



<u>Committee and Date</u>
Council
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<u>Item</u>
<u>Public</u>

CARE LEAVERS COVENANT

Responsible Officer:

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1. Synopsis

This paper sets out the proposal for Shropshire Council to sign up to the national Care Leavers' Covenant to publish the support and opportunities it makes available to care leavers across all departments through:

- The Council to officially pledge its offers of support available to care leavers through signing up to the government Care Leavers' Covenant which will then be published on the government 'My Covenant' website.
- The Council to encourage businesses and organisations county wide to sign up to the Care Leaver Covenant and publish their offers of support on the government 'MyCovenant App'.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The Council is the corporate parent for 584 children looked after and 187 care leavers (06.01.2022).
- 2.2. Shropshire Council has made a pledge to our children looked after and care leavers that 'A child who is cared for by the Council has the right to expect everything from a corporate parent that would be expected from a good parent'.
- 2.3. All local authorities have a statutory duty to publish their 'Local Offer' to care leavers setting out what services and supports individual care leavers can expect from their local authority as their corporate parent. The current Local Offer is attached (Appendix 1).
- 2.4. In October 2018 the Government launched the Care Leavers' Covenant. Unlike the 'Local Offer', signing up to the Covenant is not a statutory requirement. Rather, it is a voluntary indication of a

- desire to do their utmost to fulfil their role as a corporate parent to care leavers.
- 2.5. Local authorities sign up to the Care Leavers' Covenant through the government website 'MyCovenant' and their offer is then available to their care leavers through the 'MyCovenant' App which is free for care leavers to download on to their tablet or phone (weblinks in background papers).
 - 2.6. The Covenant encourages local authorities to follow good practice in offering additional discretionary services in line with the recommendations of the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers. 'MyCovenant' along with SOLACE – Society of Local Authority Chief Executives- have set out a "Whole Council Approach Strategy" (weblink in Background papers).
 - 2.7. The strategy sets out to raises awareness and buy in from Local Authorities across all their departments to help ensure their care experienced young people:
 - are better prepared to live independently.
 - have improved access to employment, education and training.
 - experience stability in their lives and feel safe and secure.
 - have improved access to health support.
 - achieve financial stability.
 - 2.8. The Council pledged to sign up to the Covenant on 19th September 2019 (Appendix 2).
 - 2.9. A 'Launch Event' took place with partners and businesses across Shropshire in November 2019 where 32 external agencies and businesses pledged their support (Appendix 3).
 - 2.10. A draft Shropshire 'Whole Council Covenant Offer' was collated in line with the Covenant '5 Part Strategy'. This is set out in Section 7.3.
 - 2.11. The Council is requested to agree this offer to formally sign up to the Covenant.
 - 2.12. There is more that the Council could do to enhance this offer. A 'Whole Council' audit was planned for March 2020 in order to clarify each Council Department's offer for care leavers. However, this was postponed due to the impact of Covid on Council business.
 - 2.13. It is proposed that this audit now take place to clarify and find opportunities to enhance Shropshire's 'Whole Council' offer to demonstrate to our young people that we are acting as the best corporate parents we can be.
 - 2.14. It is further proposed that a further 'social value' event is organised by Shropshire Council to bring together council departments, members and local businesses and partners to renew their pledges and encourage new offers to be made.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Council agrees to sign up to a Whole Council 5 Part Strategy and approves the current Covenant Pledge set out in Section 7.3.

- 3.2 Members are requested to sign today their commitment to promote the Care Leavers' Covenant with partners and businesses they come into contact with, and to refresh their commitment to the SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS' CHARTER (Appendix 5).
- 3.3 That Council delegates to the Chief Executive and the Executive Directors consideration of which of the additional options to enhance the Whole Council Five-Part Strategy they are prepared to endorse to include:
- The development of more suitable housing options for care leavers.
 - Support to gain suitable housing for care leavers through use of rent guarantor schemes and/or payment of a supplement to housing providers where finance is a barrier.
 - The expansion of support to care leavers who become homeless by extending the automatic priority need category up to the age of 25 (legally it is currently 21).
 - Further to this, no care leaver would be made intentionally homeless from a care placement (ie, children's home, foster care, SB&L, SHIP, SAIL) and all care leavers would be placed into gold banding (or equivalent due to the review of the policy) for HomePoint.
 - Funding for additional work experience and apprenticeship opportunities in the Council ring-fenced for care leavers
 - A 'Whole Council' audit to take place.
 - An annual 'Social Value' face to face event to bring together Council members and representatives from Council departments with local businesses and partner agencies to promote opportunities for Shropshire care leavers and set ambitious targets to enable them to live and work successfully within Shropshire.

