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**Barnardo's**  
Cymru

## **Welsh Government Consultation response on Council Tax Exemptions for Care Leavers**

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- **This response may be made public**
  - **This response is on behalf of Barnardo's Cymru**
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## **1. Information and working context of Barnardo's Cymru**

Barnardo's Cymru has been working with children, young people and families in Wales for over 100 years and is one of the largest children's charities working in the country. We currently run 86 diverse services across Wales, working in partnership with 16 of the 22 local authorities.

Every one of our services is different, but each believes that every child and young person deserves the best start in life, no matter who they are, what they have done or what they have been through. We use the knowledge gained from our direct work with children to campaign for better child and social care policy and to champion the rights of every child. We believe that with the right help, committed support and a little belief, even the most vulnerable children can turn their lives around. We aim to secure better wellbeing outcomes for more children by providing the support needed to ensure stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

### **Questions**

1. Do you agree that the Welsh Government should provide extra support to some care leavers by exempting them from paying council tax?

YES

Barnardo's Cymru support the exemption of all young people who are 'care leavers' as defined under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 under the categories of 'eligible child' and 'relevant child'.

2. A person cannot be liable for council tax until the age of 18. Do you agree that this is the age that the exemption should apply from?

YES

Barnardo's support the exemption of young people leaving care from paying council tax from the age of 18.

3. Some local authorities already use their discretionary powers to exempt care leavers from council tax until their 25th birthday. Do you agree that the proposed exemption should end on the care leaver's 25th birthday?

YES

Young people leaving care are a mixed group in terms of their life experiences, the support and interventions they will have received and their inherent abilities and aptitudes in responding to their circumstances. They will bring a varying range of readiness to the process of leaving care and moving into independent living. We know that the key issues that young people leaving care face include:

- Mental health and emotional wellbeing
- Successful engagement with education, employment and training.
- Continuity in relationships
- Transition to independence

Again, these factors will not affect all care leavers. Some will, after a settled period in a successful foster placement, have the transition to independence as the challenge. Others will approach this transition without continuity in their supportive relationships, affected by poor mental health and having not got to the point where they are able to engage with education and employment options.

However Barnardo's Cymru fully support the idea of all those leaving care being exempt from paying council tax up to the age of 25.

4. By 'care leavers' we mean young people who have been looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14, and were in care on their 16th birthday. This is a definition used for other forms of support for care leavers. Do you accept this as a suitable definition?

YES

Yes we accept this as a definition.

5. Do you agree that the Welsh Government should exempt care leavers living in Wales who were looked after in other parts of the UK?

YES

Significant numbers of children looked after in other parts of the country are placed in, often private, residential and foster care provision in Wales. If these young people become care leavers whilst living in Wales we see no reason why they shouldn't be offered the same support and opportunities as other young people leaving care in Wales. The challenges of transition to adulthood and independence will be the same for these young people.

For those who choose to settle in Wales in the longer term, ensuring they have as much support to aid successful journeys into stable and functioning adulthood is also in the broader social and economic interest.

6. Should local authorities be responsible for establishing or seeking evidence of individual's care leaver status?

YES

Barnardo's Cymru agree that, where there is any doubt about a young person's status, the local authority should seek evidence on an individual's care leaver status.

7. How do you think local authorities should respond to existing council tax debt which has already been accrued by qualifying care leavers?

We know that some young people leaving care, in most local authorities in Wales, over the past year will have signed on for Universal Credit (UC). Our services have reported to us the impact on young people of the six week wait for the first UC payment. Young people have been left without money for accommodation costs, food and transport. Some local authorities in Wales have taken action to mitigate this impact, though we are unclear how consistent the mitigating provisions are across Wales.

Changes in the welfare system, particularly the practice of monthly

payments in arrears and the expectation that young people will manage the payment of their own housing costs, demands high level financial management skills which young people leaving care are less likely to have. This will have raised the likelihood of them falling into arrears and accruing other debt, such as council tax.

We believe that the most equitable way to address council tax debt accrued is to write off the debts of those that have left care over the past year.

8. How should the Welsh Government and local authorities ensure all eligible care leavers are identified, and ensure maximum take-up of the exemption?

The exemption should be primarily driven through the statutory Leaving Care Teams in each local authority. Practitioners working in youth homelessness services, welfare advice centres and youth services should also be made aware of the exemption so that they can advise and inform those young people leaving care that they work with.

Information and advice could also be made available through the education sector including schools and further and higher education establishments.

9. Are there any other practical considerations that you think should be dealt with in guidance?

10. Please provide any other comments you have on the proposals.