

Review of Sunderland City Council's Corporate Parenting Board

1. Background

The scope of this review of Sunderland City Council's Corporate Parenting Board is to consider its current role in engaging elected members and key stakeholders including the wider Council, Together for Children and partner agencies to meet their collective corporate parenting responsibilities. The review has been tasked with proposing options for how the Board could be strengthened so that it is well placed to demonstrate its contribution to improvements in service delivery for cared for children and to meet the expectations of the 2018 statutory guidance '*Applying corporate parenting principles to looked after children and care leavers*'.

- 1.1. In proposing a refreshed model for the Board, the aim is to develop a framework for corporate parenting which is agreed and fully adopted by the City Council and its elected members, Together for Children, partner agencies and cared for children. The intended outcome is to reinforce governance arrangements regarding corporate parenting to evidence that the Corporate Parenting Board is providing effective scrutiny of strategic plans and that as a result the quality of services demonstrates that it is making a difference to the lives of cared for children.
- 1.2. The review has considered how the Corporate Parenting Board currently operates through attendance at a Board meeting, a review of the reports and presentations to the Board and Board minutes. The review has looked at the conduct of other Corporate Parenting Boards across the country which have been identified as examples of good practice.

2. Corporate Parenting

- 2.1. The concept of the Council being the corporate parent for cared for children has been well established by national policy since 1998. The term means that when a child becomes cared for, the Council as a whole has responsibility for that child as its corporate parent. The standard expected of the Council, including its officers and elected members, in fulfilling its duties as a corporate parent, is to be ambitious and aspirational for their cared for and care experienced children and to consider whether '*this is good enough for my own child.*' This priority accorded to cared for children recognises the particular challenges they face, with the majority of cared for children coming into care due to abuse and neglect and experiencing poorer educational and health outcomes compared to their peers.
- 2.2. In 2007, the Government's White Paper '*Care Matters, Time for Change*' provided more explicit guidance to Councils about how they were expected to meet their corporate parenting duties, in particular the requirement that Councils must publish a Pledge to cared for children to confirm how it proposes to meet their holistic needs.
- 2.3. More recently, the Children and Social Work Act 2017, details in law the corporate parenting principles, comprising of seven needs, which each Council must have regard to when delivering services to cared for and care experienced young people. The principles apply to the whole Council. They are intended to embed a consistent, joined up and positive approach across the Council to govern how it delivers services. The principles require the Council to:
 - act in the best interests and promote the physical health and well-being of cared for children

- encourage cared for children to express their views, wishes and feelings
- to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of cared for children
- to help cared for children gain access to and make the best use of services provided by the Council and its relevant partners
- to promote high aspirations and seek to secure the best outcomes for cared for children
- for those cared for children to be safe and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work
- to prepare cared for children and adulthood and independent living

2.4. While the delivery of care to cared for children, is largely delegated to children's services functions, the leadership responsibility for corporate parenting rests with the Chief Executive and as a key element of their statutory duties, the Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children. The responsibility for corporate parenting also extends to other directorates in the Council and to partner agencies such as Police, Housing, Health and schools, who, through s.10 of the Children Act 2004, have a duty to co-operate with the Council in meeting the needs of cared for and care experienced children and young people.

2.5. In terms of the specific corporate parenting responsibilities attributed to elected members, while every elected member is a corporate parent, not all elected members are expected to have the same level of knowledge and involvement with cared for children. The National Children's Bureau (2013) provides a definition of how the corporate parenting role for elected members can be structured into three levels of responsibility.

Universal Responsibility | All elected members have a responsibility for the children cared for by their Local Authority.

Targeted Responsibility | Councillors who are members of the Corporate Parenting Board or Adoption and Fostering Panels.

Specialist Responsibility | Councillors with a specific role e.g. Lead Member for Children; Chair of Corporate Parenting Board.

3. Local Arrangements

3.1. Sunderland City Council's Corporate Parenting Board has been in place since 2006 and was intended to report to the Children's Trust Board. As with other Councils, it is not a decision-making body, its remit is advisory and to contribute to the scrutiny of arrangements for cared for children. It is a cross-party Board, attended by senior representatives from Together for Children such as the Chief Executive and Head of the Virtual School, and representatives from partner agencies including CAMHS and the Designated Doctor for cared for children. Representatives from the Change Council regularly present to the Board regarding participation activities and present their views on services.