REPORT

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

(NB This will include the following: Impact on Children and Vulnerable Adults, Risk Management, Human Rights, Equalities, Community and other Consultation)

4.1 Impact on Children and Vulnerable Adults

This will have positive benefits for Shropshire's children looked after in preparation for adulthood and when they become 'care leavers' as young adults. Care leavers are a disadvantaged group nationally with on average only 50% in employment, education or training. They are more likely as

adults to experience difficulties with their emotional and mental health due to the trauma they suffered as children prior to being looked after, and many have fractured relationships with their birth family, leaving them with fewer lifelong supports. Care leavers are also over-represented in the prison population and more likely to become homeless.

However, given the same opportunities and supports that we give our own children and family, they demonstrate that they can thrive and make the most of their lives.

4.2 Risk Management

The recommendations in this paper pose no risks for the Council. There is a reputational risk in not offering such opportunities as the Council may be judged as not being as good a corporate parent as we could be by our care leavers and by external scrutiny such as Ofsted or the DfE.

4.3 Human Rights

Children looked after and care leavers have a right to the same opportunities as any other child being brought up by their (corporate) family.

4.4 Equalities

Children looked after and care leavers are a vulnerable group. Within this group, especially in Shropshire there is a higher proportion of children and care leavers with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) demonstrating they have additional needs. There is also a growing cohort of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people (UASC) arising from Shropshire accepting up to 45 UAS young people through the National Transfer Scheme over the next year.

4.5 Community

Care leavers are young adults with a contribution to make to the local economy and the community in which they live if they are given the right supports and opportunities to develop and enhance their skills and abilities.

4.6 Consultation

Feedback from care leavers is supportive of this Council initiative. Care leavers in Shropshire, on the whole, feel supported by their corporate parents. They highlight areas for improvement as greater access to education, employment and training close to where they live and have their support network; access to suitable accommodation to enable them to maintain employment, education and training; the ability to be able to travel for work, training or education and maintain their social network.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. The Council has already budgeted for the commitments made for Council Tax payments, the existing support from the Virtual School

and Learning & Skills Department for 2 apprenticeships and support with CVs, preparation for interviews and work experience.

- 5.2. The current Care Leavers' Local Offer is budgeted for.
- 5.3. The proposed annual 'social value' event is not yet budgeted for. The event in 2019 was budgeted at £500-£600.
- 5.4. Any additional apprenticeships, or support to ensure suitable housing are not yet budgeted for.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

Care leavers who are enabled to live closer to their support network and employment, training or education are not going to need to travel as far. If they live in suitable housing they will not need to waste fuel for heating. Many care leavers have the same worries and concerns for the climate as their peers and would wish to be able to contribute more widely to impact on the adverse effects of climate change.

7. Background

7.1 Shropshire Council as Corporate Parents to our care leavers

The Council is the corporate parent for 584* children looked after and 187* care leavers. Shropshire Council has made a pledge to our children looked after and care leavers that 'A child who is cared for by the Council has the right to expect everything from a corporate parent that would be expected from a good parent'.

All local authorities have a statutory duty to publish their 'Local Offer' to care leavers setting out what services and support individual care leavers can expect from their local authority as their corporate parent. The current Local Offer is attached (Appendix 2). The revised Local Offer is about to be published in February 2022, following a period of consultation with our care leavers.

