

FINAL REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL ON
CORPORATE PARENTING

Introduction

1. This report sets out the conclusions and recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Review Panel investigation into corporate parenting.

Scope of the Review

2. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 defines in law the responsibilities of corporate parents to ensure and, as far as possible, secure, nurturing and positive experiences for Children in Care and Care Leavers. All elected members and officers share corporate parenting responsibility.
3. The Scrutiny Commissioners on 18th July 2018 appointed a Scrutiny Review Panel to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the County Council's current approach to corporate parenting, in particular the role of elected members as corporate parents, to ensure that this duty is discharged in the most effective and appropriate way.
4. The following outcomes for the Review were identified by the Scrutiny Commissioners:-
 - (a) To consider the strengths and weaknesses of the County Council's current approach to Corporate Parenting;
 - (b) To consider best practice from other local authorities, including centres of excellence;
 - (c) To inform the refresh of the Corporate Parenting Strategy and implementation plan;
 - (d) To develop the role of elected members as Children in Care Champions;
 - (e) To ensure that the Council's approach to Corporate Parenting reflects the different age groups of children in care;
 - (f) To consider the effectiveness of the Corporate Parenting Board.

Membership of the Panel

5. The following members were appointed to serve on the Panel.

Mrs H Fryer CC

Mrs B Seaton CC

Mr S Sheahan CC

Mrs M Wright CC

Mr G Welsh CCC

(Mrs Seaton was appointed Chairman of the Panel)

Conduct of the Review

6. The Panel met on six occasions between 3 October and 22 May.

The Panel, during the course of the review:

- (i) Received detailed information on the Council's offer for Children in Care and Care leavers and the current and future national regulatory and statutory context.
- (ii) Met with officers from the Children and Families department, including the Head of the Virtual School to obtain first hand perspective of their direct dealings with children.
- (iii) Heard the views of the Lead Member for Children and Families on Corporate Parenting and Members' role.
- (iv) Attended a meeting of the Supporting Young People After Care to learn about their experiences and view of the Council's Corporate Parenting offer.

7. The Panel was supported in its review by the following persons and is indebted to them for their contributions :-

Sharon Cooke	Assistant Director Children's Social Care
Nicci Collins	Head of Service Children in Care
Mr I. Ould CC	Lead Member Children and Families
Tony Barnard	Head of Virtual Schools
Catriona Candler	Children's Rights Officer
Stuart Jones	Safeguarding and Improvement Manager
Ben Marchant	Team Manager Children and Families Services
Kelda Claire	Service Manager Safeguarding

8. The Panel is also grateful to witnesses it spoke to at the Supporting Young People After Care (SYPAC) group and the Corporate Parenting Board.

Background Information

9. Every Council has a legal duty to act as a 'corporate parent' for looked after children. This was set out in the Children Act 1989 which put forward the basic framework and defined local authorities' responsibilities towards the care of children.
10. The law does not expect local authorities to work alone; housing, education services, the Police and the NHS are all required to assist children's social care services in carrying out their functions under the Act. This was augmented by the Children Act 2004, with a focus on achieving good outcomes for children and young people.
11. These principles were further built upon by the Children and Social Work Act 2017 which provided a framework to support and enhance the existing duties in respect of looked after children in care, and care leavers up to the age of 25. This means that they should:-
 - act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing of those children and young people;
 - encourage them to express their views, wishes and feelings;
 - take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people
 - help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;
 - promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people;
 - ensure those children and young people are safe and have stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work;
 - prepare those children for adulthood and independent living.
12. The principles were designed to embed a positive culture towards Children in Care and Care Leavers, entrenching the fact that success was dependent on the extent to which directors, elected members, heads of service and front-line managers champion and promote understanding of them.
13. Edward Timpson MP, Children's Minister (2017), in defining Corporate Parenting, said "Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that councils do and when a child, for whatever reason, cannot safely stay at home, it is up to us as the local authority to step in and give them the care, support and stability that they deserve."

