

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO CABINET COMMITTEE CORPORATE PARENTING

19 APRIL 2017

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR, SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING

HIDDEN AMBITIONS - A CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER FOR WALES REPORT AND BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL'S POSITION.

1. Purpose of Report.

- 1.1 To provide the Committee with a copy of the Hidden Ambitions report published by the Children's Commissioners office, which is attached at **Appendix 1**.
- 1.2 To update the Committee on the position of Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) in relation to the recommendations within the report.

2. Connection to Corporate Improvement Plan / Other Corporate Priority.

- 2.1 The report links to all of the corporate priorities:

- Helping people to be more self-reliant;
- Smarter use of resources;
- Supporting a successful economy.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Children's Commissioner has been working with the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) to explore ways that they can help care leavers to achieve their 'Hidden Ambitions'. Her report concluded with a series of recommendations which she stated, if realised, will ensure Wales becomes a country that truly enables "every young person to be the best that they can be". In Bridgend we have a Sixteen plus team who will play a pivotal role in delivering the BCBC response to the recommendations. The report recommendations were captured under three main headings: Housing, Education or Training and Support. The details of each, our current position, and areas for development, are outlined below.
- 3.2 The Children's Commissioners office produced this report to ensure that young people leaving care can have the same expectations in terms of care and support as their peers. The research arose following the appointment of the new Children's Commissioner, after many different groups of people, including care leavers, approached her office to ask for consideration as to how the transition into adulthood can be made more straightforward. In 2016 the Commissioner consulted care leavers, and surveyed every Local Authority across Wales to establish what opportunities they currently provide. The Commissioner and her team heard about

young people's ambitions and also the barriers they can face in accessing opportunities.

3.3 The report was published on the 1st March 2017 and was subsequently discussed at the All Wales Leaving Care forum, also on the 1st March 2017. This forum is attended by the Team Manager and Senior Practitioner of the Sixteen plus team from BCBC, (our Sixteen plus team was previously aligned to the youth service team and known as Just Ask Plus) and their counterparts from other Local Authorities.

3.4 To take forward her suggested improvements the Children's Commissioner will:-

- Visit every Local Authority's executive leadership team across Wales in 2017 to discuss what they currently offer to support care leavers to achieve their 'hidden ambitions' and what they plan to put in place;
- Monitor the progress Local Authorities make;
- Monitor the progress of the Welsh Government in supporting care leavers;
- Continue to listen to care leavers about their experiences and whether they are getting the help they need.

4. Current situation/Proposal

4.1 **The report recommendations and the Council's position or planned actions are set out below:**

4.2 **Recommendation One** - *All young people leaving care should be able to access support up to the age of 25 (whether or not they are in education/training).*

The Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act, 2014, (SSWBA) states that support should be up until age 21 unless in higher education. In BCBC, assessed needs support is provided for young people up to the age of 25.

4.3 **Recommendation Two** - *There should be more focus on gaining skills for independence including practical skills such as cooking, opening a bank account and paying bills.*

The 16+ Team have, in conjunction with Newbridge House, developed a transition booklet, recognising that when leaving foster care in particular some young people are ill-equipped for independent living.

This booklet and way of preparing young people is being rolled out to foster carers and included in their training and foster carer handbooks. A small focus group has been established to identify and deliver a training programme for foster carers using an independence programme from Newbridge House Residential Unit to prepare young people in their care for independence starting at an earlier age.

Some of our young people live in Supported Living projects and with Supported Lodgings providers, those provisions also focus on teaching, enabling and supporting young people to gain independence skills.

4.4 **Recommendation Three** - *Social services, housing and education departments should all work together to help plan a young person's move to living independently.*

Education is involved as part of the Looked After Children (LAC) reviewing/Pathway Planning processes when a young person remains in education. The Looked After Children's Education (LACE) teams involvement concludes when a young person attains the age of sixteen. Education will remain involved with those Care Leavers who have a Statement of Special Educational Needs until the Statement expires. Often Care Leavers will be attending college or a life skills provision after they reach the age of sixteen. There is an established positive working relationship with Housing, however Housing legislation sometimes does not align smoothly with the SSWBA.

- 4.5 **Recommendation Four** - *Local Authorities should consider setting up forums or discussion groups just for care leavers; what is of interest or concern to a care leaver may be different to what is discussed by children still living in care. Care Leaver's Forums can be asked for their views when the local authority is planning to change how a service is offered and in deciding what issues their staff need training on.*

A young person's Consultation Group was previously established in BCBC. However following the realignment and relocation of the service in the summer of 2014 and feedback from the service users this group ceased to exist as a regularly planned meeting. Care leavers advised that they would like to access services on a more informal basis. Care leavers are currently able to access a 'drop in' provision and other 'out of hours' provisions whereby they receive support and have the opportunity to share their views and wishes. With regard to any specific change in our local policies, the service would ensure that young people are consulted about such changes e.g. the current review of our financial policy. The Team Manager of the Sixteen Plus Team regularly attends the All Wales Leaving Care Forum and the South Wales Leaving Care forum. She remains up to date with current projects, information and facilitates discussion about aligning support services where possible.

