

Care Leaver Payment – Consultation on Policy Proposals – Colleges Scotland Response - January 2024

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the voice of the sector, supporting the delivery of thriving colleges at the heart of a thriving Scotland. When Colleges Thrive, Scotland Thrives. As the membership body, Colleges Scotland represents all 26 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 13% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

Colleges across Scotland offer opportunities for the most vulnerable learners, providing access to student support funding and pastoral support services to ensure their engagement in learning and teaching activity.

Colleges Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide views on the proposed Care Leaver Payment Policy Proposal on behalf of the college sector, and in doing so has consulted with sector leads and those with close knowledge and understanding of how best to support care leavers to succeed in their learning whilst at college.

Key Points

1. How well do you think the name of the payment represents its purpose and intention?

Sector leads were generally of the view that the name of the payment represents its purpose and intention, however, a common suggestion was that the word 'transition' should be included in the title, to make clear at what stage care leavers would benefit from this payment and demonstrate that is a payment to support their progression to independent living.

Our recommendation would be that using the term 'grant' rather than 'payment' would better reflect its purpose.

2. Do you think the payment can fulfil the purpose set out?

The majority view from the sector was that the payment can fulfil the purpose set out, as it will reduce some of the financial barriers associated with leaving care.

However, sector leads highlighted the importance of clear guidance, support, and advice throughout the process, as this is a particularly vulnerable group of individuals who require clarity as to what they are entitled to in terms of financial support.

3. What are your views on the revised approach proposed by the Scottish Government?

Sector leads viewed the revised approach proposed by the Scottish Government positively, stating that a one-off payment of £2,000 would be more beneficial to care leavers than a series of smaller payments, as it would have greater impact and lessen the financial burden at a crucial time in their lives.

However, some perspectives were also offered that receiving a large, one-off payment could negatively impact those individuals who do not have good money management skills and in those cases any one-off payment has to be accompanied by appropriate wrap-around support to ensure that these individuals utilise the funding sensibly and sustainably.

4. How helpful would a payment of £2000 be at the point of moving on from care?

Sector leads had varying views on how helpful a payment of £2,000 would be at the point of moving on from care, but generally felt this would be a positive development.

The view was raised that care-experienced individuals tend not to have the same support network that other individuals do, so any available financial support that is available when they leave care will be beneficial. It was also highlighted that care leavers are more likely to experience homelessness, and this payment may help to reduce that risk.

Other sector leads felt that this payment would be helpful, if it was managed through a supported process, and there was clear guidance about what the money should be used for.

One observation was that care-experienced students could use this payment, for instance, to buy essentials for their new properties. Currently, these students will apply for college discretionary funds for this purpose, but there is a heavily audited process to navigate to access these funds, which is challenging for those who are financially vulnerable.

5. Would it be beneficial for applicants to have a choice in how their payment is made?

Sector leads were unanimous in the view that it would be beneficial for applicants to have a choice in how their payment is made, as individual circumstances vary.

For example, if the payment was made in instalments of smaller amounts, this would assist individuals with budgeting for general household and living costs, and we would suggest that monthly payments would help achieve this, as would the splitting of payments over twelve months, such as ten payments of £200 or quarterly payments of £500.

6. At what point would it be most helpful for care leavers to receive the payment?

Sector leads felt individual circumstances would determine at what point it would be most helpful for care leavers to receive the payment; and whether there was a choice in how the payment was issued.

The view was shared that when individuals are preparing to move on from care would be the most appropriate point to receive the payment, as this could be part of a wider package of support provided to someone who is preparing to leave care.

It was also raised that it would be most helpful for individuals to receive the payment at the point they are moving on from care, as this is when their financial need will be greatest. Separately, it was felt that it would be a helpful step to offer care-experienced individuals the choice in when they would like to receive the payment.

7. What might this payment help young people achieve when they are moving on from care?

The consensus from the college sector was that this payment would help young people to develop a sense of financial security and independence, with it being felt that this payment may help to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people more generally.

