

Corporate parenting resource pack

Foreword

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, can't 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. This isn't just up to the lead member or director of children's services – we need everyone looking out for our most vulnerable children and young people, and every councillor has a role to play in embedding the corporate parenting principles and doing all they can to support children in care to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. This pack aims to help them fulfil that role as effectively as possible.

Being a corporate parent means doing everything we can for every child in the council's care – and every care leaver – to give them the opportunities that other children get. This covers everything from keeping an eye on their progress at school, to looking after their health and wellbeing, to preparing them for life as independent adults – and supporting them when they get there. We need to be ambitious for the children in our care, encouraging them to dream big and take chances even if they don't feel like that's been an option in the past. We need to facilitate and empower our children in care to make a smooth and stable transition to adulthood and enable them to have a say in key decisions that affect their lives.

It's also about the smaller things that make life more fulfilling. It's about making sure children receive birthday cards, are rewarded when they do well (and supported when they don't), get to take part in the activities they enjoy and have new experiences. It's about making sure someone's on the end of a phone when a care leaver is having a hard day at work or university, or is there to help them navigate an application form. It's about doing the things you'd do for your own children.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 defined for the first time in law the responsibility of corporate parents to ensure, as far as possible, secure, nurturing and positive experiences for looked-after children and young people, and care leavers. Councils across the country already do a fantastic job of this, and we've highlighted some examples in this pack. We'd be delighted to hear of any others to add to our online good practice database for others to learn from, to make sure every councillor has the tools they need to be a good corporate parent.

Many of the children who come into our care will face more challenges before they reach adulthood than any child should have to. It is our duty and our privilege to fight their corner and give them every opportunity to reach their potential.

Councillor Judith Blake

Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board

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Corporate parenting

An introduction

What is a corporate parent?

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 says that when a child or young person comes into the care of the local authority, or is under 25 and was looked-after by the authority for at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday, the authority becomes their corporate parent. 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, and take them into account
- make sure they have access to services
- make sure children and young people are safe, with stable home lives, relationships and education or work
- promote high aspirations and try to secure the best outcomes for them
- prepare them for adulthood and independent living.

As corporate parents, it's every councillor's responsibility to make sure that the council is meeting these duties towards children in care and care leavers. Children can be in care in a range of different settings, with the authority acting as corporate parent to all of them. This includes foster care, children's homes, secure children's homes, young offender institutions, secure training centres and kinship care.

Every councillor and officer within a council has a responsibility to act for those children and young people as a parent would for their own child.

Lead members, those on corporate parenting panels, and overview and scrutiny committees will have particular responsibilities, but for all councillors, this is where your role as the eyes and ears of the community is particularly important.

Are there youth services in your ward that provide a vital service for looked-after children, and if so, how are you supporting them? Is there a children's home or care leaver accommodation in your ward? If foster carers in your ward provide care for disabled children, do they need any help to improve accessibility of local services? What feedback are you getting from residents?

How are you helping to dispel myths and challenge any stigma and discrimination faced by children and young people in care and care leavers? It's important to remember the need to protect the privacy of these children and young people, so work with officers to find out how you can best provide support.

For both officers and councillors, being a corporate parent means that when any service is being reviewed that could impact upon looked-after children and care leavers, or when you're hearing feedback from, or reports about, children in the council's care, consider:

“What if this were my child?

What can we do to put this right?”

Childhood is a time of huge potential and development. As corporate parents, all councillors will be committed to ensuring the fundamentals are in place for every child and young person in their care – just as any loving parent would. How does a child in care know that they are loved and they matter; who notices and encourages all the great things about them; and to whom can they turn when they are unhappy or want help to be heard? These are some starter questions for exploring how your council does its best for children in care and care leavers.

It is important to remember that, just as not all children are the same, looked-after children and care leavers are not one homogenous group. While it is true that some will have experienced trauma and disruption in their lives and need specialist support to cope with those experiences, others will have adjusted well to being in care and may be flourishing. Periods of stability can be followed by challenges, so councillors need to recognise the uniqueness of the children in their care, and make sure each child is getting what they need to thrive and be happy.

Corporate parenting panel

As corporate parents, all councillors should seek to stay informed about children in the council's care, and care leavers. However, the establishment of a corporate parenting panel can provide a useful forum for regular, detailed discussion of issues, and a positive link with children in care councils and other forums. Members of the corporate parenting panel can also use their position to raise awareness of the role amongst colleagues, and provide support to the lead member for children's services.

It can be helpful to include senior officers on the panel, including from areas such as education, health and housing that have a significant impact on children in care and care leavers. In two-tier areas, consider how district council colleagues can be included.

The corporate parenting panel does not replace the duty of all councillors; members of all committees have a responsibility to consider how reports before them impact upon children in care and care leavers.

Working with partners

Under the Children Act 2004, local authorities have a duty to promote cooperation between 'relevant partners', including the police, the NHS and education providers, while those partners have a duty to cooperate with the local authority in turn. Guidance on the Act highlights that corporate parenting is a 'task [that] must be shared by the whole local authority and partner agencies'.¹ Councils should consider how their partners can help them to deliver their corporate parenting role, especially in relation to the provision of services. The NHS has a responsibility to make sure looked-after children receive the physical and mental health support that they need, for example, while close working between schools and the virtual school head (VSH) can help to improve outcomes for children and young people in care.

Information and data

The lead member for children's services and those on the corporate parenting panel should receive regular progress reports with regard to looked-after children and care leavers, while data will be available to all members through reports presented to Full Council and scrutiny committees.

Data will be able to provide an overview of medium-to-long-term trends, but statistics on their own are not enough. Make sure that data is presented with the necessary context and explanations – for example, if fewer children are going missing, is this the result of a positive intervention that should be continued? Or are there issues with reporting?

