foster Carers are key members of this team. In addition to the high standard of care that they provide to vulnerable children Leeds Foster Carers ensure that our vulnerable children are able to maintain close links with their families, schools and community. In recent years the local authority has had to use Independent Fostering Agencies to provide placements for Leeds children. However, although

they are more expensive there is no evidence that these placements deliver better outcomes for our children.

- 2.5 Over the past eighteen months considerable work has been done to improve information for potential foster carers to ensure that they are fully aware of the significant benefits that there are for Leeds Foster Carer; including training, dedicated link workers and access to specialist, therapeutic support for children when needed. This has resulted in the service doubling the number of carers approved. However, we want to ensure that all children have the opportunity to be placed with a Leeds City Council Foster Carer.

Care Leavers

- 2.6 On average 130 young people leave care in Leeds every year as they have reached eighteen years of age. Many of these young people have been looked after for a significant part of their childhood and consequently the local authority has a vital role in supporting them into adulthood. The Corporate Offer for Care Leavers has been developed to demonstrate the local authority's determination to do the best for 'its children' and to extend its responsibilities as a corporate parent to ensure that all young people leaving the care of the local authority have the support that they need to be active citizens of the city.
- 2.7 Although much has been done to improve services for care leavers in the city in recent years there is still much more to do. Research shows that in the UK, care leavers have significantly lower outcomes throughout their lives compared to their peers. It also highlights that whilst the average child in a traditional family will leave home at 24, children in care 'leave home' at 18. This accelerated and compressed transition to adulthood means that many former looked after children struggle to cope with independence and are many times more likely to be unemployed, to be in prison, to be homeless or to die at an early age.

3.0 Main issues

- 3.1 As a Corporate Parent, the Council is committed to providing the best possible care to the children it looks after. Leeds City Foster carers play a critical role in delivering good outcomes to looked after children.
- 3.2 As the biggest employer in Leeds and the provider of public services the council is in an ideal position to ensure that Leeds Foster Carers are able to access a range support and services which help them in carrying out their important role with vulnerable children. The Corporate Offer also provides public recognition of the important contribution that Leeds Foster Carers make to the city. The Corporate Offer will also provide a concrete example of how other partners and organisations can support vulnerable children and help Leeds to realize its ambition to be a child friendly city.
- 3.3 The Corporate Offer for Care Leavers highlights the commitment of the Council to ensure that care leavers in Leeds are supported through the transition to adulthood to reach their potential and enjoy the same level of outcomes and success as their peers.

3.4 Providing some of these discounts and services will have a financial impact for some areas of the Council. However the Corporate Offers are a very clear demonstration of the Council's determination to work across directorates to deliver the best possible outcomes for looked after children.

3.5 **The Corporate Offer for Foster Carers is as follows:**

Leisure and Sport: Providing Foster Carers with access to leisure opportunities so that looked after children in those families have opportunities to improve their confidence, self-esteem and build skills and knowledge that will assist their outcomes as they grow and develop.

- free Bodyline
- free swims for the whole family
- free swimming lessons
- free tickets for child friendly events being organised by or in conjunction with the council e.g. The Ice Rink, Leeds Arena.
- free Leeds Card Extras

Foster Friendly Employer: The council has changed its HR Policy to become a foster family friendly employer. The Government has advocated a model approach to employment that will provide better support to foster carers, including providing time off to support the fostering process, for example to attend training. The Council already provides a range of flexible working options and support for employees that are working to support wider public service or family commitments. Implementing this standard will support the council's staff in becoming foster carers and will also enable the authority to offer leadership and support to other businesses and organisations in the city by encouraging them to also become a foster friendly employer.

Retail and Purchasing: A broad range of shopping discounts such as those provided to staff on the staff discount scheme is being secured. These will make trips out in to Leeds cheaper for foster carers, their families and the children they care for and will also help keep shopping bills lower.

MOTs: The council already offers citizens MOTs through its Fleet Services. However this will also be promoted more to foster carers as the service is independent of car dealerships and can often save people money.

Appendix 1 Shows how our Corporate Offer complements our existing service.

Areas for Development:

Free IT Software: council employees can benefit from the council's relationship with Microsoft as they are able to purchase software at a considerable discount. Discussions are taking place with Microsoft to allow this to be available to foster carers.