Sector leads also expressed the view that the payment would be especially beneficial in helping young people manage the costs associated with accommodation, such as deposits or buying furniture, and would enable young people to access opportunities they would otherwise not be able to afford, such as taking driving lessons.

8. Do you think this payment could have any negative impact on young people leaving care?

Sector leads expressed concerns that this payment could potentially have a negative impact on young people leaving care, particularly if they are vulnerable to gambling, alcohol and/or substance misuse, or they don't have good money management skills. From a pastoral perspective, sector leads also highlighted that a vulnerable individual in receipt of a large sum of money could be manipulated or taken advantage of as a result.

Our recommendation would be for the payment to be provided with wrap-around support for young people, to ensure that this would be used positively and proactively to support engagement in education and work whilst supporting their residence and resilience in their local communities. The view was also offered that if a one-off payment of £2,000 was made to individuals who are not care-experienced, there would be no suggestion of negative impact and the situation should not be viewed differently for care-experienced individuals.

It should also be noted that sector leads were of the view that there should be no negative impact from this payment on individuals, provided it doesn't affect eligibility for other Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits.

9. What are your views on the proposed eligibility criteria for applicants of the payment?

The majority of sector leads were in agreement with the proposed eligibility criteria for applicants of the payment and felt this was fair and non-discriminatory.

However, it was highlighted that there are examples of informal kinship care where there is no Kinship Care Order in place, and these individuals are not included in the eligibility criteria. This would disadvantage these individuals who are not able to apply for the payment, but still face the same financial vulnerability as other care-experienced individuals. We would recommend that this particular issue be further explored and resolved where possible.

The proposal was also put forward that young people who have been adopted should be included in the eligibility criteria to ensure equity of opportunity.

10. Is there anything else you think the Scottish Government should take into consideration related to eligibility criteria for the Care Leaver Payment?

We would advise that if care-experienced individuals are full-time students they can already access significant weekly financial support, and it therefore may not be beneficial for them to have access to an additional Care Leaver payment. Further considerations be given as to potential overlap and duplication of funding to ensure that funding is directed to those young people who require it most. We would also recommend that it would provide reassurance to the college sector and associated sector leads if undertaking some form of financial education was introduced as part of the application process. This would support the transition process for the care leaver and help to ensure they have an improved chance of maximising their money.

Ease of access and a clear definition of the eligibility criteria must be a priority for care leavers applying for this payment to ensure they have full awareness of what they are allowed to claim in

terms of funding. Training for social workers and other relevant professionals would also be beneficial to ensure they can provide the appropriate support to individuals.

11. What are your views on the proposed age requirements for applicants of the payment?

The majority of sector leads were in agreement on the proposed age requirements for applicants of the payment. However, the view was also put forward that under 18 could be too young to receive a large lump sum, and suggested the payment should only be available to an applicant from their 18th or 21st birthday onwards, but with the option to apply from the age of 16 providing appropriate support is in place for that young person.

12. What are your views on an applicant's income impacting their eligibility for the payment?

Sector leads were in favour of the Scottish Government's proposal that an individual's income should not impact their eligibility for the payment. For example, it was highlighted that a significant wealth of research conducted by the third sector and academics has evidenced that Scottish care leavers are more likely to experience deprivation, unemployment, homelessness, and poor mental health. Therefore, all barriers should be removed to offer a supportive transition as a care leaver regardless of current income.

13. What are your views on this payment impacting an individual's entitlement to other support?

Sector leads unanimously supported the Scottish Government's proposal that the receipt of this payment should not negatively impact an individual's entitlement to other support. It was again flagged that there is a wealth of evidence underlining that care-experienced individuals need more support across a broad spectrum, and there should be no attempt to limit access to any other care related support in response to the introduction of this payment.

14. What should the experience of applying for and receiving the proposed Care Leaver Payment look and feel like for applicants?

It was the consensus view from sector leads that the application experience should be as clear and straightforward as possible for applicants, and not administratively burdensome. We would put forward the suggestion that the application process is administered and promoted by local authorities, as they hold the overall responsibility for young people in care.