Also look for direction of travel, and comparisons with your statistical neighbours and national data to see where the council is performing well and what could be better.

However, as any parent will know, situations with children and young people change quickly, and statistics will not provide all the real-time data that you need. The corporate parenting panel should keep in close contact with the children in care council, independent reviewing officers (IROs), children's rights and advocacy services and the director of children's services (DCS) to make sure they're receiving up-to-date information and can respond quickly if needed.

Listening to children and young people

Local authorities have wide-ranging duties to give due consideration to the wishes and feelings of children in care and care leavers. This applies to decisions and actions affecting children and young people as individuals, and to wider matters concerning children in care and care leavers. As corporate parents, all councillors should take an active interest in how well children in care and care leavers are listened to and how this is acted upon. Care experienced people of all ages have valuable, direct knowledge of how it feels to be in care, and what needs to change for the better.

Safeguarding

Local authorities have a responsibility for safeguarding all children², but there are certain risks that particularly affect children in care and care leavers that corporate parents need to be aware of.

Children in care are three times more likely to go missing than children not in care.³ Processes must be in place to report missing children, take the appropriate action to find the child, and then to follow up with them when they are found to establish the underlying reasons for going missing.

Corporate parents should be monitoring instances of children going missing, and how regularly independent return interviews are taking place (including for children placed out of area), as well as any emerging themes. The local authority should also collaborate and share information and intelligence with other countries if a child in care goes missing and is thought to have travelled abroad.

Child victims of modern slavery are particularly vulnerable, with nearly two thirds of trafficked children in local authority care going missing at some point; some within just one week.⁴ Councils need to make sure a strong multi-agency approach is in place to protect victims from further risk from their traffickers and preventing trafficking from taking place. In particular, there should be a clear understanding between the local authority and the police of roles in planning for this protection and responding if a trafficked child goes missing. Council representatives on local multi-agency safeguarding partnerships should make sure there is oversight of those arrangements, and monitor how well they are being implemented and reviewed.

Children in care are also disproportionately likely to be at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) than those in the general population, though it is important to remember that the vast majority of CSE victims are living at home. While those issues that led young people to need local authority care in the first place may increase their vulnerability to CSE, the experience of care itself can also be significant, especially if the child's placement lacks stability. Those at risk of CSE will need to have clear plans in place to protect them, and all social workers and partners should know how to spot signs of risk and deal with them appropriately.

There is also a growing threat of county lines and child criminal exploitation that children in care may be susceptible to due to increased levels of vulnerability.

In addition to ensuring plans are in place to safeguard young people, local authorities are encouraged through a national protocol⁵ to work in partnership and have effective mechanisms in place to support children in care and care leavers from being unnecessarily criminalised.

There is also a high proportion of children in care within the youth justice system, either at young offender institutions, training centres or secure children's homes. Local authorities are responsible for children in custody who are the subject of care orders, and all remanded children automatically attain looked-after status. Councils should therefore have systems and processes in place to support this group of young people who may be going through a challenging time.

Sufficiency

The council has a duty⁶ to ensure, as far as is reasonably possible, sufficient accommodation is available locally to meet the needs of looked-after children and care leavers. This can be directly provided, or commissioned provision. Councils should regularly review their position on this, and report on how they intend to meet the sufficiency duty. This will be a valuable source of information for corporate parents.

Foreign national children in care

As corporate parents, it can be useful for local authorities to be aware of how many children in care are foreign nationals and whether social workers have access to appropriate support and training to enable them to provide appropriate support to this group of children in care.

Sources of information

Children in Care Council and other feedback mechanisms

There should be mechanisms in place to hear from children in care, with this information being reported regularly to the corporate parenting panel. There may also be an annual report submitted to Full Council. The format for reporting should be discussed with children and young people; some may wish to meet with councillors to discuss issues face-to-face, some may prefer to use mediators, and others may prefer online methods.

This feedback can provide rich information to act upon to make sure children in care and care leavers are getting what they need – from concerns about how they're kept informed about their placements, to how often they can see any siblings they aren't placed with, right down to whether they're happy with their pocket money.

Independent reviewing officer annual report

Amongst other duties, IROs are responsible for making sure that the local authority, as a corporate parent, gives proper consideration and weight to children's wishes and feelings in their care plans, and that it genuinely responds to a child's needs.

The IRO manager should produce an annual report for the consideration of the corporate parenting panel, which should include areas of good practice, and areas for development. It should include commentary on issues including the participation of children and their parents, and whether any resource issues are putting the delivery of a good service to all looked-after children at risk.

Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy

Joint health and wellbeing strategies (JHWSs) are developed by local leaders to enable the planning and commissioning of integrated services that meet the needs of their whole local community. They particularly work to reduce health inequalities and support the needs of vulnerable groups and individuals; the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

underpinning the JHWS should include specific consideration of children in care and care leavers. The strategy (or associated delivery plan) will include targets, actions and who is responsible for implementing those actions.

The JHWS will be agreed by the health and wellbeing board, which should also monitor its implementation. Board meetings should be public, as should the JHWS, reports and meeting minutes.

Performance reports

Reports should be published regularly updating on key indicators in relation to children in care, including direction of travel. These indicators are part of a nationally collected dataset reported to government, and include information on placement stability, outcomes for children in care and adoption. Your authority may also report on other indicators according to local priorities.

Key priorities to consider include:

- placement stability
- health data
- educational attainment
- proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training
- children in care being placed out of area or at a distance including overseas placements
- proportion of care leavers that the council has regular contact with
- availability of suitable housing for care leavers.

