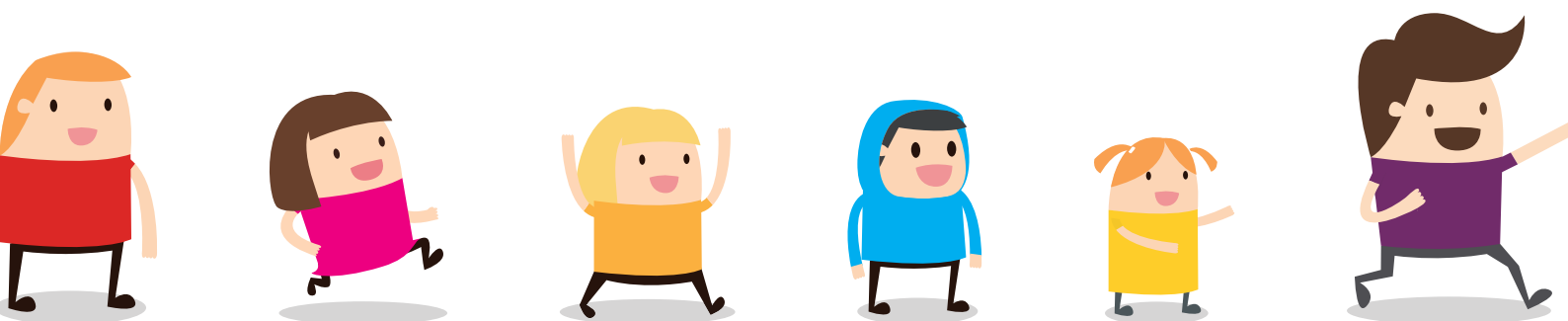


Sunderland's guide to corporate parenting

for elected members



Corporate Parenting Board guidance for elected members in Sunderland

Foreword

Elected members have a crucial role to play in ensuring that Sunderland is a safe city for our most vulnerable children – those who are looked after by the local authority, or those who have left local authority care. These children can be at risk of poorer outcomes than their peers; the Council, as their corporate parent, has a responsibility to ensure that we have the same aspirations and interest in their progress as any parent would have for their own child.

All elected members are corporate parents, and this guide is designed to provide an overview of what this responsibility means in practice. It also suggests ways in which we can all make a difference to the lives of looked after children and care leavers, whatever your level of involvement with children's services. I hope you find it helpful, and can use some of the suggestions in this guide to help us continue to develop our services for those we look after.

Introduction

Sunderland City Council and its partners want to support its children and young people to enjoy and achieve the best possible outcomes. However, some children and young people, because of their needs and circumstances face particular challenges and will require support if they are to achieve their potential.

We know from national data and academic research that children and young people who are looked after by the local authority can be at risk of poorer outcomes than their peers who are able to remain at home with their families; for example, young people who have been in care are more likely to leave school with fewer qualifications, and they also have a higher risk of offending, and of not being engaged in education, employment or training.

When a child or young person cannot live with their birth family for whatever reason and becomes looked after, parental responsibility transfers to the local authority; this is referred to as corporate parenting.

Corporate parenting was first enshrined in legislation through the Children's Act (1989). Although it does not have a formal legal definition, it is commonly understood to mean that officers and elected members of the local authority have a responsibility to take the same interest in the progress, attainments and wellbeing of looked after children and young people as a reasonable parent could be expected to have for their own children. Corporate parenting also extends to care leavers, as the local authority retains a level of responsibility for former looked after children up to the age of twenty one, or twenty four for those in full time education.

According to the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS): 'corporate parenting should seek to ensure supportive relationships where young people feel cared for, not just looked after.' Good corporate parenting involves championing the rights of looked after children and care leavers, and ensuring that they have access to good services and support from the local authority, partner agencies and individual lead practitioners.

Why do elected members need to know about corporate parenting?

Every elected member, when elected to represent their ward, becomes a corporate parent as part of their role. Whilst much of the responsibility for actually delivering care for looked after children and care leavers is delegated to staff within the children's workforce (crucially, this is not limited to professionals within the Children's Social Work Service, but applies to all members of staff who may come into contact with looked after children, including schools and healthcare practitioners), officers and staff within the local authority deliver services and support on behalf of their elected members.