Sector leads also felt that care-experienced individuals should be offered one-to-one support from social workers with the application process, with it being suggested that a statement or "sign-off" from either social work services or a trusted adult as part of the application would be beneficial.

15. Do you think young people should have support to apply for the payment?

Our position, based on the view of our sector leads, is that that young people should have support to apply for the payment.

16. What support might a young person need when applying for the payment?

Sector leads advised that from their practical experiences in supporting learners transitioning from care, that a young person might require financial advice (i.e. budget management, opening bank accounts etc.) and one-to-one support to complete the application form itself, as they may lack confidence with this or an understanding of the support they are entitled to.

Simultaneously, young people applying for the payment may need assistance with gathering the relevant evidence requirements to support their application, as well as in accessing relevant IT equipment to complete their application.

17. How should this support be provided?

Sector leads were generally of the view that this support should be provided in advance of young people leaving care and as part of their transition phase out of care. A range of options should be available, to meet individual preferences, including face-to-face and online support.

One view suggested that this support be provided by social workers, foster carers, and residential care staff, in line with the stage at which the young person is at in terms of leaving care arrangements.

18. What support might a young person need once they have received the payment?

The majority of sector leads felt that a young person would need ongoing support around financial planning and budgeting once they had received the payment to ensure this would be used appropriately and in their best interests.

Other suggestions included advice on benefits entitlements and how to apply for them, support with finding a job, and education and careers guidance.

19. How should this support be provided?

Sector leads put forward a range of views about how this support should be provided, but there was a general consensus that a range of options should be available to meet individual preferences, including face-to-face and online support. One view suggested that this support be provided by social workers, foster carers, and residential care staff and could also be provided in conjunction with colleges and universities, and that DWP should be involved where necessary. Regardless of how the support is provided, there is a need for clear information signposting throughout the process, such as websites and/or social media campaigns to ensure that potential applicants for the care leaver payment have clear and accessible, information, advice and guidance.

We would be open to engaging further with the Scottish Government to explore how best this support could be provided and what role the college sector can play in ensuring care leavers have full awareness of the care leaver payment.

20. Are there any other communication channels you think we should consider, other than the following:

- **public awareness campaigns**
- **social media**
- **community hubs**
- **healthcare practices**
- **educational establishments, and**
- **key workers in the lives of children, young people and their families.**

Sector leads were broadly in agreement with the communication channels proposed by the Scottish Government. Other suggestions of communication channels included Skills Development Scotland, Citizens Advice Bureau, job centres, local authorities, and third sector organisations. We would suggest that further consideration be given to a targeted leaflet/information campaign, i.e., for those who may be in kinship care and may not access existing communication channels, and which could be supported by stakeholders including the college sector.

21. Is there anything else you think the Scottish Government should consider in the development and delivery of the payment?

We would urge Scottish Government to give further consideration to the administration of the payment whilst this is in development to ensure it is successful upon delivery. To support this we would be happy to facilitate engagement with sector leads to ensure their knowledge and experience informs this process.

22. What other financial assistance might those with care experience benefit from in the future?

From the perspectives offered by sector leads, there must be enough support in place to ensure that care leavers have enough financial support for such things as childcare to help support their ability to seek employment. This should include a review of the current support in place benefits system to make it easier for young people to access financial support.

Whilst the Care Leaver Payment will undoubtedly provide financial assistance, it may be helpful for care-experienced individuals to have the ability to apply for a relief/emergency fund as a one-off in cases of financial crisis. Similarly, care leavers in receipt of benefits should be allowed to study full-time without it affecting their eligibility.

Conclusion

As the Scottish Government receives responses with which to inform and shape the delivery of the Care Leaver Payment, we would expect that the knowledge and thinking of the college sector is taken into consideration in the next stages of this work and would welcome the opportunity to hold further engagement on this agenda.

In doing so, Colleges Scotland would be able to facilitate engagement with college institutional leads for Student Support to shape the design and development of the Care Leaver Payment to ensure we can maximise the number of learners able to access education in Scotland's college sector.

Colleges Scotland
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