Further information on these points is included throughout this pack.

Performance reports should be publicly available and should also be presented to a locally agreed committee – for example the corporate parenting panel, the relevant scrutiny committee or cabinet.

Feedback from foster parents

Most children who are in care live with foster parents, and the quality and experience of those foster parents is key to delivering good outcomes for children. Each council will have different ways of gathering feedback from foster parents, including surveys and focus groups, along with different ways of reporting that feedback. The corporate parenting panel should receive updates on foster parent feedback, and this should be used to help inform support for foster parents, and to improve recruitment and retention.

The panel may also wish to consider ongoing input from foster carers by co-opting representatives onto the panel, or having regular meetings with carers to hear about experiences and receive feedback.

Stability Index

Stability for children in care, where they are in an appropriate placement that meets their needs, is an important element in helping them to secure positive outcomes. To help support improved placement stability, the Children's Commissioner has developed a Stability Index to measure three aspects of children's experiences of care – placement moves, school moves, and changes in social worker.

Updates to legislation and practice

National Quality Standards for children's homes

The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 set out nine Quality Standards which outline the aspirational and positive outcomes that all children's homes are expected to deliver.

These quality standards are:

- quality and purpose of care
- children's views, wishes and feelings
- education
- enjoyment and achievement
- health and wellbeing
- positive relationships
- protection of children
- leadership and management
- care planning.

Further information on each standard is outlined in the Department for Education's (DfE) 'Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations'.

New rules for out of area placements

Statutory guidance⁷ has strengthened the responsibilities of local authorities to notify other local authorities if they place a looked-after child within their area. Children's homes are also now required to notify their host local authority when a child is placed with them by another authority.

An 'out of area' placement is classified as one outside of the council's geographical boundary, but within an authority that it shares a boundary with. If a child is placed in an authority that doesn't share a geographical boundary with the placing authority, that is classed as an 'at a distance' placement.

A responsible officer should be formally appointed by the DCS to approve out of area placements; this will often be an assistant director. All at a distance placements must be signed off by the DCS. This does not apply where the placement is with the parent, a connected person or a foster carer approved by the responsible authority.

The child's IRO should always be consulted prior to an out of area placement being made, and the wishes of the child should be taken into account. The host authority should also be consulted in advance in the case of out of area and distant placements, and notified when the placement is made.

Staying put and staying close

'Staying put' is an arrangement that allows a looked-after child to continue to live with their foster carer after their 18th birthday, when they cease to be 'looked-after' by the local authority. This can take place where the council considers it appropriate, and both the young person and the carer want to enter a staying put arrangement.

A 'staying put' duty was introduced in the Children and Families Act 2014, which requires councils to monitor arrangements and provide advice and support (including

financial) to the foster parent and young person to facilitate the arrangement until the young person reaches 21. Guidance material has been produced (see references and further information).

A number of councils are trialling approaches to 'staying close' – a variant of staying put for young people leaving residential care – using funding from the DfE's Innovation Programme to enable care leavers to maintain links with their former children's home.

Sir Martin Narey's Independent Review of Residential Care

Sir Martin Narey was commissioned by the Prime Minister in 2015 to carry out an independent review of children's residential care.

The final report was published in July 2016 and contained 34 recommendations. These included ways to improve commissioning of places in children's homes, and to encourage development of the right sort of provision where it is needed.

Sir Martin also recommended a review of fostering provision, and the need for sharing of best practice across a range of areas.

Several areas of national policy were also singled out as needing review, including guidance around planning, the use of restraint, and the recording of criminal offences to avoid the unnecessary criminalisation of children in care. Changes to Ofsted inspections of children's homes and guidance were also recommended.

Finally, Sir Martin highlighted ways to improve staffing, including making sure social work students spent part of their placement within a children's home to make sure new staff are getting experience across the sector.

Independent review of foster care in England⁸

The DfE commissioned Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owens to look at the current state of foster care and how to improve the prospects of children in care. As part of the review there was a public call for evidence for a wide range of stakeholders to contribute. The review made 36 recommendations about how to improve outcomes for children in foster care including:

- ensuring that foster carers are supported and included in decision-making
- improving foster placement commissioning and matching
- greater stability and permanence for children and young people in foster care.

The Government published its response to the report in July 2018.⁹ This outlined the actions the Government intended to take to improve practice and the experience of children in foster care, including amending guidance and developing new tools and resources to support better commissioning.

Care Leaver Strategy 2016

The Government published a new Care Leaver Strategy in July 2016, entitled 'Keep on caring: Supporting young people from care to independence'.

The strategy strengthens the role of the corporate parent, paving the way for the provisions in the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Statutory guidance: Children who go missing from care

Statutory guidance was issued in January 2014 on children who run away or go missing from home or care.

The guidance highlights the need for a children's services authority to name a senior children's service manager as responsible for monitoring policies and performance relating to children who go missing from home or care. The responsible manager should understand the risks and issues facing missing children and review best practice in dealing with the issue.

Councils should agree a protocol, with the police and other partners, for dealing with children who run away or go missing in their area. Protocols should be agreed and reviewed regularly with all agencies and be scrutinised by local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Where appropriate, agreed protocols should also be in place with neighbouring authorities.

Statutory guidance: Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked after children

The Children and Families Act 2014 places a duty on every children's services authority in England to appoint a virtual school head (VSH) – an officer employed to make sure that the council's duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked-after children is properly discharged. The VSH should also be an educational advocate for children in care and provide advice and guidance to support parents of previously looked after children.

