

Care Leaver Council Tax Consultation Summary – May 2018

1. Background

The Children's Services Improvement Action Plan recognises the need to improve outcomes for care leavers, and in particular to ensure that they have access to appropriate discretionary funds and reliefs, improve outcomes and ensure they are adequately prepared for independent living.

A briefing paper on council tax reduction for Barnet care leavers was finalised and presented to Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel on 3 February 2018.

The proposal was approved at Policy & Resources Committee on 13 February 2018 to authorise the Deputy Chief Executive to consult on a policy for offering council tax relief to care leavers based on guaranteed relief for their first two years of independent living, and a presumption in favour of granting relief should it be required after that up to age 25; and instruct the Deputy Chief Executive to bring the policy to a future meeting of the committee for approval.

2. The consultation

The consultation consisted of 11 questions which sought views on key elements of the policy proposal to;

- 1) Offer Council Tax relief to care leavers up to age 25.
- 2) That automatic relief be limited to their first two years of independent living.
- 3) Living circumstances to which this relief should apply.

The Consultation consisted of a questionnaire that was accessible online and via a facilitated group discussion with care leavers.

In addition to the online survey and facilitated care leaver discussion, key stakeholders including Social Work Team Managers, the Virtual School, Looked After Children Nurse, Barnet Homes, the Foster Carer Support Team, Voice of the Child Team and Leaving Care Service, were also engaged via the Corporate Parenting Officers' Group.

There were 4 main scaling questions posed as part of the consultation, to establish the extent respondents agreed or disagreed with the following:

- i. The council's proposal to help Barnet Council's Care Leavers up to the age of 25 by providing council tax relief?
- ii. That it is made available for the first two years of independent living (from the point a care leaver is first named as liable on Council Tax bill)
- iii. That council tax liability should be reduced to nil where a Care Leaver is jointly liable for council tax?
- iv. That this relief should apply to Care Leavers living in all bands of property?

Additional questions asked provided the opportunity for qualitative responses to be added by respondents and captured equality and diversity information.

The Consultation ran from 21 March to 20 May 2018 and received:

- 15 online survey responses from care leavers
- 4 facilitated discussion responses from care leavers
- 4 survey responses from other Barnet residents

The total number of care leavers that responded (n=19) equates to 8% of the total number of 18-25-year-old care leavers as at March 2018.

1.1 Facilitated discussion

A facilitated discussion was held with care leavers on 21 March 2018, during which all care leavers strongly agreed with each one of the consultation questions. Comments from the young people included:

Q4: Do you have any other comments or suggestions regarding the two years of independent living?

- “why can’t it be extended for longer? We should get it until [age] 24/25?”
- “If you have a job, depending on how much you get you should pay”

Q5: Do you have any other comments or suggestions regarding joint liability reduction to nil?

- “Halve it so the care leaver doesn’t have to pay”
- “Care leavers shouldn’t have to pay it”
- “Is there a way to have two different council tax bills for one house? Otherwise have the whole household at nil”
- “Just nil it by the house”