Overview of the County Council's Current Offer

14. Leicestershire County Council is the corporate parent of around 580 children and young people and 280 Care Leavers¹. As a corporate parent the County Council has collective responsibility to be a good parent to the children and young people in care, so that they grow up happy, achieve well and are able to make a success of their lives. This means the Council, officers and elected members are expected to do what any reasonable parent would do for their child.
15. On the 1st April 2019 the Council launched 'Our Promise to Children in Care and Care Leavers' where County Council officers, representatives of other relevant agencies and members of the Panel came together to sign the charter showing commitment to developing a positive outcome for Children in Care and Care Leavers, recognising that the County Council now has a statutory responsibility for Care Leavers up to the age of 25. The charter has been drawn up in close consultation with Children in Care and Care Leavers and sets out seven key promises:
- We will support you;
 - We will respect your identity;
 - We will listen to you;
 - We believe in you;
 - We will support you to find a place you can call home;
 - We will inform you;
 - We will be a lifelong Champion.
16. To achieve this, the Council has a dedicated Corporate Parenting Team which focuses on the support and advocacy of Children in Care and Care Leavers. The Team ensures that the voice of the child is central to all decision making in regards to both individual care plans and wider strategic decisions.
17. The County Council also has a Virtual School focused on improving educational outcomes for children in care (from Early Years upwards), care leavers to age 21 years (or 25 if requested) and previously looked after children up to the age of 16. The Virtual School works to support children and young people in care and care leavers regardless of where they are living in the country. It does not teach the children in care, as responsibility and accountability for this rests with their schools and settings. However, it is an essential advocate for the importance of education for all children and young people in care and care leavers. It is concerned with raising self-esteem, expectations and aspirations, removing barriers to learning and working with schools, colleges and settings to enable children and young people to improve their educational outcomes and life chances. Members welcomed the role of the Virtual School and the activities that it was undertaking.

¹ Figures as of 27 September 2018.

18. The voices of Children in Care and Care Leavers are heard through a number of avenues, both formal and informal.
- The Children in Care Council is a group of Leicestershire children and young people who are in care and have left care. They meet together as a younger group of children, an older group as well as the Supporting Young People After Care (SYPAC) group. The meetings include activities and an opportunity to talk to senior managers and members about issues that matter to them such as how services are run, and hold them to account for what they are doing to make it better. It is a forum where they can make a difference for all Children in Care and influence this locally as well as nationally through the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers.
 - The Corporate Parenting Board is another formal way where Children in Care and Care Leavers can have their voices heard in ensuring that the whole Council and partner agencies have a joint commitment to Corporate Parenting. It is jointly chaired by the Lead Member for Children and Families and a Child in Care. The aim of the Corporate Parenting Board is to achieve continuing improvements in the lives and outcomes for looked after children and young people with the agenda being set by the Children in Care Council and Board Members.
19. Children in Care and Care Leavers also take part in decision making on matters that impact them and sit on interview panels for senior members of staff and are involved with the training of Foster Carers and Social Workers.
20. The Panel felt that detailed consideration had been given and was ongoing to involve harder to reach Children in Care and Children with Disabilities in engagement. While not all Children in Care and Care Leavers may want to be involved in meetings and events their voices would still be heard through the officers and workers who supported them, such as Participation Officers whose purpose is to raise aspirations, develop, promote and deliver opportunities to widen experience and improve the life chances of children and young people in care and care leavers.
21. Children's Rights Officers also played an important role in helping children and young people understand their rights and to ensure they are being treated fairly and listened to by their carers among other roles. They also represent the voice of Children in Care across departmental meetings, highlighting any issues in service delivery. Members were particularly pleased to hear from an officer and hear about the real impact they were having on children and young people's lives by being able to represent them where the child may feel unable to do so, providing representation rather than an interpretation of the child's needs.

22. Children in Care and Care Leavers will also be supported in their everyday life by officers and workers they come into contact with such as Social Workers, Personal Assistants and carers and would be encouraged to talk to whomever they felt most comfortable with to express any concerns they may have to enable them to be addressed.
23. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 gave local authorities a statutory responsibility for Children in Care up to the age of 25. As young people reach the age of 18 they are supported as Care Leavers. The Panel recognised that this can be one of the most challenging times for young people as they enter adulthood. Care Leavers could choose to disengage, but those who want continued support have a plan and know who to go to in a time of crisis.
24. During the course of the Panel's investigation, members heard about the achievements of Children in Care and Care Leavers which are celebrated at a special event in the autumn and is attended by the Director of Children and Family Services, the Lead Member, children and young people, and other senior managers, as parents would.