This statutory guidance, issued in 2014 and updated in 2018, highlights that as corporate parents, councils should have high aspirations for the children they look after. The guidance outlines the ways in which authorities should work to close the attainment and progress gap between looked-after children and their peers, and to make sure that looked-after children have access to high quality education, including appropriate support for any special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The Children and Social Work Act 2017 extended the role of the VSH to previously looked-after children. For these children, the VSH should promote their educational achievement through the provision of information and advice to their parents, educators and others who the VSH considers necessary.

Statutory guidance: Health and wellbeing

Joint guidance from the DfE and Department of Health was issued to councils and clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) in 2015 to support them to promote the physical, emotional and mental health of children in care.¹⁰ It emphasises that children in care should be proactively considered in the joint strategic needs assessment and when commissioning health services and advocates that children in care should never be refused a health-related service, including a mental health service, on the grounds of a placement being short-term or unplanned. CCGs and health authorities have a duty to respond to requests by councils to carry out health assessments for children in their care.

Statutory guidance: Special guardianship

Guidance was issued in January 2017 on special guardianship, outlining the issues local authorities should take into account when preparing reports for the court to apply for special guardianship orders. This includes information about the child's needs, and more detailed assessments of the child's relationship with, and the parenting capacity of, the prospective special guardian, both now and longer-term.

Children and Social Work Act 2017

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 defines, for the first time in law, the role of corporate parents, in addition to expanding and extending support for care leavers, for example through the publication of a 'local offer for care leavers' and making personal advisers available for care leavers up to the age of 25.

The Act also signalled the introduction of a set of corporate parenting principles to support councils to adopt a positive culture for their children in care and care leavers.¹¹

The Act sets out revised arrangements for local multi-agency safeguarding partnerships to replace local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs). Under the new provisions, the local authority, CCG and the police have a shared responsibility to make arrangements for themselves and 'relevant agencies' to work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the area. These statutory partners should make sure that all appropriate agencies are involved meaningfully in the partnership, and in particular should look at the engagement of schools, including academies and free schools, which have a key role to play in safeguarding children and young people.

Foreign-national children and working with authorities overseas

The DfE has published non-statutory guidance for cases where a foreign-national child is taken into care, and when a local authority places a child in another country. The guidance emphasises the importance of notifying a country's consulate in the UK when a child who is a national of that country is taken into care (unless doing so would put the child at risk), and to seek permission from and notify the authorities of the other country when a child is placed abroad.

National protocol to reduce the unnecessary criminalisation of looked after children and care leavers

This protocol encourages councils to work with partner agencies to avoid the unnecessary criminalisation of children in care and care leavers through, for example, the use of restorative approaches, better understanding of the potential causes of offending and positive parenting in care.¹² The protocol covers all children in care, in all types of placement.

Non-statutory guidance:

Key lines of enquiry for all councillors

What are the characteristics of our cohort of children in care and care leavers?

Understanding the characteristics of children and young people is the first step to making sure that councils are able to act in their interests. The Children in Care team will have information on the children in the council's care, including:

- age and length of time in care
- where children are currently living
- number of children in foster care, children's homes or other settings (including residential schools, hospitals and custodial institutions)
- number of children awaiting adoption
- number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
- placement stability
- accommodation and employment information about care leavers
- education information
- foreign national children in care.

The corporate parenting panel and children's scrutiny committee should also receive information about social worker caseloads, to make sure that these are manageable and social workers are able to dedicate sufficient time to children, regardless of their needs.

Find out how this information compares to that of other councils in your statistical group, and to the national picture, and look at direction of travel to help spot trends and areas of concern.

Everyone with a local authority email address has access to LG Inform¹³, which provides a rich source of data for use by councils.

Do all of our councillors and officers know about their corporate parenting responsibilities?

Every councillor should ideally have training on their corporate parenting role when first elected. It is every councillor's responsibility to consider how new plans and policies might affect children in care, and to ask questions to ensure that those children are getting the best care, support and protection.

There are certain departments within a council that this will be particularly important for, such as education, housing, leisure and skills, but every part of the council needs to consider how its work impacts on children in care and care leavers. Look at how business plans and reports are structured – are officers proactively considering the needs of children in the council's care, or could this be improved? How are the corporate parenting principles being applied?

Consider ways of raising awareness about the corporate parenting role, for example inviting all councillors to any celebration events, or inviting the children in care council to give feedback at Full Council or relevant committee meetings.

Do our partner agencies understand their role in supporting us as corporate parents?

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, training and recreation
- the contribution made by young people to society
- social and economic wellbeing.

Relevant partners include the police, probation services, the NHS, schools and further education providers.

The participation of partners in work to promote the wellbeing of all children and young people is vital, and it's 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, while close working with the police to protect children who are at risk of going missing or being exposed to child exploitation is essential. The phrase 'it takes a village to raise a child' is pertinent here; 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.

Consider how existing partnership forums, such as local safeguarding partnerships, health and wellbeing boards and crime and disorder partnerships, are taking into account the needs of children in care in their plans, and consider whether other partners might wish to support your ambitions for children in care.

For example, local businesses might consider offering apprenticeships to children in care, or leisure facilities might be able to offer discounts or free memberships.

How are we giving children and young people the chance to express their views, wishes and feelings? How do we know those are being acted on?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 1989 state that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. Children should be involved in developing their care plans, and provided with advocates to help them do this wherever necessary. It might be useful to also consider information about how the rights of children in care are positively promoted and upheld.

Likewise, care leavers need to be integral to the development of their pathway plans. Social workers make the necessary arrangements for this to happen, and IROs should ensure children and young people are listened to, and their views taken seriously. IROs should provide feedback on how well this is happening.

What arrangements are in place for children to have access to independent advocates and how many take this up? How are concerns raised through this service reported?