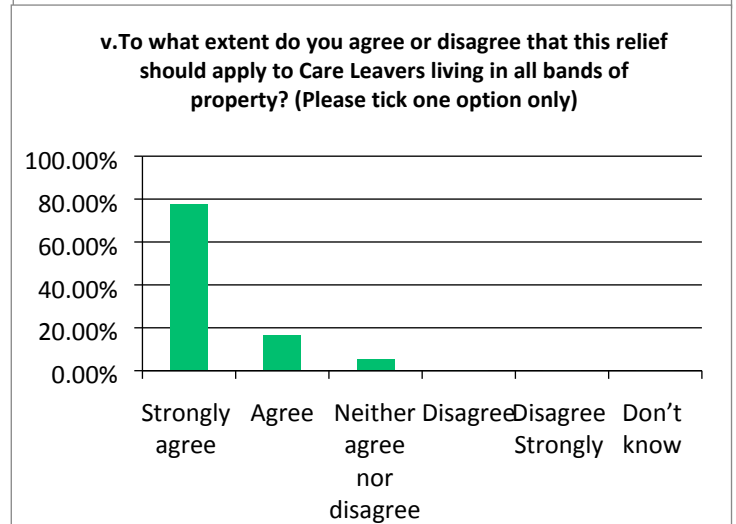
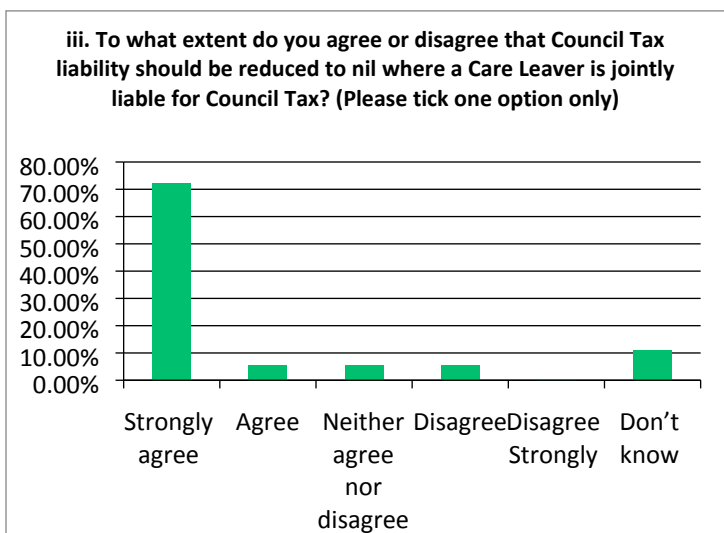
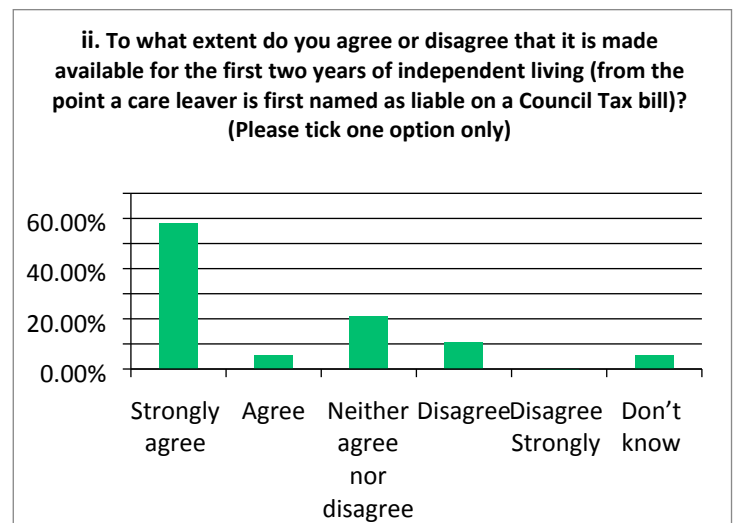
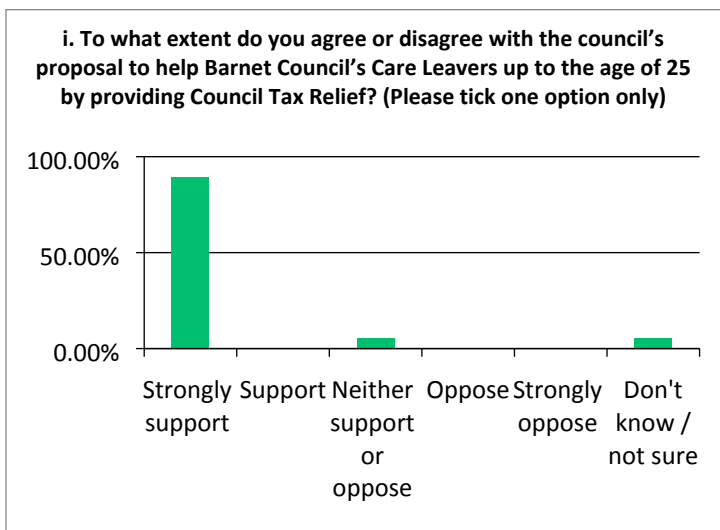
Q11: Do you have any other comments or suggestions regarding the proposal?

Feedback included:

- Concerns about young people in education not benefitting from the scheme.
- Young people living out of borough still being at risk of debt.
- Out of borough young people being disadvantaged.
- Care leavers being penalised when going in and out of university.