IT Hardware: the council's major IT suppliers are being asked by the Chief Officer,

ICT, to put forward ideas on how they can support foster carers as part of their corporate and social responsibilities.

Transport: the council is liaising with Metro to see if special travel passes can be provided for foster carers to use.

Corporate Offer for Care Leavers

- **Charter for Care Leavers**

The council will adopt the government's Charter for Care Leavers (Appendix 2) which means we will:-

- respect who they are, and remember that they are individuals
- listen to them and place their views at the heart of decisions made about them. If you don't agree explain why.
- provide them with practical help and support
- value their strengths and help them learn from their mistakes
- not forget them when they are no longer anybody's statutory responsibility

- **Accommodation, out of hours support, Independent Living Skills, Financial and Welfare Support and Advice.** A service specification for commissioning Housing Related Support (HRS) has been devised in collaboration with Children's Commissioning and Housing. This sets out the standards and outcomes required in the delivery of the Young Person's Area Based Housing Related Support Services. Three area based services will deliver a wide range of support for Care Leavers, including: access to stable housing; housing related support; financial advice and budgeting support; help with engaging in the community and with neighbours; taking up education, employment and volunteering opportunities. In addition to this there is extra support including for care leavers with higher needs emergency accommodation for those at risk of homelessness.

- **Employment.** The economic downturn and austerity pose significant challenges for young people finding work. Leeds has some success in this area but additional support is needed particularly for more vulnerable young people such as care leavers. The Chief Officer of Employment and Skills has agreed to improve support for care leavers through the successful '250 Opportunities Programme', which has provided work experience, apprenticeships and jobs for local young people. In addition, work is underway to build employment opportunities for care leavers and looked after children into on-going procurement contracts. HR Officers from the council will provide CV writing coaching and interview coaching.

- **Housing** – Children leaving care will receive additional support from housing services in their options being placed into council housing. In addition there will be quicker alerts from Housing to the 13+ team in Children's Services who support looked after children and care leavers when they get into rent arrears following suspension of Housing Benefit would ensure the team could support young people more effectively.

- **Setting up a home** - Independent living skills in cooking, house maintenance. Through the council's catering unit young people can receive help learning how to shop and cook. Through the council's property maintenance service the council can

advise young people how to maintain their home. The Catering Service will also help with kitting out a first kitchen in a new home.

- **Leisure** - keeping fit and healthy and enjoying life. In line with other councils Leeds will be offering looked after children and care leavers free or heavily discounted access to their Leisure facilities and Arts events. This includes discounted Bodyline cards and Leeds Card Extras. Additional support is provided in Leeds through the Max Card discount scheme which provides looked-after children, friends and family with free or discounted access to attractions across the UK including Harewood House, Royal Armouries and the Leeds owned museums and historic houses.
- **Areas for Development.** Whilst clear progress has been made and the Corporate Offer for Care Leavers provides a clear demonstration of the authority's commitment to care leavers; there is much more to be done. Leeds is determined to do the best for its care leavers. Children's Services are working with national experts, Professor Mike Stein from the University of York and Dr Emily Munro from the Institute of Education to further develop and improve our offer for care leavers.
- **Health.** There are currently six dedicated nurse practitioners for looked after children. Once these children become care leavers this support is no longer available and the young people are expected to access mainstream services. However, many care leavers have high needs and face complex challenges. The Service will be working with Health colleagues to offer access to a designated nurse for health needs for care leavers.
- **Benefits.** Young people leaving care can find the telephone-based systems for claims made prior to the 18th birthday very hard to use. Often they lack the education, maturity and confidence to negotiate a set-question automated system ('scripted') and the use of mobile phones makes such calls expensive and wearing. Martialling the factual information required is a real barrier. Care leavers often have chaotic lifestyles and may struggle to attend interviews. We are exploring the development of a system that will enable young people who are waiting for their benefits to be processed to receive a financial weekly payment from the council. When the benefits claim is processed the payments are backdated.
- **A place to go** – When most young people leave home they are able to turn to their family to get advice, learn skills and share experiences. This is more difficult for care leavers. Research has highlighted the importance for Care Leavers of being able to easily access, help and support – both formal and informal. Best practice is to have a single, city centre facility that provides care leavers with a welcoming place that they can go to access to a range of support, services and advice. We want to develop such a facility for Leeds Care Leavers. This will require a suitable site within the city centre and the support of all directorates and partner agencies in co-locating and/or integrating service staff and teams to ensure that Care Leavers can access all the support they need under one roof. These would include Social Work, Health and Housing. It is envisaged that these Services would be available for all young people, but there would be an additional facility for Care Leaver, which could include laundry, shower and washing facilities, a lounge area, a quiet room, IT facilities and sports facilities like pool tables. Parenting classes, welfare workshops and group work facilities as independent living workshops and surgeries from