Most councils have established children in care councils, comprising any looked-after children and care leavers who want to take part (though some councils hold a separate care leavers' forum, depending on what young people ask for); for councils that haven't done so, it is worth considering this or an alternative method of feedback that's appropriate for looked-after children in the area.

They should be able to set the agenda so that they can talk about what matters to them, and they should also decide how they would like to engage with the corporate parenting panel – whether that’s through joint meetings, feeding back via a mediator, or something else.

Don’t forget, however, that not all children will want to take part in group forums – there should be mechanisms set up to allow all children and young people to express their views in a way that they’re comfortable with.

Also consider how to engage with children with special educational needs and disabilities, or those who may face cultural or language barriers to engaging in feedback processes. In some cases, there may be safeguarding concerns about children with particularly complex needs being asked to take part in certain ways of giving feedback – there should be sensitive discussions between the children’s carers, advocates, the complex needs team, social workers and any other relevant professionals to find the best ways of engaging these children, who should still have the opportunity to say how they feel about their care.

Very young children may also find it harder to explain their wishes and feelings, and there will inevitably be children and young people who actively disengage from review meetings or feedback forums. Consider also those children placed out of area and at a distance. All looked-after children and care leavers have a right to be heard, and support must be put in place to give them that opportunity.

Review how feedback from children in care and care leavers is fed back to the whole council so that it can be factored into all relevant decisions – from housing and employment to education and public health.

Regardless of how feedback is collected, make sure that all children and young people (not just those who attend forums or participated in the feedback exercise) find out what has been done as a result of that feedback – show the young people that their voices are being heard, and changes are being made as a result.

How do we show children in our care that we have high aspirations for them?

Councils should be ambitious for every child in their care, working with and encouraging them to achieve their full potential, from overcoming early instability or trauma to progressing well in education, learning and training, to pursuing hobbies and developing their talents, depending on what’s most appropriate for the individual child.

It’s important to recognise that children in care are likely to have had very different experiences to their peers, therefore they might be at very different stages at school to other children of the same age. Additionally, in 2018, 55.5 per cent of children in care had a special educational need, compared to 14.6 per cent of all children.¹⁴ Providing the appropriate support can help children begin to overcome earlier trauma and disadvantage, and research shows that children in care achieve better educational outcomes than children in need who stay at home, thanks to the protective factor of that care.¹⁵ The VSH will keep the council updated with how looked-after children are progressing in school, what support is provided to those with learning difficulties, and what action is being taken to help them reach their potential.

Children and young people thrive on recognition and reward, and it’s important to make sure that children in care receive this in the same way children in the rest of the population do. Award ceremonies, money for carers to take children for a celebration of a sports win, or a congratulations card from the lead member for a good school report or a special birthday will all help to reassure children that their efforts are recognised, supported and cared about.

As young people approach leaving care, they should be getting support from their social worker and a personal adviser to consider their future options. The VSH can make sure that young people are encouraged to think broadly and ambitiously about their options, and how to get there.

Are we providing stable environments for children in our care?

Stability for children and young people is linked to improved mental health and educational attainment.¹⁶ It also helps children to develop relationships, feel more secure and wanted, and build a sense of belonging.

That said, clearly statistics alone cannot be taken on face value. A child or young person should not stay in an unsuitable placement, while a change of social worker to one with a smaller caseload may ultimately be positive for the child – provided this is well managed.

Analysis by the Office of the Children's Commissioner found that one in ten children in care had two or more placement moves in 2017/18. The analysis also found that just over one in ten children in care had experienced a mid-year school move in the previous year, while, 27 per cent experienced two or more changes in social worker over the same time period.¹⁷

It's important that the council understands the reasons for any instability experienced by children, and takes action to limit this where it is not in their best interests, while recognising that some moves may be unavoidable.

What are we doing to look after the health and wellbeing of children in our care?

The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment should include consideration of the needs of children in care and care leavers¹⁸, with an accompanying Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JHWS) in place to meet those needs and minimise inequalities. The health and wellbeing board is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the JHWS. Particular issues to look out for include:

- mental health services – children in care are four times more likely to have a mental health difficulty than children in the general population¹⁹
- sexual health and family planning services – a quarter of young women leaving care are pregnant, and nearly half become pregnant within two years²⁰
- drug and alcohol prevention services – a third of young people leaving care report problems with drugs or alcohol within a year.²¹

Do children and young people have good access to services to support with these, and other issues? How long do they need to wait for support?

It's important to remember that while many children in care will be happy and well-adjusted, some will have experienced significant trauma, others will have lived unstable home lives, and some may lack good support networks. It's the responsibility of councils, as corporate parents, to work hard to tackle those issues and support the children in their care as they work to overcome difficulties that most children in the general population might never have to deal with.

As corporate parents, councillors will want to challenge any stigma and discrimination faced by children in care and care leavers, and to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes. It is important that councillors

believe in children and young people in care and care leavers, and fight their corner.

If a child has experienced one or more placement moves, check whether health records are being passed between carers so that things like regular dental check-ups and standard vaccinations aren't being missed. Looked-after children should receive an annual health assessment (every six months for under-fives)²², but make sure these are being carried out in a child-friendly way – some children find these intrusive and feel they are unnecessary, so make sure they understand why they are taking place and that they know their right to opt out. Pass on feedback about assessments to the CCG, which carries them out, and check whether this is being acted on.

Consider also issues like access to sports facilities and music lessons or other activities outside of school, which will contribute to a child's wellbeing and sense of belonging. What happens to these if a child changes placement? Are care leavers helped to keep accessing activities to support their wellbeing? And what is the local offer for care leavers?