Care leavers in Shropshire feel supported by their corporate parents. Our Leaving Care Personal Advisors recently won the National Care Leavers Benchmarking Award as PA Team of the Year 2021, with supporting comments from care leavers who wanted to say how well they had felt supported by the team through the Covid pandemic. Many have had no other support available to them and levels of anxiety and loneliness are higher in this vulnerable group.

Our Leaving Care Team are 'in touch' with 92%* of care leavers up between the ages of 18-25. 92%* are in suitable accommodation.

However, despite the best efforts of their PAs, and support from the Virtual School and Learning and Skills services, 48%* of our care leavers

are not in employment, training or employment currently. They have been especially impacted on at the end of the furlough scheme, with many not retaining their jobs.

They also find it difficult to gain accommodation close to employment and training opportunities and face challenges with travel across the county, often only having their Personal Advisor as their supporter, being estranged from their own family and no longer in touch with those who looked after them as children.

**Data as at 06.01.22*

7.2 The National Care Leavers' Covenant

In October 2018 the Government launched the Care Leavers' Covenant. Unlike the 'Local Offer', buying in to the Covenant is not a statutory requirement. Rather, it is a voluntary indication of a desire to do their utmost to fulfil their role as a corporate parent to care leavers. The Covenant encourages local authorities to follow good practice in offering additional discretionary services in line with the recommendations of the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers.

The Covenant is a government initiative borne out of Keep on Caring, the care leaver strategy 2016. It seeks to create practical, specific offers, by organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors, to support care leavers aged 16-25 in living independently.

It was developed through a process of listening to the voices of care-experienced individuals in various fora. The government's 'MyCovenant' website and 'MyCovenant' App works by linking care leavers to the offers which includes discounts, financial support, exemptions, personal development, workshops, training, work experience, apprenticeships and internships available to them across the country.

This is achieved through supporting organisations in signing the Covenant and raising the awareness of local authorities and voluntary sector organisations working with care leavers.

All Central Government departments were asked to make specific pledges to care experienced young people in terms of how they would support care leavers nationally. The pledge is:

- *that all parts of society have a responsibility to help care leavers to avoid poor outcomes and make a successful transition to adulthood; and*
- *that action to support care leavers should be in their best interests. promote their health and well-being and secure the best possible outcomes for them.*

All Central Government departments signed up to the pledge, some making a generic pledge of support and some more detailed pledges from Housing, DWP, Health and Education.

Some national businesses have also made specific offers to care leavers under the Covenant- e.g. Severn Trent & Marstons Brewery, alongside many Universities.

Local Councils were encouraged to make the same pledge and to involve local businesses and services to join the Covenant. When a Council signs up to the Covenant then all their local offers are available to on the 'MyCovenant' website and 'MyCovenant' App for their care leavers to access.

7.3 Whole Council Shropshire Council Covenant

'MyCovenant' along with SOLACE – Society of Local Authority Chief Executives- have set out a "Whole Council Approach Strategy" under 5 main headings:

1. Raising Awareness of the Covenant
2. Council Tax Exemption and Suitable Housing
3. Training and Employment Opportunities
4. Social Value Policy
5. Economic Development

The strategy sets out to raises awareness and buy in from Local Authorities across all their departments to help ensure their care experienced young people:

- are better prepared to live independently;
- have improved access to employment, education and training;
- experience stability in their lives and feel safe and secure;
- have improved access to health support;
- achieve financial stability

Shropshire 'Whole Council Approach 5 Part Strategy

This Council has already committed actions that would fit under Parts 1, 2 and 3, as set out below:

1. Raising Awareness of the Covenant

A successful 'launch event' was held in Shropshire in November 2019 to raise awareness of the Covenant. 32 local businesses and partner agencies made a pledge to raise awareness of the Covenant and promote opportunities for Shropshire care leavers.

During National Care Leavers' Week (annually October) in 2020 and 2021 the Council promoted our Corporate Parenting responsibilities across the

council, celebrating our care leavers' successes, and raising awareness of their challenges. This will be an annual supported event.

All members now attend Induction Training about their corporate parenting responsibilities, presented by officers and our Care Leavers' Ambassador and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Peer Ambassador.