Frank Dobson MP, in 1998 when he was the responsible Secretary of State, characterised the role of elected members in relation to corporate parenting as follows:

'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 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 vulnerable group.’

The Local Government Association, in partnership with the National Children’s Bureau and the Centre for Public Scrutiny, produced a useful guide to corporate parenting, entitled [10 questions to ask if you're scrutinising services for looked after children](#) . In addition to explaining the ten questions, the guide also includes a helpful ‘jargon buster’, which defines some of the terms commonly used when referring to services for looked after children and care leavers.

Whilst every elected member is, by definition, a corporate parent, not all elected members will have the same knowledge and involvement. The National Children’s Bureau helpfully break the corporate parenting role down into three different levels of responsibility:

1. Universal responsibility – applicable to all councillors
2. Targeted responsibility – e.g. those councillors who may sit on the Corporate Parenting Board, Fostering and/ or Adoption Panels, Scrutiny Boards etc
3. Specialist responsibility – those councillors with a specific, relevant role e.g. the Lead Member for Children’s Services, Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board, Chair of the Scrutiny Board for Children’s Services

In Sunderland, our Corporate Parenting Board was originally established in 2007, and is regularly refreshed to ensure that it works effectively on behalf of looked after children and care leavers. It brings together elected members from all political parties across the city, as well as relevant officers within the Council, and colleagues from partner agencies.

The Corporate Parenting Board works closely with the Change Council. This group is made up of children and young people who are currently looked after or who have left the care of the local authority, and they help to advise officers and members in Sunderland about their experiences of the care system, and what is important to them in terms of improving the services they receive. The Change Council, supported by officers have developed a list of Pledges from the local authority to all looked after children in our care (please see appendix one for details). The Pledges were agreed by the Corporate Parenting Board and each Pledge supported by a young person, who will act as the critical eye and hold to account senior officers and councillors from the Corporate Parenting Board.

There is a virtual network of Care Leavers who we can invite to be involved in decision making processes which affect their lives, for example reviewing the leaving care financial support policy.

Council helped us to implement the national Care Leavers Charter (please see appendix two for details), and they have contributed to a number of senior officer recruitment processes.

The Change Council meets with the Corporate Parenting Board four times per year, and the young people attending those meetings are supported to participate.

Whilst the Corporate Parenting Board is an appropriate forum for elected members and relevant officers from the local authority and partner agencies to come together and offer challenge and support around services for looked after children and care leavers, this is not the only way in which elected members discharge their duties as corporate parents. The following pages outline ways in which all members can be effective corporate parents, whatever their role.

What contact should I have with looked after children and care leavers?

You can be an effective corporate parent without having to know individual looked after children and care leavers personally; in fact, personal contact on an individual basis is not generally appropriate, unless looked after children or care leavers choose to contact their local councillor, as is their right as Sunderland residents.

However, some communication and contact is valuable in helping councillors to understand the importance of the corporate parenting role, and in giving young people an opportunity to express their views and concerns directly to those with the authority to make decisions and shape policy.

The Pledges for looked after children (appendix 1) outline what the service is committed to achieving for our looked after children and young people and care leavers; members should familiarise themselves with these commitments and, when given the opportunity to meet with young people, you can show your commitment to their care by prioritising attendance.

You can become involved in visits and attend events to further understand the issues that looked after children and care leavers face, and to celebrate their achievements. In addition, there are recruitment and celebration events for foster families, to show our appreciation of all carers do for the most vulnerable children in the city. Elected member attendance at these events can provide encouragement for looked after children, care leavers and foster families and demonstrate to them the commitment of elected members to their corporate parenting role.

Is there any training available?

There is a unique two-day training course available called In Your Shoes, which is delivered by young people with direct experience of the care system. It is designed to give foster carers, practitioners, officers and elected members a better understanding of what it is like for a young person to be in care.

The training covers a number of issues, including the importance of listening to young people, valuing diversity, and the importance of independent advocacy and complaints processes. Feedback from members in other local authorities who have attended this training has been very positive, with members noting how valuable and powerful it is to learn about the perspectives and experiences of young people who have been looked after themselves.