designated nurses and welfare advisors. Consultation with Care Leavers shows that this would be something young people in Leeds would use and find helpful to them in their transition to leading fulfilling independent lives.

- **Technology and communications** - engaging with services and staying in touch. Being connected to the digital online world is very important to young people and in particular care leavers and Looked After Children. It helps young people form relationships and maintain important friendships. Access to the internet in Care Leavers' accommodation is something that would help close the digital divide and help ensure Care Leavers had online access to public services, social media and education resources around the clock. The council's IT service is talking to its major suppliers to see what they can offer as part of their Corporate and Social Responsibilities.
- **Transport:** the council is liaising with Metro to see if special travel passes can be provided for Care Leavers to use.

4.0 Corporate considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

4.1.1 Consultation with foster carers has been undertaken through stakeholder meetings and support groups. A satisfaction Survey was also completed earlier on the year on the issue of support to carers. Carers are keen for the council to provide a more enhanced level of support for them. No specific consultation has been undertaken to inform this work but care leavers and looked after children have close and on-going contact with social workers and the service each day and significant surveys have been undertaken locally and nationally in recent years. Further work will be undertaken with the Children in Care Council as proposals are developed.

4.2 Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

4.2.1 All foster carers will benefit from this proposal across the city and this will, in turn, benefit some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded young people in Leeds.

4.3 Council policies and city priorities

4.3.1 Improving the recruitment and retention of foster carers in order to build a larger foster carer base is a key priority for the council. Ensuring that we fulfil our role as a corporate parent is a key responsibility and priority of the council.

4.4 Resources and value for money

4.4.1 It is difficult to give a precise estimation of the cost to the Local Authority of providing the benefits outlined in the Corporate Offer to Foster Carers and Care Leavers, as this will be dependent on the level of take up by foster carers and care leavers. The Council has decided to meet these costs corporately.

4.4.2 It is hoped that the recognition of the important contribution that foster carers make to the city through the Corporate Offer will help to support foster carer recruitment and retention. This will support improved placement choice for looked after children and reduce the use of Independent Fostering Agencies.

4.4.3 The Children's Services Budget for 2013/14 includes savings £1.6m which is predicated on achieving a 30% reduction in the number of children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies by 31/3/14.

4.5 Legal implications, access to information and call in

4.5.1 No significant issues.

4.6 Risk management

4.6.1 The development of the Corporate Offer to Foster Carers and the Corporate Offer to Care Leavers will support the authority to deliver better outcomes for looked after children. Poor outcomes for looked after children have significant costs to the authority.

5.0 Conclusions

5.1 The development of these two corporate offers is significant. By working across all areas of the authority the Corporate Offers provide a clear demonstration of the Council's commitment to be effective corporate parents to the children it looks after and to care for them ' as if they were their own'.

5.2 The Corporate Offers also provide a very clear example of how organisations can make a practical contribution to making Leeds a child friendly city and support the most vulnerable children in the community

5.3 The Leeds City Council Corporate Offer for Foster Carers acknowledges the important contribution that our foster carers make to the city by improving the lives of vulnerable children in Leeds.

5.4 The Corporate Offer for Care Leavers is the latest step in improving services for care leavers. It is a whole council approach that provides better support to these young people sustained by their corporate parent until they have made the successful transition to adulthood.

6.0 Recommendations

6.1 That Executive Board members note the work that has taken place to provide Corporate Offers for Foster Carers and Care Leavers.

6.2.1 That Executive Board members agree that the Corporate Offers for Foster Carers and Care Leavers provides a clear and practical example of how an organisation can offer a range of benefits which support vulnerable to children and take forward the ambition to become a truly Child Friendly City.

7 Background documents¹

7.1 None

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.