A significant issue for looked-after children and care leavers is having a support network. If they aren't able to rely on family, and if they've experienced multiple placement or school moves, they might not have had a chance to build up a network of their own. Look at what's being done to help them develop relationships that will support them both now and when they leave care, and see what help is available locally – are there volunteer mentors or support groups, for example? All looked-after children should be offered the chance to have an independent visitor – a volunteer to befriend and support them consistently, providing a relationship with an adult who isn't their carer or social worker.

Having stable placements and social workers will also help children to feel more secure and help them learn to develop positive relationships.

It is important to respect the diversity and individual needs of children in care and care leavers, and to make sure that those needs are responded to appropriately. This includes catering for the cultural and religious needs of children, and support for children's emotional wellbeing including, for example, issues around gender identity and sexuality.

What are we doing to ensure that our children in care are not unnecessarily criminalised?

With the growth of child criminal exploitation and county lines, it is important that as corporate parents, councils are doing all that they can to prevent children in care from being coerced into criminal activity.

Children in care who have been in the care system for more than 12 months are five times more likely to offend than other children.²³ It is important to find out the proportion of children looked after by your authority that are involved in the youth justice system, and find out how this has been changing over time. Are things improving, or is there more work to be done? Have the types of offence changed, or the profile of young people involved? What arrangements are in place to support children in care to engage with restorative activities?

Research has also found children in care living in children's homes are being criminalised at excessively high rates compared to all other groups of children, including those in other types of care.²⁴ As a result children's homes and police are having to work closely to ensure incidents are dealt with more proportionally.

The council's corporate parenting panel should monitor the proportion of those in children's homes who are involved with the youth justice system, find out what arrangements are already in place to manage incidents in children's homes, and work with and support officers to find out if improvements can be made.

More information can be found in our 'Youth justice' resource pack for councillors.

What are outcomes like for our care leavers?

As a corporate parent, it's up to you to make sure that care leavers are getting the support they need to lead successful lives.

Care leavers can face a wide variety of challenges and, depending on their individual needs, they might need the support of their personal adviser and social worker to overcome their own hurdles to progress – and they need to know that support is there as they make the transition from a looked-after child to independent living.

Each young person's pathway plan should consider their options for when they've left school, whether they want to go on to further study or straight into the world of work. Work should start on this plan well in advance of a young person leaving care.

For those aiming for university and further education, children in care should be getting support at school to help them get achieve the best results they're capable of, and the VSH will know what interventions are working best or could be expanded. It's also important to look at pathway plans to see how children are reassured about university – it's a scary prospect for most young people, so care leavers need to know how they'll manage their finances, and where they can go during the long university holidays.

For those that don't go on to university, how many are not in education, employment or training – and what is the council doing to improve that?

Are the statistics getting better or worse? Find out how care leavers factor into your authority's recruitment, skills and economic development strategies, including access to apprenticeships and work experience.

The availability of suitable housing is a key issue for care leavers, as is preparation for moving on to independent living. Care leavers should not be placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, and the type of housing that they will move into after leaving care should be included in the pathway plan. Some young people will need more support than others as they move towards independence, while all will need to know that there are fall-back options if things don't work out.

For more information on support and outcomes for care leavers, please see our 'Support for care leavers' resource pack.

How many children are we placing in out of area placements and why?

Every children's services council has a 'sufficiency duty', which states that it must take steps to secure, as far as possible, sufficient accommodation within its area to meet the needs of children that it is looking after. But there is no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the needs of individual children, and there are often very good reasons why some children are placed outside their home authority. This could be for their own safety, to break gang affiliation, to place them near other family members or to access specialist services.

If your council is placing a higher proportion of children out of area than its statistical neighbours, or than it was two years ago, for example, it is important to ask why. Is this because the children need very specialist placements that can only be found elsewhere, or because there are not enough placements locally? If the latter, what is being done to improve this?

If children are moved out of area, this may mean moving them away from their school, their friends and family, and the area they're familiar with – it's important that if that happens, it's for the right reasons and that appropriate support is provided to help the young person manage that transition.

How are we planning for the future and commissioning services?

If a council has too many children and young people being placed out of area inappropriately or in accommodation that doesn't suit their needs, it will need to revisit its sufficiency strategy and revise plans and commissioning to address this. The council will need a strong understanding of what its needs are now and into the future, which it can identify by looking at the data and feedback available, and analysing local and national trends. Councils can then use this information to better manage the local market, whether through recruiting and training more foster carers; evaluating the use of in-house and external provision; and considering the balance of children's home places or foster care with high levels of support for children with complex needs.

Consider also the way in which services for looked-after children are commissioned; are services better commissioned at a local (how local?) or regional level? Would children and young people's outcomes be improved if resources were pooled with partners for specific outcomes, such as early intervention or wellbeing? Are young people involved at any point in commissioning processes, to make sure that services meet their needs?

If in-house provision is an issue, feedback from foster carers – both those that are still working for your authority, and those that have either stopped fostering or moved to an independent fostering agency (IFA) – will be important to find out whether things need to be improved to increase the number of in-house carers.

How well do we support our foster carers?

It's vital that foster carers feel well supported so that they feel able to provide the best possible care to children and young people, and to encourage them to foster for as long as they are able.

The Fostering Network's State of the Nation Report 2019 identified the following three issues that foster carers would choose to change to improve their ability to care for children:

- recognised and valued as experts who best know the children they care for
- empowered to make day to day decisions for the child they are caring for
- better financial support.

These issues highlight the importance of making sure that foster carers are listened to and have access to the right kind of support when they need it. For example, how are foster carers involved in care plan reviews? Do all in-house carers have up-to-date training plans? Is there good support available if there's a problem in the middle of the night? How much freedom are carers given to make decisions for their foster children?