Visit from the Department For Education

25. The Children and Families Department had invited the Government's Department for Education's (DfE) National Implementation Advisor for Care Leavers to review the Care Leaver offer. The DfE used two days to meet with senior officers, workers and young people to discuss the offer to Care Leavers and Leicestershire's approach and understanding of the services needed for Care Leavers as part of the corporate family. The Panel felt that their findings were consistent with that of the DfE which had found that the Department had a good leadership and managerial approach and was ambitious, aspirational and passionate.
26. The DfE made some recommendations to the County Council on how it could improve its offer. The Panel felt the most pertinent to its review were the following:
- A Member Champion model, such as had been introduced at Trafford Council, where a member would be assigned to a particular area, such as housing, to try and unpick any issues together with district councils, providers and the County Council.
 - Linking the Corporate Parenting Board to wider organisations to help drive and unpick blockages faced, Members were pleased to note during the course of the review a representative from the Department for Work and Pensions had been identified to join the Board.
 - Ensuring the Care Leaver team was an integrated team made up from multiagency staff.
 - Mandatory training on care leavers for all staff within the Children and Families Department,
 - A rolling programme of drop in sessions in addition to SYPAC, that could be based in other council or locality buildings closer to the Children in care.

Corporate Parenting Role of Councillors

27. Frank Dobson MP, Secretary of State in 1998 stated, “The (looked after) child has a right to expect that members of the authority are looking out for him and will protect him from harm. Therefore, given that the central importance of the local authority’s role in caring for looked after children and supporting them to reach their potential, all Councillors should take an informed interest in how the council supports this very vulnerable group.”

28. The National Children’s Bureau, which produced the training material for councillors on corporate parenting, states that, “as elected members, councillors are responsible for the following:

- Being aware of the corporate parenting role and the shared responsibility for ensuring that the needs of looked after children and care leavers are met
- Having some knowledge of the profile and needs of the children their authority looks after and how these may be changing
- Understanding the impact on looked after children of all council decisions
- Receiving information about the quality of care and the quality of services that children are experiencing
- Considering whether this would be good enough for their own child
- Ensuring that action is being taken to address any shortcomings in the service and to constantly improve the outcomes for children in care”.

29. The Panel believes that more can be done to highlight the role of Corporate Parenting to members. For example, it should be included in the description of the key roles of all County Councillors in the Constitution and a more detailed role description should also be developed to form part of the Corporate Parenting Strategy. This would enable members to have a clear understanding of the role and what it means in practice. The following wording is proposed:

“To fulfil your responsibilities as a “corporate parent” for children and young people in the care of the local authority:

- (i) by having an understanding of the profile and needs of the children in the care of the local authority;
- (ii) by being aware of the impact on looked-after children of all council decisions;
- (iii) by considering whether this would be good enough for your own child;
- (iv) by ensuring that the council has a focus on improving outcomes for looked-after children;

- (v) by acting as an advocate for looked-after children in your local community;
- (vi) by supporting the Member Champions in their role;
- (vii) by being aware of the work and aims of the Corporate Parenting Board.”

30. The Panel recognised that members who were part of a relevant Committee or Board, or took a particular interest in the topic were likely to have a deeper understanding than other members. It also felt that prospective and new councillors appear to have limited opportunities to learn about their corporate parenting role. Unless highlighted in the Party selection process it is likely that prospective elected members who stood for election in 2017 knew very little about a members corporate parenting responsibilities. The Panel felt it would help and would bring focus if the corporate parenting role was flagged up to candidates, political parties could also make people aware in their selection processes, and that this was followed by more detail in the member induction.

31. Induction training was provided after each election for new and existing members. Training on Corporate Parenting had been provided in October 2017. The Panel noted that attendance tended to vary at training; however, all training sessions were recorded so that members who were unable to attend could watch them subsequently.