If you would like to attend an In Your Shoes session, you can book a place via The Learning Hub at <http://hrbusinessservices.org.uk/learninghub/index.php> . For further information about the training, please contact David.laverick@sunderland.gov.uk

What can all elected members do?

Effective corporate parenting requires that all elected members:

- Are aware of the role and its implications for discharging the local authority's legal responsibilities for looked after children and care leavers – this guide and the information available through the links in the document provide a good overview
- Develop knowledge and awareness of the services available for looked after children and care leavers, both across the council and from relevant partner agencies
- Are advocates for looked after children and care leavers – ensuring their voices are heard, their needs are met and their achievements celebrated
- Prioritise the needs of looked after children and young people in council decision making and budget setting discussions
- Consider the potential impact of all council decisions on looked after children, foster carers and care leavers
- Ask appropriate questions of officers across the council, not just in children's services, about the quality of services provided to looked after children and young people, and ensure that any issues identified are resolved in a timely manner
- Be accessible to professionals, carers and looked after children who may wish to raise issues or concerns
- Take an active interest in the issues facing looked after children and care leavers at a regional and national level, and bring any examples of good practice or new ways of working to the attention of Ann Goldsmith, Associate Director – Children's Safeguardin (ann.goldsmith@sunderland.gov.uk).

What can I do as a ward councillor?

- Be aware that there are probably looked after children and care leavers living in your ward
- Make an effort to find out about and understand the issues that looked after children and care leavers may face, and the support they may need from the local authority
- Be proactive in ensuring that social workers, foster carers, looked after children and care leavers know how to contact you
- Attend and/ or support foster carer recruitment and celebration events in your ward
- Ensure that the Lead Member for Children's Services and the Director of Children's Services are made aware of any issues with services for looked after children and care leavers within your ward
- Take an active interest in facilities for children and young people in your area, and speak to staff about how they support the inclusion of looked after children and care leavers
- Maintain contact with the area social work and looked after children teams in your area, as well as staff in any residential homes; arrange to visit periodically and speak to staff about their experiences and challenges
- Know what provision (e.g. housing) is available for foster carers, looked after children and young people in your ward, and speak to social workers about ensuring that all looked after children are accessing universal healthcare and dental care
- Promote community understanding of looked after children and care leavers, and promote fostering within your ward, e.g. by providing leaflets at surgeries
- Monitor and challenge council policy for its impact on looked after children and care leavers
- Offer or help to secure employment opportunities, work experience or placements for looked after young people and care leavers

What can I do as a school governor?

- Find out which member of staff has specific/ designated responsibility for the wellbeing of looked after children
- Ensure schools have high aspirations for their looked after children. Ask what is being done to support their attainment, and what strategies are in place to ensure that looked after children have the opportunity to achieve the same results as their peers
- Find out about the statutory obligations of schools towards their looked after children, and ask if the school is meeting these (e.g. ask for information about the number of looked after children on the school roll, attendance levels, attainment, fixed term and permanent exclusions, bullying policies, and arrangements to ensure that looked after children can participate fully in school life, such as attending school trips)
- Ask about training for school staff; is there a good understanding amongst teaching and pastoral staff of the particular issues that looked after children and young people may face, which can have a detrimental effect on their education?
- Ensure that information on looked after children is regularly reported and discussed at governor meetings, and opportunities provided for governors to challenge the school on their performance
- Ask about whether any of the looked after children at the school have a statement of Special Educational Needs – are they being appropriately supported?
- Check whether all of the looked after children have an appropriate and up to date Personal Education Plan (PEP), and that the school has a copy for each child champion and promote the needs of looked after children in schools and nurseries
- For primary schools, governors should ensure that appropriate support and guidance is provided in a timely manner to the child's carers in applying for secondary school places, and navigating the appeals process where necessary
- Ask about the careers advice provided and employment/ work experience opportunities available to looked after children and care leavers; ensure that they are given the same opportunities as their peers to apply for or access such opportunities

What can I do as a member of the Corporate Parenting Board?

