A fairer start for care leavers: Briefing for campaigners.
Thank you for agreeing to take action on council tax exemption for care leavers. It means a lot to have your support.

We are asking councils to make care leavers exempt from paying council tax until they turn 25.

The majority of councils have already made this important change and provided a valuable few years for care leavers to learn the ropes of living independently without the worry of debt.

‘I was getting letters through the door. I was in denial’

Care leavers are a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to council tax. Often, when care leavers move into independent accommodation they begin to manage their own budget fully for the first time.

Managing household finances for the first time, often without financial education or support, can be difficult. Council tax debt can be especially worrying as it can quickly escalate to fines, bailiffs or even court.

Our research into council tax debt – The Wolf at the Door and The Cost of Being Care Free reports – showed that what can start out for many care leavers as falling slightly behind on payments can quickly escalate to bailiffs, fines and court. Understandably, this can be frightening for care leavers, particularly as many will have no family to support them.

As part of our research, we interviewed care leavers and held focus groups. One care leaver told us that they didn’t know what council tax was or that they needed to pay it when they moved into independent living arrangements. Another explained how after getting into debt they had received letters from bailiffs and had to work with their personal advisor to set up a repayment plan.

By making care leavers exempt from paying council tax until they turn 25, your council will give these young people who are living independently the chance to learn about managing their finances without the burden of council tax debt.

What’s more, this change can have a high impact for young people, for a relatively low cost for councils, as many care leavers would already be entitled to discounts on their council tax anyway.

We have a specific briefing for you to pass over to your councillors where they can read our evidence, and see some costings for this change. The link for this is at the bottom of this document.

Thank you once again for your support.
In this briefing:

1. Key points
2. Practical tips on meeting your councillor
3. What your councillor can do

1 Key points

- There are an estimated 52,000 care leavers in England. These young people have been in the care of their local council at some point during their childhood.
- When these young people turn 18, they may become eligible to pay council tax to the very council that was responsible for their care.
- The Children’s Society’s two reports, The Wolf at the Door and The Cost of Being Carefree, spoke to care leavers and discovered that council tax debt was particularly frightening, especially as it could quickly escalate to fines, bailiffs and even court.
- Our research has shown that many care leavers have had no formal education or training in how to manage money, and may have no family or support networks to help them when they begin living independently.
- We are asking councils to make care leavers exempt from paying council tax until they turn 25, to give them a valuable few years to learn the ropes of managing their finances without the worry of debt.
- The majority of councils have already made this change. These include Labour – and Conservative – led councils and range from smaller rural councils to large city and county councils.
Meeting your councillor(s) is your right as a constituent, and a vital way in which councillors find out about issues that matter to you and your community.

Step 1: Find your councillor

Depending on where you live, you will either have a county and district council (a ‘two-tier’ authority) or one council (a ‘unitary’ authority).

Within your council, there will also be between one and three local councillors for your local neighbourhood, which is called a ‘ward’. Your local councillors may all be from different parties and are all worth meeting to discuss your issues.

If you are not sure who your local councillors are, you can check at gov.uk/find-your-local-councillors. Simply type in your postcode and it will redirect you to your council’s website.

You can also type your postcode into writetothem.com and find out the details for all your local elected representatives. Your local library or town hall will also have this information.

You can then write to your councillor, or preferably arrange to meet them. The following steps explain how.

If you know who your councillor is, you can also check their website or social media pages to find their contact details.

Step 2: Arrange a meeting

Most councillors will have ‘surgeries’ or drop-ins when they are available at different places within their constituency for constituents to meet and discuss problems with them. Contact your council to find out when these are taking place and book a meeting.

Alternatively, most councils have arrangements for ‘receiving deputations’, usually at the start of full council meetings, where you can make a short presentation and answer questions. You can also ask questions at council meetings. Usually requests need to submitted a number of days in advance. Your council website should have details about this, or you can ask your local councillor for support.

Step 3: Prepare

If you have been successful in arranging a meeting, please keep in touch and let us know as we can provide helpful advice and local facts and figures to help you prepare.

It is often helpful to know some background about your councillor before you meet them. Here are some things you might like to find out in advance (we can help you with this of course):

- **What party is your councillor a member of?** If you have more than one councillor, they may represent different political parties.
Do they have additional responsibilities in the council – are they a Cabinet member, or do they chair any committees?

What are their interests?

What have they been doing in your local area recently? (You can look at their website and their social media accounts to find this out.)

When you have answers to these questions, think about how this might affect how they will respond to your questions. Are they likely to be interested in finding out about how they can support the work of The Children’s Society, or might you need to persuade them about why it is important?

Step 4: Think about timing

It might seem obvious but if a councillor has given you a particular meeting time, make sure you are on time.

If attending a surgery, you may also need to make sure you make your points clearly and concisely, as you might not have very much time.

Step 5: Be polite and informative

Introduce yourself and show why you care about the issue, so the councillor knows why it matters to you. Do thank them for taking the time to meet you!

The key to successful influencing is building relationships with the people you are trying to influence; if you are getting on with them, they are more likely to listen to what you have to say.

Because councillors will work on lots of different issues, you will probably know more about the issue than them, so don’t worry about being asked lots of difficult questions – but do make sure you are prepared.

Your arguments will have the credibility and the conviction that they need to persuade the councillor to take action and our campaigns and public affairs team will always be happy to follow up with the councillor after your meeting.

Councillors are always keen to know about how the issue you are talking about affects people in their local area, so local examples can help show that it is an issue.

Step 6: Feedback and follow up

Once you have had your meeting, please let us know how it went. It is important that we know if your councillors were supportive and have committed to doing what you asked, if they had questions we need to answer, or if they disagreed with points.

It is a good idea to follow up with a letter or a card to your councillor(s), thanking them for taking the time to meet with you and reminding them what they agreed to do.
Councillors will be very busy and will like to know exactly what you need them to do. Here are some specific things they can do:

- Read through our briefing on council tax exemption and share with their fellow councillors, particularly the lead member for children and the lead member for finance.
- Raise as an agenda item in upcoming council meetings for discussion.
- Ask the council to explore what the costings and impact would be for your local council.
- Have a follow-up meeting with a member of our Public Affairs team to discuss further (they can contact toby.north@childrenssociety.org.uk).
- Take a photo with you to post on social media, thanking them for meeting with you about this issue.

Further information

- Download the data for your local area: childrenssociety.org.uk/constituency-packs-for-members-of-parliament
- Download the briefing for your councillors: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/briefing-council-tax-exemption.pdf
- Contact us to find out more, or if you have any questions about this briefing email jacq.mcnee@childrenssociety.org.uk
- Read our guide on lobbying to get more useful tips for meeting with your councillor: childrenssociety.org.uk/what-you-can-do/campaign-for-change/how-to-lobby-a-decision-maker
- Read our guide on getting the message out and think about how you could use social and traditional media to raise the profile of this issue: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/how-to-spread-the-word.pdf
- Read our guide on organising an event to raise awareness of this issue – and invite your local politicians: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/how-to-plan-an-event.pdf
Right now in Britain there are children and young people who feel scared, unloved and unable to cope. The Children’s Society works with these young people, step by step, for as long as it takes.

We listen. We support. We act.

There are no simple answers so we work with others to tackle complex problems. Only together can we make a difference to the lives of children now and in the future.

Because no child should feel alone.