3.2. The governance arrangements between the City Council and Together for Children present a unique opportunity for the Corporate Parenting Board to provide challenge and support to the collective approach between both organisations to corporate parenting. For the Council and Together for Children, there are clear benefits to ensuring that the Corporate Parenting Board is effective in championing corporate parenting across both organisations, and in the context of the TfC model, with the TfC Board itself which also holds the corporate parenting duty by virtue of delivering the service on behalf of the Council.

- 3.3. The span of influence of Together for Children is not as substantial as the Council's, which has a wide range of services, links to local organisations and businesses, and the local community. The Council is well placed to support the wider needs of cared for children in areas such as housing, job opportunities and access to cultural and leisure activities, and it is important it does so to benefit cared for children. The Corporate Parenting Board has an important role to play in engaging the Council to think about how it can keep the needs of cared for children at the forefront of its strategic plans and services.

4. Models of Good Practice

- 4.1. In the best performing Councils, effective corporate parenting is a result of a shared vision, strong leadership, accountability through clear governance arrangements and challenge. As with Sunderland City Council, the majority of Councils have established Corporate Parenting Boards which include elected members and senior officers, to provide a strategic view of how cared for children and care experienced young people experience services.

- 4.2. This review has considered a range of corporate parenting arrangements across the country and in particular those Councils where their corporate parenting arrangements have been cited as good practice examples or rated highly by Ofsted. Analysis of the better performing Councils indicates that they have the following features in common:

- 4.2.1. **Strategic Ownership** | In a number of Councils, where their corporate parenting arrangements were seen as effective, they had a clearly articulated vision which was ambitious about the outcomes they wished to achieve for their children and stated how they were going to deliver on the seven corporate parenting principles and their Pledge to cared for children about what they could expect from their corporate parents. This is usually developed in a strategic plan (Corporate Parenting Strategy or Looked After Children Strategy) which identifies what the Council intends to do to achieve its vision and the contribution of key partner agencies and the Council to deliver the plan. (*North Yorkshire, Leeds, Achieving for Children*) In a number of Councils, scrutiny of the delivery of the Corporate Parenting Strategy is used by the Corporate Parenting Board to measure the effectiveness of the Council's corporate parenting arrangements and to hold services and agencies to account (*Doncaster, North Yorkshire, Solihull, Westminster*).

In Councils where corporate parenting is well embedded, Directorates across the Council have a clear understanding about their contribution to the corporate parenting agenda as the 'family firm' which is driven by senior officers including the Chief Executive (Leeds, Westminster).

- 4.2.2. **Champions** | There were examples where elected members, senior officers in the Council and partner agencies proactively championed the needs of cared for children by promoting them as being everyone's business. In some instances, this was established by key officer roles in the Council being given specific tasks to promote corporate parenting e.g. Corporate Parenting Champions in each Directorate. A Corporate Parenting Week took place in one Council (Wigan) where cared for children shadowed senior managers. In two Councils, each Directorate across the Council is required to adopt a business objective which relates to corporate parenting (Solihull) or to lead on a theme of the Corporate Parenting Strategy (Leeds). There were also examples where the Corporate Parenting Board championed cared for children with other elected members and Cabinet by ensuring the needs of children were addressed in key strategies to make sure they kept the needs of children at the forefront of their considerations (Solihull).

- 4.2.3. **Involvement for Cared for Children** | The experiences of cared for care experienced young people are an important measure about how well the Council is delivering on it's corporate parenting responsibilities. To capture these, it is important that their voice is meaningfully heard by the Corporate Parenting Board, senior officers and partner agencies. In most Councils, the Children in Care Council is well established and attends the Corporate Parenting Board to provide their views. There were a number of models of how looked after children were involved in the Corporate Parenting Board. In some Councils, representatives from the Children in Care Council are members of the Corporate Parenting Board, share joint responsibility with elected members for the agenda of the Panel and in some Councils (Gloucestershire) chair the Corporate Parenting Board once per year. Another example was where the Corporate Parenting Board held joint meetings with the Children in Care Council. In those Councils where cared for children took a proactive role in the Corporate Parenting Board, they regularly met with elected members to discuss their experiences. As a result, elected members were able to gain an increased insight into the care experiences of these children with led to a more informed understanding of information and data.

Several Councils had supported cared for children through the modern apprenticeship scheme to be either Young or Care Ambassadors (Hampshire, Doncaster, Gloucestershire) whose role is to represent the views of cared for children, contribute to policy and advise senior leaders. These roles were seen as an invaluable means of supporting the Corporate Parenting Board and senior leaders to be child centred and to be responsive to the issues identified as important by children. These roles have been cited as an example of good practice by Ofsted in terms of providing challenge and evidence of impact on service improvements.