- Champion and promote the corporate parenting role across the authority and with partner organisations; develop your understanding of what effective corporate parenting looks like, e.g. through reading resources on the [NCAS website](#)
- Develop your knowledge and awareness of government expectations in relation to the services provided to looked after children and care leavers, and the requirements of Ofsted when inspecting safeguarding and looked after services
- Review and monitor the services provided to looked after children and care leavers, by receiving and analysing the quantitative and qualitative information provided to the group, and offer appropriate support and challenge where improvements could be made
- Review the work of the fostering and adoption panels
- Ask about planning for looked after children – are care plans regularly reviewed and updated, and are the wishes and feelings of looked after children and care leavers taken into account?
- Consider how the group can effectively engage with looked after children and young people, as well as their parents and carers, and ensure that their views are listened to and responded to
- Ensure that looked after children and young people are involved in the running of the group, and in setting the priorities and work programme; e.g. support 'takeover' initiatives where young people can chair group meetings
- Attend and support events and meetings which aim to improve outcomes for children and young people, and to celebrate their achievements (e.g. Young Achiever awards).
- Question what all Council directorates are doing to support looked after children, care leavers and foster carers

What can I do as a member of Scrutiny Committee?

- All Scrutiny Boards should consider looked after children and care leavers in their work; consideration should not be limited to the Children and Education Scrutiny Committee
- Examine the arrangements in place to support the wellbeing of looked after children and care leavers, and monitor their effectiveness; challenge and scrutinise performance, and make recommendations for improvement
- Ask demanding questions of officers with responsibility for looked after children and care leaver services; seek qualitative as well as quantitative information to ensure that the experiences of looked after children are consistent with what the performance data shows, and ask questions of officers' interpretation of the data
- Ensure that issues relating to looked after children and care leavers are regularly considered at Scrutiny – prioritise any areas of particular concern, e.g. identified through inspections or reviews
- Involve looked after children and young people, care leavers, parents, carers and partner agencies in the work of the Board; their direct feedback, and case studies of their experiences, should drive the work and the priorities
- Ensure that the findings and recommendations of the Board have an influence on policy, and encourage the sharing and embedding of good practice

What can I do as the Executive Member for Children's Services?

- Hold the equivalent responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services at a local political level, as required by the Children's Act (2004)
- Ensure that the needs of looked after children and care leavers across the council are prioritised; including in funding discussions
- Make links with other Executive Members to ensure issues affecting looked after children and care leavers are taken into account and prioritised in all council decision making
- Ensure that the views of looked after children and care leavers are sought and used to influence service development and delivery
- Be accountable for the actions, decisions and delivery of services for looked after children and care leaver
- Ensure that policy or service development does not have any adverse effects on looked after children and care leavers
- Play a leading role in partnerships on behalf of the authority; particularly with the Health Service, to ensure sufficient priority is given to looked after children and care leavers
- Ensure that departments and agencies work with each other to ensure effective integrated working for existing services and ways of working

What can I do as an Executive Member for other directorates?

- Consider opportunities for the needs of looked after children and care leavers to be prioritised within services in your portfolio
- Consider whether the decisions you take have an impact on looked after children and care leavers, and ensure appropriate steps are taken to mitigate any adverse effects
- Ensure that Cabinet considers issues affecting children holistically, particularly links between children's services, leisure, transport, housing policies and any other relevant areas of work

Where can I find more information?

For more information about fostering and adoption in Sunderland, go to www.sunderland.gov.uk/fostering or www.sunderland.gov.uk/adoption. Alternatively, you can email adopt.foster@sunderland.gov.uk

For information about what makes a good Corporate Parent, and some powerful case studies demonstrating why the role is so important for looked after children and care leavers, please visit the National Care Advisory Service website:

http://leavingcare.org/about_care_and_leaving_care/corporateparenting_home

There are also resources available from the National Children's Bureau:

<http://www.ncb.org.uk/corporate-parenting>

Appendix One – Our pledges to looked after children in Sunderland

These pledges were developed with looked after children on the Change Council, and focus on what they feel is important to them. The Pledges were agreed by the Corporate Parenting Board and each Pledge supported by a young person, who will act as the critical eye and hold to account senior officers and councillors from the Corporate Parenting Board.