Our Care Leavers' Ambassador hosts a Facebook site for Shropshire Care Leavers and our Ambassadors organise events to bring care leavers together. Face to face events were 'on hold' mainly through the Covid pandemic, but when possible outdoor activities have taken place.

Our Ambassadors and Personal Advisors promote the national opportunities available for care leavers available to all care leavers through the Covenant community portal, [Connects](#) and the free **Covenant App: [Apple App Store](#) | [Google Play Store](#)**. Any officer of the Council and members can also support care leavers they come into contact with to access this.

2. Council Tax Exemption and Suitable Housing

Shropshire Council ensures that all Shropshire care leavers are exempt from payment of Council Tax up to the age of 25, whether they reside in Shropshire or another local authority.

In support of obtaining suitable housing Shropshire Council gives all Shropshire care leavers 'Gold' banding when they register for social housing at 18.

A Training Flat is available for 16/17 year olds to see what it may be like to live on their own and try out their independence skills in a supported environment ready for adulthood.

Care leavers are enabled to 'stay-put' with their foster carers or remain in supported accommodation post-18 where this meets their assessed needs if they are not ready for living in their own place or whilst they are awaiting an offer of their own place.

3. Training and Employment Opportunities

Shropshire Council has specific opportunities for care leavers and supports them to attain their goals and aspirations in respect of education, employment and training:

- Support to access work experience whilst still in statutory education, promoted through the Virtual School alongside a commissioned service from Aspire for more vulnerable learners who may be at risk of not accessing education, employment or training post-16.
- Support to access work experiences post-16, promoted by the Virtual School post-16 Advisor and the Learning & Skills Service.

- Links through the Virtual School post-16 Advisor with local colleges and the University to access their Covenant offers.
- Development Funding secured each financial year to support up to 2 Care Leavers into Apprenticeships on an aspirations-based approach to job/apprenticeship match.
- Supports up to 2 weeks paid work experience to determine whether the post is suitable for them; if so, will undertake a job aligned to Grade 3 salary
- Care Leaver will undertake an apprenticeship to support them to gain higher level skills (Level 3 Apprenticeship)
- Offer includes pre-employment support i.e. CV writing, interview preparation, workplace experience
- Process also includes a phased induction programme enabling the young person to adapt to the new working environment, processes and routines.
- Guaranteed interview for opportunities in the Kickstart Scheme.
- Support to access other work schemes-e.g. Step-Up
- Support to write a CV/application and prepare for interview.
- Provision of suitable clothing and travel expenses to attend interviews.
- Provision of incentives through vouchers, travel costs and lunch money to attend work experience opportunities.
- Support to purchase specific equipment for specialist training.
- Support to access higher education through help to access government student loans and specific university financial aid, a bursary, accommodation costs in holidays, travel costs, support to purchase equipment.

The Council's Learning and Skills Department is the lead service promoting opportunities for care leavers and has a Key Priority to support at least 5 care leavers to gain work opportunities within the Council each year.

7.4 Potential for further enhancing the Council's Covenant 'Offer' under a Whole Council 5 Part Strategy

1. Raising Awareness of the Covenant

Members and all Council staff who are corporate parents are urged to sign a pledge to raise awareness of the Care Leavers' Local Offer and the Care Leavers' Covenant with Shropshire care leavers they come into contact

with and also with local businesses and partners who could make an offer for care leavers.

Members are requested to sign their commitment to this today and to refresh their commitment to the SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS' CHARTER (Appendix 5).

2. Suitable Accommodation

In addition to properly preparing our children looked after for adulthood and to support themselves independently, as their corporate parent we have a duty to ensure there are services and people who can support them when they encounter bad luck, make a mistake or wrong decision- something which most of us take for granted with our own children at this age.

Under the Government Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities (updated January 2021) all local authorities have a duty to ensure that care leavers are prepared and have suitable move on options as they reach adulthood to prevent them from being homeless or needing to declare themselves as homeless.

The Homelessness Code requires local authorities to develop a joint protocol between their responsible services (Housing, Childrens and Adult Services and any other relevant services) including arrangements pertaining in 2-tier authorities.