- 4.6 **Recommendation Five** - *Local authorities should be using the Welsh Government's Housing Positive Pathway and the Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework developed by Barnardo's as guidance for all those working with the young person.*

This framework is agreed as good practice in principle and is one that all directorates from within BCBC try to adhere to. However, there are barriers to this being fully implemented as there is often a shortage of accommodation available for this age group – supported accommodation, independent accommodation etc. is limited and provisions may often be bed-blocked as there is no appropriate move on. The Sixteen Plus team, Supported lodgings scheme within Bridgend Foster Care, Housing and Supporting People services are working closely together to try and make positive changes to improve our position. Last year housing commissioned a review of the Supported Lodgings provision which was undertaken by Llamau. This concluded that the service could be delivered and commissioned through an external provider with experience of delivering Supported Lodgings in other areas of Wales. This would be able to offer provision to both the Children and Housing departments and could lessen the overall impact on the local authority of young people becoming 'intentionally homeless' and then social services becoming involved.

- 4.7 **Recommendation Six** - *All young people should be entitled to clear information on the money and grants that they can access when they leave care, and the rules on what their money can be spent on should be the same for everyone. Information on finances should be clear, transparent and easily accessible.*

Information is provided to young people by their Social Worker and Personal Advisor (PA). Young people are supported to attend benefit / housing appointments and are often accompanied by their PA. Money management work is often completed with young people and foster carers are encouraged to do this also through the independent living literature. Our current financial policy is being reviewed and updated, incorporating consultation with young people. Ultimately a young person's version of the policy will be available to young people before they leave care so they are aware of the financial support entitlement they can access from the Sixteen Plus Team.

Although the benefit rules are set by the UK Government, it is important that young people across Wales have access to clear information on benefit entitlements, how to make a claim and who to contact for support and advice.

This information is provided by the young person's PA and Social Worker prior to leaving care and is ongoing as part of their entitlement to support and through the Pathway Planning processes whereby 6 monthly reviews are held as a minimum.

- 4.8 **Recommendation Seven** - *The Welsh Government is looking at what can be done to make council tax fairer and young people leaving care should be central to these considerations.*

There are currently no specific exemptions for Care Leavers in respect of Council tax but they do qualify for exemptions the same as any other citizen, e.g. living in shared accommodation / claiming housing benefit.

- 4.9 **Recommendation Eight** - *Local Authorities should be like a large family business in terms of their roles as Corporate Parents of looked after young people. Like any family business, they should be prepared to offer training and job opportunities in their many areas of employment, including administration, parks, nurseries, carpentry, social care and housing.*

Bridgend CBC takes its role as a corporate parent very seriously. The Corporate Plan 2016-2020 includes a specific item about the increase in apprenticeship opportunities for looked after children. Further work is planned to identify any actions which can be undertaken within existing resources to:

1. Further promote opportunities available.
2. To provide support e.g work experience; essential skills training; mock interviews; completing application forms.

- 4.10 **Recommendation Nine** - *Support for young people needs to be proactively offered, to help them to prepare for and access training schemes. Links to local businesses and partners can be valuable, as well as assistance with interview preparation and clothing and any tools or equipment needed to carry out a job.*

Young people leaving care are supported by their PA (and social worker) to prepare for and access training schemes. The Sixteen Plus Team has established and maintains positive links with a number of training provisions locally and also in neighbouring authorities. The Just Ask (youth) service facilitates job clubs where staff specifically support young people to gain training and access employment opportunities, this includes preparation for interview. The Sixteen Plus Team also access employment / engagement workers for young people needing any additional support. Financial assistance for interview clothing and any tools or equipment needed to carry out a job can be provided following a needs assessment. The young person is also supported to access any other available funding streams.

- 4.11 The Children's Commissioner for Wales is finalising a schedule of meetings with all Local Authorities across Wales and attendees from BCBC will include the Chief Executive, the Leader of the Council, the Director of Social Services and Wellbeing, the Head of Children's Social Care and other relevant Members and officers.
- 4.12 The aim of the meeting will be to reinvigorate the discussion about what services Local Authorities offer care leavers, to acknowledge what works well and explore any gaps in provision or potential for further development of opportunities. BCBC will take this opportunity to discuss its position and intention in relation to the recommendations as outlined above.
- 4.13 It is also the Commissioner's intention to invite Bridgend care leavers to the meeting to be able to hear directly from them about what is important to them or what would make a positive difference to their outcomes.

5. Effect upon Policy Framework and Procedure Rules.

- 5.1 There is no effect on the policy framework and procedure rules.

6. Equality Impact Assessment

- 6.1 This report is concerned with information rather than policy or decision making therefore, an equality impact assessment is not applicable.

7. Financial Implications.

- 7.1 BCBC is currently undertaking a review of the way in which the service financially supports care leavers at university. This review will take into account the recommendations coming out of the Hidden Ambitions Report

8. Recommendation.

- 8.1 Committee Members to note the content of the report and support the Sixteen Plus team and other partner department and services in fulfilling the recommendations of the Hidden Ambition report for the children and young people of Bridgend CBC.

Susan Cooper
Director of Social Services and Wellbeing
March 2017

Contact Officer: Natalie Silcox

Telephone: (01656) 372316
e-mail: Natalie.silcox@bridgend.gov.uk
Postal Address Children's Directorate, Civic Offices, CF31 4WB

Background documents

None