Partnership Working

32. Leicestershire County Council shares wider Corporate Parenting responsibilities with district councils, education services, the police and the NHS, these bodies sit alongside the Council on the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and the Corporate Parenting Board, which is co-chaired by the Lead Member for Children and Families and a child in care. The phrase ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ is pertinent, the council alone cannot provide all the support that a child in care needs, and all local services have a responsibility to keep children safe and well.

33. Over the course of the review the Panel saw for themselves that effective partnership working required good communication between partners. It was recognised that relationships and linkages could be complicated but shared working was vital. An example was the development of the Housing Protocol between the County Council and district councils, where there had been a lack of shared understanding of particular issues, such as whether the County Council would act as a guarantor for Care Leavers. Officers welcomed the support from Panel members to resolve these issues, demonstrating the impact that elected members can have in this area of policy.

Member Champion Role

34. The Panel recognised that there was a wide variance in members' understanding of their role as corporate parents and it would not be possible for all members to approach the role in the same way, given their different levels of knowledge and responsibility and their different opportunities and abilities to influence both inside and outside the Council.
35. The Panel was keen for members to use their unique position to promote opportunities for Children in Care and Care Leavers through either political power and influence, or through connections in the community, schools, health services, local businesses and employers. If these links can be built upon then 'life choices' and outcomes for children and young people can be greatly improved.
36. To that end, it was thought that a Member Champion role could be introduced, similar to that in place at Trafford Council. The purpose of this role would be to lead on a particular area or theme, such as housing, to try and unpick any issues together with partners such as district councils and service providers, as had happened during the review panel. It was envisioned that one Member would be assigned to a particular area, with a named County Council officer to provide support. The Member could chair a small working group consisting of the lead officer, Children in Care Officers, partners and a young person. Each working group would be able to look at in detail the issues that Children in Care and Care Leavers may face and compare offers and try to raise the issue throughout the county. It was important that each area was specific, manageable and had achievable targets as it had become clear to the Panel that Corporate Parenting was a broad and nuanced area that needed to be broken down and focused on in detail. The Panel also felt that clarity of scope for each Member Champion was essential.
37. The Panel recognised that the Member Champion needed to be someone with real passion and drive for the role. It was also important for the role to be non-party political and open to all members of the Council, to be appointed on merit. The Panel felt that there should be no monetary reward for the role.
38. It was envisioned that the model be trialled in three areas, Education, Training and Work, Housing and Accommodation and Health. Each Champion area would discuss the needs of Children in Care so that decisions about the offer reflect their journey, right the way through to being a Care Leaver. The importance of 'starting early' to make the most difference for the children and young people must also be recognised. These areas are set out in further detail in the sections below.

Education, Training and Work

39. A significant concern for young people in and leaving care is the ability to gain and sustain employment. The Member Champion would need to be aware of the following existing provisions that the County Council has put in place and seek to identify ways in which these can be enhanced or further supported:
- (a) The Leicestershire Virtual School, which is run by the County Council and aims to raise the aspiration of children in care and the aspirations that adults have for children in care ensuring there is a clear focus on Education, Employment and Training. Aspirations for Children in Care and Care Leavers are usually heavily influenced by birth families and peer groups and being in care is usually an isolating factor. It is important that the children are not treated any differently at school, but also that their needs were being taken into account.
 - (b) In September 2018 the Virtual School co-funded alongside the Corporate Parenting team a full-time participation officer to work across areas and give greater capacity to ensure continued collaboration across services to provide a balanced programme of events.
 - (c) Leicestershire County Council has six ring fenced apprenticeships for Children in Care and Care Leavers. The apprenticeships are matched to young people who had expressed an interest in that area of work and had the relevant qualifications. The target for the first year was that six young people were in post by April 2019; this had been met. Procedures were put in place to prioritise apprenticeship opportunities to Care Leavers and they were integrated into the County Council's 'Guidance for Managers on the Recruitment and Employment of Apprentices'. Whereas there had been a concern at the start of the Panel that the policy was not going forward at the pace envisioned over the course of the review Members were pleased to note the progress of the young people and were pleased that the DfE had commended the Council's offer.
 - (d) The Council is also working with agencies and work is underway to encourage the business community to engage and offer sponsorships, job opportunities and apprenticeships.
40. The Panel recognised that the Council and Members should do what they can to facilitate for the above for Care Leavers and Children in Care. However they were not the only factors influencing Children in Care and Care Leavers quality of life, it was rightly noted that it could be the easily overlooked small changes that could make the biggest differences to them. For example it would be a role of a Champion to look into the current offer and other councils' provision to see what could be an achievable outcome, such as extending the Corporate Benefits Scheme to Children in Care and Care Leavers or providing a free bus pass to enable them to access education or work.