1.2 Online survey

Responses to the consultation’s four main questions were as follows:



Although the responses show clear agreement with the proposed policy, there were several themes that emerged from the comments. They have been categorised as follows:

1. **Continuation:** respondents feel that the two-year period should stop/start according to their council tax liability status I.E. Care Leavers are exempt from paying council tax when in full-time education and therefore this period of exemption should not be deducted from their two-year exemption – 6 respondents (26%)
2. **Duration:** respondents feel that the full reduction should be for longer than the proposed two years – 5 respondents (22%)
3. **Phased council tax bills:** respondents feel there should be incremental year on year bill increases– 2 respondents (9%)
4. **Backdated reduction:** a respondent felt that when the scheme is introduced, reduction should also be granted for those who have been living independently for more than two years – 1 respondent (4%)

When considered in the context of the total number of responses, point 1 and 2 are statistically significant. However, just 8% of care leavers responded to the consultation.

There were also numerous comments pertaining to the general hardship experienced by care leavers and the need for financial and other additional support, including:

“As a care leaver, I know how difficult it can be having to manage finances in combination with being independent and having to overcome challenges from childhood that the average child does not struggle with. The burden of financial woes and uncertainty of paying bills can make it so much harder for a care-leaver to overcome their childhood traumas. Thus, every, tiny bit of financial support makes a HUGE difference in reducing that burden and preparing a care leaver to feel strong enough to become independent after 25, when they no longer can access the same support. Therefore, I strongly support the proposal for care-leavers to be relieved of council tax up until the age of 25.”

“I do believe that this proposal will benefit many care leavers, as living in own it's difficult. Since I have placed into care and living in my house, I become liable for all my bills including council tax, that every year my social try to help by getting me an exemption to reduce my expenses. The process is not easy as they are many requirements before even be considered.”

“I am sure it will very good idea because the council tax is a big challenge for me.”

“I believe that the voice of care-leavers, whom already are at a significant disadvantage growing up and into the adult world, should be heard at the highest regard. The state has a duty to look after their needs and thus prepare them adequately one they leave the care system. In my opinion, this should mean that the burdens of responsibility in making the transition into adulthood should be minimised as much as possible I, especially financially which I personally know can be a source of major anxiety and pressure despite support from social workers. Therefore, a council tax exemption is something I know would help this, and is certainly something care-leavers deserve. As a care-leaver who has been in the system most of my life, I hope my opinion and wishes are heard above those that have not been in the system. Thank you.”

“That care leavers in apprenticeships or internships pay a highly reduced amount that is upped gradually to help prepare them for when they pay it all”

Consultation outcome

The majority of respondents strongly agree with each element of the proposed policy. The recommendation is therefore to implement the Care Leaver Council Tax Reduction scheme, with a backdated start date of 1 April 2018.

In terms of the categories of statistical significance, when considering the initial vision for the scheme and our corporate parenting responsibilities, we recommend that:

- *Continuation* - the scheme be varied to accommodate this point. This would entail a “pause enabling” approach for young people who leave their accommodation for a period of time or are awarded full exemption due to education status. The proposed terms and conditions for this are outlined below.
- *Duration* – this scheme should not be varied to accommodate this point. Care leavers can apply for up to 100% discretionary reduction after their initial two-year period if they are experiencing financial difficulties. The opportunity to access extended reduction is therefore available. In addition to this, as corporate parents, the council has an important role to play in preparing young people for independence; the discretionary reduction after two years is a way of achieving this.

Continuation terms and conditions

1.1 Where a full-time student is entitled to an exemption from Council Tax, the 2-year care leaver discount will be paused. There may be unforeseen circumstances where a full-time student may not be entitled to a full exemption, and so if the Care Leaver is liable to pay all or part of the Council Tax whilst a student, the Care Leaver discount will continue and the pause will not apply. Once the exemption ends, the Care leaver discount will recommence.

1.2 The maximum aggregate total of the guaranteed up to 100% care Leaver discount must not exceed 2 years. The discount may only be paused a maximum of two times. If a third instance (or more) of pausing is required, the discount will not be paused and will run concurrently with the student exemption. Where a care leaver requires more than 2 pauses, they may apply for discretionary relief under the general provisions of section 13A and their circumstances as a care leaver/student will be taken in to consideration along with the any supporting comments from Onwards and Upwards.

1.3 If the care leaver moves out of a property where relief is currently being applied, to take up full-time education (moves into halls of residence etc), they will also be eligible for the pause in relief should they:

- *later become liable for Council Tax in Barnet again;*
- *meet the other qualifying conditions;*
- *not have taken more than 2 pauses already.*

In this instance relief will only be applied following confirmation from the care leavers Personal Advisor that s/he has been living elsewhere owing to them being in a full-time course of education and that they are satisfied s/he has been attending the course.