It's important to remember that a foster carers' role is to provide a loving, caring home for a child, rather than to be a council employee; being treated as professionals is about their being valued, respected members of the team whose knowledge and understanding of the child is given appropriate weight in all decisions.

It's also essential that wherever possible, foster carers are kept fully informed about children coming into and leaving their care, and up-to-date with planned changes. This allows them to provide the right support and ease transitions for their foster children.

Financial support can be an issue for any carer, but in particular there may be concerns around carers with young people in staying put arrangements. While they still receive fees and allowances, these are lower than for fostering placements, which can be problematic where fostering is a major source of income for the family, and may make it difficult for families to continue supporting a young person.

Your best source of information about whether your foster carers feel adequately supported is from foster carers themselves; feedback should be considered by the corporate parenting panel, who can then make recommendations for improvements.

Local case studies

Hampshire County Council

Being a good corporate parent means getting involved, asking questions and making sure the voices of children and young people are being heard.

When the children's residential service was under review in Hampshire, the Lead Member for Children's Services took the opportunity to find out exactly what children wanted and needed, and to make sure their voices were at the centre of any new proposals. This included visiting existing homes – owned both by the council and other sectors – to find out about the experiences of the children living there, and to see what they thought made a 'homely environment'.

At the same time, work was underway to implement the evidence-based Pillars of Parenting model, an approach to move from 'looking after' children to 'caring for' them, and providing strong support for staff including access to an educational psychologist. Children were involved in board meetings as the new care model was put in place, ensuring that they could flag up any issues with the model and let officers and councillors know how they felt about the changes.

In one small children's home using the Pillars of Parenting model, stability for the children living there was found to be better, involvement in crime was reduced, and engagement in education was good. The improved outcomes for children as a result of the new care model and the small, well-located home provided a good evidence-base to support what young people were saying.

The Lead Member took those views and the evidence directly back to his fellow elected members, emphasising the benefits the council could realise – both in terms of outcomes for children in care, and financially thanks to those long-term outcomes – by selling old, larger children's homes with poor community links to support new homes more suited to caring for children. As a result, he was able to successfully bid for considerable investment from the council to provide six new homes.

The Lead Member has continued to champion children's views as the process has continued, attending workshops where children contributed to the design of the new homes, and regularly visiting the homes during the build process to make sure they met the varied needs of the children he'd been speaking to. He has also worked with officers on keeping his fellow corporate parents engaged, with many visiting children's homes, and some even taking their dogs along to meet the children – a great ice breaker.

For more information, please contact:
cathi.hadley@hants.gov.uk

Gloucestershire County Council

Gloucestershire aims to put the voice of children and young people at the heart of its approach to corporate parenting, with children in care, young people with experience of children's services and corporate parents working together on everything from strategic planning and service delivery to training and consultation.

One of the key ways that Gloucestershire is working to incorporate the voice of children and young people is through their Ambassadors for Vulnerable Children and Young People, which was highlighted as a strength in an otherwise difficult Ofsted inspection for the authority. These young people, aged 16-25, all have experience of children's social care – whether through being in care, experiencing early help, or receiving support for a disability, for example – and play a central role in developing the council's services. They also act as a link between children and young people and the rest of the council, making sure those voices are heard.

As Participation Manager Della Keith highlights, "Ambassadors help us to keep our focus on, and communicate effectively with, children and young people; they challenge us, work with us, and often identify areas of our work that might be neglected. Most importantly, they've changed our attitudes, understanding and awareness of the issues that are important to children and young people".

Ambassadors are recruited two to three times a year, with 15 currently in post, and are paid for their time and expenses whenever they attend meetings or events. They attend the Children in Care Council so that they can feed back to the Corporate Parenting Group, which they are co-opted onto, and have led consultation with looked-after children to help improve everything from the activities children do with their social workers, to issues around contact with family; their own experiences make them ideally placed to

help communicate the needs and wants of children back to corporate parents.

They have also been part of task groups to improve the quality of care plans, improve questions on fostering panels, and to secure a pilot of personal budgets for children in care who need mental health support. The early involvement of young people in the latter was instrumental in gaining the support of NHS England for the pilot, highlighting the way in which the council places the voice of young people at the heart of their work for looked-after children.

The council has involved the ambassadors in the design of information for young people, which has been highly successful, for example leading to more young people attending fostering panels as they now understand better what goes on, and improving the use of the 'Mind of my Own' app so that children in care can get help with things they are worried about more easily.

All councillors are invited to receive training from the ambassadors about the role of members as corporate parents, and to give them an increased awareness of children's lived experience of their journey into and through care. The Ambassadors have also helped the Children in Care Council to host meetings with councillors, which have had excellent feedback from the children, who feel listened to, and the councillors, whose understanding of being a child in care has improved significantly.

For more information, please contact:
della.keith@gloucestershire.gov.uk

London Borough of Lambeth

Any good parent will know that the needs of their children always come first – and Lambeth Council is committed to putting that philosophy into practice with all the children for whom it is a corporate parent.

Where children are placed in residential care, the council works hard to develop and maintain strong partnerships with those providers to make sure that the children's individual needs and wants are properly taken care of.

In the case of 14-year-old Amy, this has meant support to feel stable in her children's home, and honouring her wish to stay in that home with those she describes as 'family', rather than transferring into foster care. The council and the children's home have worked together to find ways to help her develop her confidence and self-esteem, including providing piano lessons to nurture her passion for music.

Amy is now considering whether she wants to move on to foster care as she gets older, so both the children's home and the council are starting to plan with her. Most importantly, they are working at a pace that suits her, rather than trying to rush her, making sure that her voice is at the forefront of any decision – as any parent knows, children and young people need support and encouragement to work through big decisions, to make sure that they can come to the right decision long-term.

