Bursary for Care Experienced Students: Implementation Issues

Roundtable Discussion 23rd October 2018

In response to various enquiries and queries raised regarding issues arising from the local implementation of the bursary for Care Experienced Students' a roundtable discussion was hosted by CELCIS on 23rd October 2018. Representatives from Barnardo’s Scotland, CELCIS, CPAG Scotland, Staf, Who Cares? Scotland, Angus Council, East Ayrshire Council, East Renfrewshire Council, Falkirk Council, Glasgow City Council, and West Dunbartonshire Council attended the meeting.

The aim of the meeting was to explore how this bursary is being viewed and interpreted locally and any subsequent impact on other benefits or entitlements available to care experienced young people. We sought to share issues, concerns and local practice in how to maximise support to care experienced students heading onto higher or further education.

The bursary was welcomed as a very positive intention, to encourage care experienced young people to engage in and sustain further and higher education; to remove barriers; and to enhance the financial support available. The issue highlighted is not so much with the bursary itself (although it was suggested that a clearer definition of what it is intended to cover may be useful) but the way in which it appears to be being viewed by some local authorities. A concern is that in many cases the bursary was being seen to replace rather than enhance the financial support offered to care experienced young people. This is arguably at odds with the Scottish Governments broader corporate parenting aspirations and certainly at odds with the ‘assumption of entitlement’ principle set out in the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant. What emerged is that there are significant inconsistencies, variations and applied discretion at local authority level, often to the detriment rather than benefit of care experienced students.

Summary Points

- There is a very mixed picture, adding yet again to the notion of a ‘post-code lottery’ for care leavers
- Some young people in receipt of the bursary are losing access to other payments they were previously receiving through their local authority for example housing and rent costs; and young people who are currently looked after and are losing clothing and toiletries allowances
- There are questions arising regarding entitlements to S.29 or S.30 support and funding; who pays for housing and accommodation; and reductions to foster carer and continuing care funding as a consequence of being awarded the bursary
- WC?S reported these issues coming through in their advocacy work with different local authority areas taking a different approach
- Different funding schedules in Further Education and Higher Education can make it difficult for students to navigate, with a reported increase in discrepancies and inconsistency of application since the bursary was extended to FE as well as HE
• Policy intentions undermined by local culture and practice issues based on either misunderstanding, or an informed deviation, or deliberate subversion from what is a very welcome and positive policy intention, with the explicit aim of saving money at local authority level
• An implicit undercurrent of a ‘deserving /undeserving’ value judgement being applied; and an expressed concern that some care experienced young people now had ‘too much money’ and/or would not be able to use this wisely.
• Disparity between children looked after at home and care leavers; some students are eligible for social work support on leaving care, others are not; some are entitled to universal credit, others are not. Potential that the gap has actually widened for those looked after at home given the additional barrier or the bursary impacting on other benefits
• Differences between under 18’s and over 18’s in terms of other DWP entitlements and impacts; and differences in how and when money is paid by colleges and universities (fortnightly/monthly/4 x weekly payment)
• The bursary needs to viewed as part of a package that helps students engage with student life holistically (WiFi, social events, laundry) and not just a basic ‘cost of living’ benefit
• The need to regard any financial support to care experienced young people within the wider context of poverty, financial and precarious hardship.
• Recognition that this welcome investment will lead to greater uptake or FE/HE places which will put additional funding and resource pressure on local areas – this needs to be acknowledged and extra spending planned for

Next steps

• Seek clarity from SAAS and SFC regarding how the bursary amount was arrived at; what the bursary is intended to cover; and what the expected parental contribution would be for non-care experienced young people.
• Request clearer guidance to be issued to local authorities regarding their powers and responsibilities under S.30 of the Children (Scot) Act 1995 on the basis that the bursary intention is to enhance rather than replace existing financial support
• Request clearer guidance to be issued to Colleges and Universities regarding how the bursary is paid
• Alert Scottish Government about the emerging concerns regarding this positive ambition being impacted by poor and inconsistent implementation