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Children, Young People and Families
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**Our ref: JB/JW
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Essex Chief Executives
c/o John Mitchell
Uttlesford District Council
Council Offices
London
Saffron Walden
Essex
CB11 4ER

Dear Mr Mitchell,

Re: District responsibilities for Corporate Parenting

Thank you for the invitation to attend the District Chief Executive group on 22.11.13 and the positive response. Following that presentation I have had further discussion with colleagues and with Members and Senior Officers at the Corporate Parenting Panel, which is chaired by Cllr Dick Madden, Lead Member for Children's Services in Essex. Cllr Madden has endorsed this further approach to you.

As requested I am now presenting you with some further detail behind my presentation and some specific requests for you and your fellow District Chief Executives.

One of the questions I was asked was which organisations we worked with around housing and employment. Aside from working closely with other council colleagues from Youth Service, Youth Offending Service, Education and Employability and Skills Unit we have partnerships with Family Mosaic, Foyers, YMCA's, NACRO and Catch 22 with regard to accommodation and accommodation support, and with Prince's Trust with regard to work programmes.

The two biggest challenges for us all in respect of young people in and leaving care is firstly the availability of suitable permanent accommodation as young people leave care, and secondly the availability of work programmes and employment. This is a national as well as local issue and in October 2013 the Government published a Care Leavers Strategy, which reiterated cross departmental responsibility for care leavers, including some specific attention to housing authorities' responses.



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In respect of housing we are very aware of the increasing pressures on districts in terms of dwindling housing stocks and rising demand. At the same time the Localism Act has passed much greater discretion to districts to make their own decisions about how they discharge their housing responsibilities and this can obviously be of great benefit to local citizens in need. However, the combination of increased pressure coming alongside the increased discretion is that some highly marginalised groups can unintentionally fall through gaps.

Although all districts have responsibility under housing legislation to recognise care leavers as a priority group, districts currently make very different decisions about how to implement that responsibility. The number of priority housing nominations ring fenced for care leavers varies across districts from 14 a year to none and this number does not appear, in most circumstances, to bear much if any relation to the number of care leavers either originating from or placed in those districts. Where nominations are ring-fenced some districts put restrictions in place that can present significant barriers eg requiring that a care leaver has to have lived in the district for at least 5 years (excluding any time in foster care); has to have a family member living in the district for at least 5 years. As shown within the presentation the majority of young people in care have not been placed within their district of origin and may also have experienced a series of placement moves. The exclusion of foster care (and presumably also any period in residential care) from the length of residence is an immediate disadvantage and difficult to justify. There may be very good reasons why young people would not want to live in the district that their families live in or alternatively why they would very much wish to return to that district having lived for some years away from it. Flexibility therefore is crucial. We have also noted with concern recent exclusions being made in respect of people with anti-social behaviour or criminal convictions, which, if this were to be universally applied to care leavers, would present a significant obstacle. This leads to another issue, which is that some districts require a period of time in semi-independent provision, with a specific provider, before a young person is considered ready to take up a tenancy. This excludes any young person who has been living in a different type of accommodation but who may have received an equal amount of preparation for independent living and be just as ready to take up a tenancy.

In other respects the Localism Act clearly presents some opportunity for innovative schemes – eg use of assured short hold tenancies, which could be used in the first instance to test out a young person's readiness for a longer term tenancy or to tide a young person over before going off to university; use of vetted private rented accommodation. We would be interested also in the development of shared tenancies for young people and other schemes such as care leaver nomination swaps.

I mentioned during my presentation the Staying Put policy which relates to young people being able, in some circumstances, to remain in their foster placements beyond the age of 18. We now know that the government is intent on extending this provision from April 2014 as part of the Children and Families Bill. This could provide us with an opportunity to maintain more young people in foster placements for a longer period of time past their 18th birthday. This potentially not only lessens the immediate pressure on district housing authorities to re-house young people as they leave care, it also means that young people will be more prepared for the challenge of maintaining their own tenancy once they receive it.

It should be noted that Staying Put arrangements would be entirely voluntary for young people, some may not wish to take it up at all, others will want to stay with foster carers for a limited period of time past their 18th birthday.

In summary, our request to you is:

1. A commitment to review your housing allocation quotas and policies in respect of care leavers with a view to achieving, as far as possible, a greater level of consistency across the county
2. Agreement to exempt care leavers from any universal restrictions in respect of anti-social behaviour/criminal convictions
3. Agreement to relax restrictions in respect of "local connection" where these present unreasonable barriers to care leavers
4. A commitment not to reduce the existing number of priority housing nominations and to work with district and county colleagues on ways of increasing the range and quantity of post 18 housing options
5. A commitment to liaise with the relevant county council officers (eg in our Access to Resources Team) when considering any changes at a district housing level that has implications for young people leaving care and care leavers, including any involving district partners such as Housing Associations

Turning to work programmes and employability, I am aware that there is a great deal of activity already going on within districts and at county level. However, we need to do more to tailor these opportunities to care leavers, many of whom are unable to access opportunities provided, for a range of reasons. We have been working closely with ECC Employability and Skills Unit to develop a specific Employability Programme for young people in care and care leavers and hope to progress this early in 2014. Whilst we cannot be specific at this stage about what this will look like it is likely that this could include requests to district councils to provide targeted work experience opportunities for young people, both within your councils and with businesses that you contract with locally. Our request to you at this stage is for your support and engagement for this programme as it is launched and developed.

I have one final suggestion. As shown within my presentation the number of children in care and care leavers either originating from or placed in each district is relatively small. Whilst this means that in the face of competing pressures it is easy for them to be overlooked it also means that relatively small changes or allocation of resources can make a significant difference. Given the potential accumulative cost on society, including local communities, of getting it wrong for children in care and care leavers it would seem sensible to make a modest investment in getting corporate parenting right. As a step towards this it would be very helpful if districts could nominate a Senior Officer to act as Corporate Parenting lead, providing a liaison function between the county and the districts and an awareness raising and championing function within the district. This function already exists in districts for safeguarding so it would be a matter of putting a similar arrangement in place for corporate parenting.

I hope this provides you with the information that you required. I am very grateful for your attention to this issue and look forward to receiving your response and taking these matters forward.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenny Boyd". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jenny Boyd
Director of Local Delivery West

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Cc Cllr Dick Madden, County Hall, Chelmsford