The relationship between the council and the provider is a vital one – much like the relationship between two parents. Trust, mutual respect and good communication mean that both parties can concentrate on working towards the same outcome – a successful and positive care experience for all children being looked-after.

For more information, please contact:
communications@lambeth.gov.uk

Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council

When a young person presents as homeless to a local authority, and they have not been in care before their 16th birthday, the authority's responsibilities in law are very limited, requiring only advice and assistance. In Trafford, the Corporate Parenting Board and officers felt that, despite not being corporate parents in such cases in legislative terms, they still had a responsibility to these vulnerable young people, who were homeless and in need of trusted professional support; doing the bare minimum was not good enough. They agreed to provide these young people with a full leaving care service, with support from a personal adviser, a pathway plan, safe and appropriate accommodation, support to live independently and help to engage in education, employment and training. The leaving care grant could also be awarded in certain circumstances. Ofsted was very supportive of the approach, which is an example of how councillors and officers can and do still step in to help young people – even where they don't have to, and where it isn't easy, just as other good parents would.

For more information, please contact:
aftercare@trafford.gov.uk

Key resources and further reading

Centre for Public Scrutiny, Safeguarding children: A practical guide for overview and scrutiny councillors, June 2016

Department for Education, Children Act 1989 statutory guidance: Care planning, placement and case review, March 2010 (updated July 2015)

Department for Education, Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, January 2014

Department for Education, Promoting the education of looked after children and previously looked after children: Statutory guidance for local authorities, February 2018

Department of Education, Promoting the health and wellbeing of looked after children, March 2015

Department for Education, Applying corporate parenting principles to looked after children and care leavers, February 2018

Department for Education, Guide to the children's homes regulations including the quality standards, April 2015

Department of Education, Home Office, Ministry of Justice, National protocol on reducing the criminalisation of looked after children and care leavers, November 2018

Department for Education, Working with foreign authorities: Child protection cases and care orders, July 2014

Department for Education, Special Guardianship Guidance, January 2017

Fostering Network, Staying Put: Guidance for children and young people services, fostering services and leaving care services, September 2017

HM Government, Keep On Caring: Supporting young people from care to Independence, July 2016

Local Government Association, Youth justice resource pack, April 2018
www.local.gov.uk/youth-justice-resource-pack

TACT, Language that cares, March 2019
www.tactcare.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/03/TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf

Glossary of useful terms

Advocacy	An advocate's role is to make sure that the child's views and experiences are considered when decisions are made about their future. Every child has the right to be supported by an advocate and councils must have a system in place to provide written, age appropriate information to each looked-after child about advocates and how to request one.
Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)	Services that work with children and young people experiencing emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties.
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.
Clinical commissioning group (CCG)	These commission most hospital and community NHS services in their area, including mental health and learning disability services.
Child sexual exploitation (CSE)	Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.
County lines	A term used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operation to smaller towns and exploiting children and young people to sell drugs.
Children's home	A residential facility where groups of children are cared for by qualified workers.
Former relevant child	A care leaver aged 18-21 who was a relevant child or was in care until the age of 18. Young people who are still getting help with education or training remain 'former relevant' until their training has finished.

Foster care	Foster care is a way for children to be cared for within a family setting when their own family is unable to care for them. It is considered temporary in that there is no legal split from the family (as with adoption), but can be long term where this is in the best interests of the child.
Independent fostering agency (IFA)	IFAs provide fostering services to local authorities. They recruit, train and support their own foster carers who the council can then place a child with on payment of a fee. IFAs can be charities, not-for-profit or profit-making.
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 the child.
Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)	JSNAs identifies the current and future health needs of the local population to inform and guide commissioning of health, wellbeing and social care services within local authority areas.
Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JHWS)	The JHWS outlines how local partners will work to improve health in the local population and reduce health inequalities.
Kinship care	Kinship care is where a child is looked-after by a relative or friend. This can be an informal arrangement, through a Special Guardianship Order, or through friends and family foster care, where the local authority still has legal responsibility for the child.
Modern slavery	Modern slavery encompasses slavery, servitude, and forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking. A person is trafficked if they are brought to (or moved around) a country by others who threaten, frighten, hurt and force them to do work or other things they don't want to do.
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.
Private arrangement	An informal arrangement where a child or young person is looked-after by a close relative such as grand-parents, aunts or uncles.
Private fostering	An informal arrangement where a child or young person is looked-after by someone who is not their parent or close relative. The local authority should be informed of the arrangement, but is not responsible for the child and is therefore not the corporate parent.

Secure children's home	Secure children's homes offer specialist care and intensive support in a secure setting to young people sentenced by the courts and to young people detained for their own welfare (for example, where children are at risk of child sexual exploitation, and likely to place themselves in risky situations). These are referred to as youth justice beds, and welfare beds respectively.
Special guardianship	Special guardianship means that a child lives with carers who have parental responsibility for them until they turn 18, but legal ties with the parents are not cut as with adoption. The child is no longer the responsibility of the local authority.
Staying Put	An arrangement whereby a looked-after child can stay with their foster carer after the age of 18, as long as both the young person and the foster parent is happy with this arrangement, and it is in the young person's best interests. The council has a duty to support the arrangement up to young person's 21st birthday.
Sufficiency duty	The duty for a council to take steps that secure, as far as possible, sufficient accommodation within its area to meet the needs of children that it is looking after.
Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)	The definition of an unaccompanied asylum seeking child is set out in the Immigration Rules as someone who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is under 18 years of age when the claim is submitted; • is claiming in their own right; and • is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so.
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 and previously looked-after children. 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.



Local Government Association

18 Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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