There are few young people who are ready to live completely independently at 18. Care leavers are especially disadvantaged as few have their birth family to fall back on.

Many local authorities are reconsidering what they offer to their young people at this vulnerable age. The benefit of a combined People Directorate including Housing, Adults and Children's Services could be used to commit to developing:

- A wider variety of 'move-on' options including bespoke supported accommodation and temporary accommodation for care leavers.
- The Council acting as rent guarantor for an agreed period of time.
- The Council paying a supplement to social or private landlords when care leavers are in training, higher education or not yet in employment/low-paid work for an agreed period of time.
- The Council expands its support to care leavers who become homeless by extending the automatic priority need category up to the age of 25 (legally its currently 21).
- Further to this, no care leaver would be made intentionally homeless from a care placement (ie, children's home, foster care, Supported Board & Lodgings [SB&L], Supported Housing in Partnership [SHIP], and Supported Accommodation And Independent Living [SAAIL]) and all care leavers would be placed

into gold banding (or equivalent due to the review of the policy) for HomePoint.

The benefit of supporting these options is that we reduce the risk of homelessness, and provide our young people with the chance to have a stable and secure home of their own.

3. Training and Employment Opportunities

Many Local Authorities have created additional specific apprenticeship opportunities ring-fenced for care leavers (e.g. participation officers; additional peer ambassadors) and/or funded a number of apprenticeships where care leavers have expressed an interest and aptitude for a particular area of work. This is an area for development and further consideration by Shropshire Council.

The benefit of bespoke apprenticeships is that they build on the care experience of care leavers to enable generations of new children looked after to be better supported and prepared for adulthood and engaged in the development of the care they receive from the Council as their Corporate Parents.

The benefit of tailoring a number of apprenticeships for care leavers with an aptitude and interest in a particular area of work is that we are creating an opportunity for our own young people with talent to remain in and contribute to the economy of Shropshire.

4. Social Value Policy

Shropshire Council commits to review our Social Value Policy to ensure that meaningful offers of work, apprenticeship, internships and work experience for care leavers are a standard part of procurement practices. This will begin with a 'whole council' audit for each department to clarify what they can offer for care leavers. The details for this are in Appendix 4.

5. Economic Development

The 'launch event' in 2019 was highly successful. Sadly, no similar event has been possible face to face since the Covid pandemic started in 2020. However, this opportunity is now becoming available again and so it is recommended that Shropshire Council hosts an annual 'Social Value' event to bring together those who have made a pledge and to encourage other businesses and partners to join.

8. Additional Information

No additional information.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. By signing up to the Covenant using the 'Whole Council 5 Part Strategy' as the basis of the Council Covenant 'offer' the Council is publishing to all our care leavers what we offer as their Corporate Parents.
- 9.2. By committing to enhancing the Whole Council Approach 5 Part Strategy the Council is signalling our aspirations as 'good parents' to our children looked after and care leavers.
- 9.3. By engaging with local businesses and partner agencies the support for care leavers can be further enhanced across the local authority.
- 9.4. Together we can set ambitious targets to enhance and enable more of our care leavers to successfully engage in employment, education and training opportunities and live in suitable accommodation in Shropshire.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Link to SOLACE 'Whole Council Approach' MyCovenant website-

<https://mycovenant.org.uk/>

Covenant advice to Local Authorities

[Local Authorities Engagement - Care Leaver Covenant \(mycovenant.org.uk\)](https://mycovenant.org.uk/)

Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities

[Chapter 22: Care leavers - Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/care-leavers-homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities)

[From Care to Where? Care Leavers and Homelessness \(stepbystep.org.uk\)](https://stepbystep.org.uk/)

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Kirstie Hurst-Knight

Local Member

All

Appendices

Appendix 1: Shropshire Care Leavers' Local Offer

Appendix 2: Care Leaver Covenant: Shropshire's Pledge and sign up (19.09.2019)

Appendix 3: List of Pledges made by local businesses and partner agencies

Appendix 4: Toolkit for incorporating Social Value

Appendix 5: Shropshire Council children in care and care leavers' charter