Housing and Accommodation (Partnership working)

41. Leicestershire County Council has a duty (as set out in the Children Act 1989 Section 22G) to ensure as far as reasonably possible, sufficient accommodation is available locally to meet the needs of looked-after children and Care Leavers. Leicestershire, as a two-tier area, has to work with district councils and partners in this area, particularly as housing is the responsibility of district councils.
42. Schemes to support care leavers with their housing needs require effective partnership working. Members were pleased that, following some input from themselves with district councils, all district councils in Leicestershire had now agreed to exempt Care Leavers up to the age of 25 from paying council tax from April 2019 to enable Care Leavers to develop their independence and aspirations without the additional worry of a council tax bill.
43. During the course of the Panel the Council also signed up to the Care Leavers' Housing Protocol as part of a formal agreement between Leicestershire County Council Children and Family Services (CFS), Blaby District Council, Charnwood Borough Council, Harborough District Council, Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council, Melton Borough Council, North West Leicestershire District Council, Oadby and Wigston Borough Council, The Bridge, and partner agencies working with care leavers. This was to ensure the effective discharge of corporate responsibilities to try and jointly address the diverse accommodation needs of young people leaving care in Leicestershire. The Protocol enables a Care Leaver to apply for social housing at 17.5, which had been an issue especially for those coming out of prison near their 18th birthday as it left them effectively homeless.
44. A key part of the protocol was the recognition that Care Leavers moving into accommodation may need to be treated differently and afforded some leniency in their tenancies in recognising that they are some of the most vulnerable in communities.
45. The DfE review identified that the Council had had a historically good offer for children going to university. However it no longer paid accommodation fees but instead contributed £2000 toward tuition fees each year. Some universities did not charge accommodation fees for Care Leavers; however, this was not universal practice. The Council would need to approach the government alongside other authorities to challenge this. The Council would consider funding supported accommodation during university holidays for Care Leavers who had no family to return to and were not able to stay in university accommodation.
46. The Panel was pleased to note that officers were giving consideration to a refresh of the financial package for Care Leavers in all forms of higher education, but requested that the focus be on accommodation fees.
47. The Panel felt that the progress made to date by the Council and its partners was extremely positive, but that an Accommodation Champion would be able

to focus in depth on the issue, such as how the Housing Protocol works in practice and reviewing what the Council currently offers in terms of higher education, though it is recognised this may involve wider lobbying of higher education institutions, to ensure none of our Care Leavers are unfairly disadvantaged.

Health

48. The Council has a duty under Section 10 of the Children Act 2004, to promote cooperation between local partners to improve the wellbeing of young people in the area. This includes physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing, protection from harm and neglect, education, social and economic wellbeing. Relevant partners include the police, probation services, the NHS, schools and further education providers.
49. The participation of partners in work to promote the health of all children and young people is vital, and it is important that they understand the specific needs of Children in Care so that this can be taken account of in their plans. For example, Children in Care are more likely to need support with their mental health so colleagues in the NHS will need to consider this.
50. Currently the Council offered Children in Care free access to swimming pools at leisure centres using the Activ8Card if they are under 16 years old. More could be done to further this programme through a Member Champion who would be able to look into what other councils offer and importantly also what the district councils offer to ensure that the offer is consistent across the County.