Pledge 1: If possible I want to live with my own family and relatives

Pledge 2: If I need to come into care you will make sure I am properly cared for

Pledge 3: I feel I am being listened to

Pledge 4: I want to get a good education and enjoy my free time

Pledge 5: I want to keep fit and healthy

Pledge 6: I don't want to leave care until I am ready

Please tell us if these promises are not being kept, or if someone who cares for you or supports you has done an amazing job keeping these promises. Get in touch at csresponse@sunderland.gov.uk

Appendix Two – Charter for Care Leavers

The Care Leavers Charter is a national set of promises, developed by the Department for Education. Local authorities are encouraged to adopt the promises in the Charter.

The national charter reads as follows: Care leavers' charter

A Charter is a set of principles and promises. This Charter sets out promises care leavers want the central and local government to make. Promises and principles help in decision making and do not replace laws; they give guidance to show how laws are designed to be interpreted.

The key principles in this Charter will remain constant through any changes in Legislation, Regulation and Guidance. Care leavers urge local authorities to use these principles when they make decisions about young people's lives. The Charter for Care Leavers is designed to raise expectation, aspiration and understanding of what care leavers need and what the government and local authorities should do to be good Corporate Parents.

We Promise:

To respect and honour your identity

We will support you to discover and to be who you are and honour your unique identity. We will help you develop your own personal beliefs and values and accept your culture and heritage. We will celebrate your identity as an individual, as a member of identity groups and as a valued member of your community. We will value and support important relationships, and help you manage changing relationships or come to terms with loss, trauma or other significant life events. We will support you to express your identity positively to others.

To believe in you

We will value your strengths, gifts and talents and encourage your aspirations. We will hold a belief in your potential and a vision for your future even if you have lost sight of these yourself. We will help you push aside limiting barriers and encourage and support you to pursue your goals in whatever ways we can. We will believe in you, celebrate you and affirm you.

To listen to you

We will take time to listen to you, respect, and strive to understand your point of view. We will place your needs, thoughts and feelings at the heart of all decisions about you, negotiate with you, and show how we have taken these into account. If we don't agree with you we will fully explain why. We will provide easy access to complaint and appeals processes and promote and encourage access to independent advocacy whenever you need it.

To inform you

We will give you information that you need at every point in your journey, from care to adulthood, presented in a way that you want including information on legal entitlements and the service you can expect to receive from us at different stages in the journey. We will keep information up to date and accurate. We will ensure you know where to get current information once you are no longer in regular touch with leaving care services. We will make clear to you what information about yourself and your time in care you are entitled to see. We will support you to access this when you want it, to manage any feelings that you might have about the information, and to put on record any disagreement with factual content.

To support you

We will provide any support set out in current Regulations and Guidance and will not unreasonably withhold advice when you are no longer legally entitled to this service. As well as information, advice, practical and financial help we will provide emotional support. We will make sure you do not have to fight for support you are entitled to and we will fight for you if other agencies let you down. We will not punish you if you change your mind about what you want to do. We will continue to care about you even when we are no longer caring for you. We will make it our responsibility to understand your needs. If we can't meet those needs we will try and help you find a service that can. We will help you learn from your mistakes; we will not judge you and we will be here for you no matter how many times you come back for support.

To find you a home

We will work alongside you to prepare you for your move into independent living only when you are ready. We will help you think about the choices available and to find accommodation that is right for you. We will do everything we can to ensure you are happy and feel safe when you move to independent living. We recognise that at different times you may need to take a step back and start over again. We will do our best to support you until you are settled in your independent life; we will not judge you for your mistakes or refuse to advise you because you did not listen to us before. We will work proactively with other agencies to help you sustain your home.

To be a lifelong champion

We will do our best to help you break down barriers encountered when dealing with other agencies. We will work together with the services you need, including housing, benefits, colleges and universities, employment providers and health services to help you establish yourself as an independent individual. We will treat you with courtesy and humanity whatever your age when you return to us for advice or support. We will help you to be the driver of your life and not the passenger. We will point you in a positive direction and journey alongside you at your pace. We will trust and respect you. We will not forget about you. We will remain your supporters in whatever way we can, even when our formal relationship with you has ended.