- 4.2.4. **Structure of Meeting** | Largely due to the involvement of cared for children, several Councils had modified the conduct of the Board meeting away from formal reports to presentations. Several Boards explicitly reported that they had adopted a collaborative approach, providing challenge in a structured and constructive way with a view to establishing a common purpose and mutual respect with all stakeholders at the Board (Gloucestershire). The focus of the discussion in a number of Boards was a clear focus on tangible improvements with the Board evaluating performance of services against a clear set of measures agreed by the Board. (Doncaster) with feedback from a variety of sources including cared for children. Those Corporate Parenting Boards where children were members of the board or had chaired the meeting, tended to be smaller with no more than six elected members on the Board.
- 4.2.5. **Involvement of Partners** | The attendance of partner agencies is a uniform feature of Corporate Parenting Boards. This predominantly takes the form of the Head of the Virtual School and Designated Nurse or Doctor with regular reporting from Housing, CAMHS and the Youth Offending Service to provide assurance about how these services are meeting their corporate parenting responsibilities.
- 4.2.6. **Accountability** | In all Councils, the Corporate Parenting Board acts as an advisory rather than a decision-making committee. A number of Corporate Parenting Boards provide regular reports to Scrutiny Committee so that there is transparency about the work of the Board and to bring issues regarding corporate parenting into the Council's decision-making structures (Gloucester, Doncaster, Bristol).

5. Recommendations

- 5.1. The proposals below are intended to strengthen the role of the Corporate Parenting Board so that it provides effective scrutiny and assurance about how the Council, Together for Children and partner agencies jointly meet their corporate parenting responsibilities.

Recommendation 1 | The Council, Together for Children and their partners develop a shared vision for how they will work together a jointly agreed framework such as a Corporate Parenting Strategy which articulates each of their contributions to meeting the needs of cared for children and their plan to improve services for them.

Recommendation 2 | The impact of the shared vision and Corporate Parenting Strategy on the experience of cared for children is regularly reported and scrutinised by the Corporate Parenting Board through a set of measures agreed by the Board.

Recommendation 3 | The membership of the Corporate Parenting Board is revised to include 6 elected members of the Council in addition to the Lead Member of Children's Services as Chair. There are nominated substitutes for each of the elected members to ensure quoracy.

Recommendation 4 | Elected members appointed to the Board should preferably have an interest in children's issues and relevant life or professional experience relevant to the focus of the Board.

Recommendation 5 | The composition of the elected members on the Board remains non-partisan and politically balanced.

Recommendation 6 | The Corporate Parenting Board includes up to 3 non-voting co-opted members nominated by the Change Council, including its Chair and Vice Chair.

Recommendation 7 | Key Officers in attendance include: DCS; Director Children's Social Care; Cared for Children Service Manager; Head of Virtual School; Designated Nurse and Doctor. The Chief Executive and Executive Directors of Sunderland Council are participant observers who are there to provide advice and assistance to members of the Bboard. Directorates nominate a senior lead to represent their Directorate at the Board.

Recommendation 8 | The Corporate Parenting Board is held bi-monthly.

Recommendation 9 | There are regular joint meetings between Corporate Parenting Board and Change Council, three per year, where the agenda is set jointly, and the meeting is jointly chaired.

Recommendation 10 | Each elected member has responsibility for leading a theme from the Corporate Parenting Strategy and works with a representative from the Change Council, Together for Children and a lead Executive Director to promote the theme.

Recommendation 11 | The Corporate Parenting Committee is required to consider and provide comment on all Council plans and strategies which might impact on cared for children.

Recommendation 12 | The Council considers the appointment of Care Ambassadors to promote the needs of cared for children with Together for Children and Sunderland City Council.

Recommendation 13 | The Corporate Parenting Board maintains a Challenge Log to evidence where it has provided challenge to services and the impact of that challenge.

Recommendation 14 | The minutes of the Corporate Parenting Board are shared with the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee and that the Corporate Parenting Board provides the Committee with a report regarding its work, identifying key issues for cared for children every six months to provide greater oversight and challenge.

Recommendation 15 | That mandatory induction training is provided to elected members and officers regarding their corporate parenting responsibilities.

Recommendation 16 | The Terms of Reference of the Corporate Parenting Board are revised to reflect the recommendations of this report.

Recommendation 17 | An officer to be identified from the Chief Officer Group to carry the role of Principal Corporate Parent. The recommendation would be that this is the Chief Executive of Sunderland City Council.

Recommendation 18 | A Non-Executive Director of the Together for Children Board to be a co-opted non-voting member of the Corporate Parenting Board.

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