Conclusion

51. The Panel welcomes the work to date in developing the role of the County Council as a corporate parent, in particular the work by the managers of the Child Leavers team, the managers of the Children in Care and Care Leavers teams as well as the Virtual School in promoting apprenticeships, and the development of the Housing Protocol. However, the Panel would like to make the following recommendations to further the Council's offer and strengthen the Role of Elected Members:-

(a) That the Panel supports the refresh of the Corporate Parenting Strategy and requests that it includes a clear role description for elected members, as follows:-

“To fulfil your responsibilities as a “corporate parent” for children and young people in the care of the local authority and care leavers up to the age of 25:

- (i) by having an understanding of the profile and needs of the children in the care and care leavers of the local authority;**
- (ii) by being aware of the impact on looked-after children of all council decisions;**

- (iii) by considering whether this would be good enough for your own child;**
 - (iv) by ensuring that the council has a focus on improving outcomes for looked-after children and care leavers;**
 - (v) by acting as an advocate for looked-after children in your local community;**
 - (vi) by supporting the Member Champions in their role;**
 - (vii) by being aware of the work and aims of the Corporate Parenting Board.”**
- (b) That reporting on Corporate Parenting issues be enhanced via:-**
- (i) A six monthly update to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be circulated to all members of the Council via the Local Issues Alert Procedure;**
 - (ii) Regular reporting on progress against each Champion area to the Corporate Parenting Board.**
- (c) That three Member Champions be appointed to work on achievable targets relating to Education, Training and Work; Accommodation and Housing; and Health;**
- (d) That the Member Champions be supported by a dedicated working group consisting of a Lead Officer from the County Council, a Children in Care Team Manager, partners and a young person (either a child in care or a care leaver);**
- (e) That all elected members receive training on their corporate parenting role when first elected, followed up with refresher training when necessary, but at an interval of no greater than two years and that training be arranged following Summer 2019;**
- (f) That guidance be issued to all elected members to support them to act as a corporate parent to children in care and care leavers in their local community;**
- (g) That Members support the review of the financial package for those in higher education but recommend that officers focus on providing support related to accommodation rather than tuition fees.**

Glossary of useful terms and roles

Care order A court order approving the case for a child to be taken into care.

Care plan A care plan should be developed for every child and young person when they come into care. This should identify how the child will be accommodated, how long it is anticipated that the care order will last, and formulate planned outcomes for the child with associated actions. The plan should be reviewed at least every six months.

Childrens Rights Officer (CRO) - supports children and young people in care, to make sure their rights are defended and safeguarded; to provide information and help young people detangle and interpret what is happening to them.

Extended Young Peoples Support Worker Extended Young Peoples Support Workers are usually based in the Children in Care teams and help social workers with their work. They work with older children and young people who are leaving care.

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) An IRO chairs a looked-after child's review(s) and monitors the child's case on an ongoing basis. They ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects their current needs, wishes and feelings, and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards

Participation Officers Purpose is to raise aspirations, develop, promote and deliver opportunities to widen experience and improve the life chances of children and young people in care and care leavers.

Pathway Plan A Pathway Plan is developed by the local authority with a young person in care as they approach their 16th birthday to help them effectively make the transition from care to living independently. It includes areas such as accommodation, education, life skills and health.

Personal Education Plan (PEP) The PEP is a statutory part of a child's care plan, making sure that all relevant partners are engaged in a child's education, tracking their progress and giving them the support they need to achieve and be aspirational in their education.

Registered Social Workers Registered Social Workers are experienced in working with children and families and are the main people involved in making sure your placement meets all your needs. They'll organize the child's reviews, medicals, education needs and any other requirements you may have.

Support Worker Support Workers deal with a lot of the running around and manage tasks like taking you places as well as supporting children and young people in care, to make sure their rights are defended

Senior Practitioners Senior Practitioners are registered social worker with lots of experience of working with children and young people. They work on their own cases and help workers with less experience with their cases.

Virtual School Head All local authorities must have a virtual school head (VSH) in charge of promoting the educational achievement of the children looked-after by that authority. Their role is to know how the looked-after children are doing, and help school staff and social workers to find out about the extra needs of these children and any additional support available to them. VSHs also work with the children's services department and all schools in the area on initiatives to promote the education of children in care.

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