

# ssia

Social Services Improvement Agency  
Asiantaeth Gwella'r Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol

## Corporate Parenting Workbook

June 2016



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The Welsh Local Government Association has worked with the Social Services Improvement Agency to produce three workbooks for Councillors. This one is about Corporate Parenting, and the others are on Child Sexual Exploitation and Safeguarding Adults. These three topics emerged as those on which Councillors would find briefings most helpful.

Individual Councillors will pay most attention to the Workbooks that relate closely to their areas of responsibility or special interest. But there are connections between them, and common threads that run through all three. Perhaps the most vital of these are the need for everyone in the complex systems that we operate to have a clear understanding of their own responsibilities and those of others, and recognising the vital importance of respecting every individual we serve as a citizen with unique needs, strengths and aspirations.

This workbook does not aim to be a textbook on the law and practice concerning Looked After Children and Young People. It simply provides useful pointers as to how Councillors themselves can fulfil their duties to them. It is designed to be brief and to-the-point.

In particular, we suggest lines of enquiry which will throw helpful light on how well your Council is doing by these children and young people, and steps you can take to make a difference.

Two cautionary notes are needed. First, that there will often not be clear definitive answers to the questions we suggest. Rather, these enquiries will prompt reflection, increase understanding, and point to issues to pursue. Secondly, that you and your officers will not have the capacity to pursue all these possible lines of enquiry and action at once. You will need to prioritise and programme on the basis of the best available intelligence.

We are very grateful to Voices from Care Cymru, to two groups of young “experts by experience” (young people who had been or were in the care of Welsh Councils), and to Councillors from two Authorities, who helped us to develop this Workbook. And also to the young people, Councillors, and senior Childrens’ Services managers who kindly commented on a draft.

Lastly, we have been keen that the voices of young people with personal experience of care should be heard in these pages. We hope it reflects in large measure what they have said to us, and that they will feel we have “got it right”. You will find a scattering of direct quotes from them (distinctively in green bubbles). They are always insightful, often courageous, and sometimes bleak. As such, they reflect the varied and sometimes troubled experience of our children. They certainly liven up the text!

Just a word on terminology. The whole workbook is about Looked After Children and Young People and Care Leavers. But to use that expression every time would make it very long-winded. So we use “our children” from now on, as short-hand for that. It has the merit of being much more concise, but also we hope, conveying the right sense of relationship and responsibility.

## Chapter 2

### The Council's Care for Children

The law and guidance about Looked After Children is substantial and complex. These are the children and young people for whom your Council becomes responsible when it is not possible or in their best interests for them to be with their family. They may be in the Council's care by agreement with their parents or by order of a court.

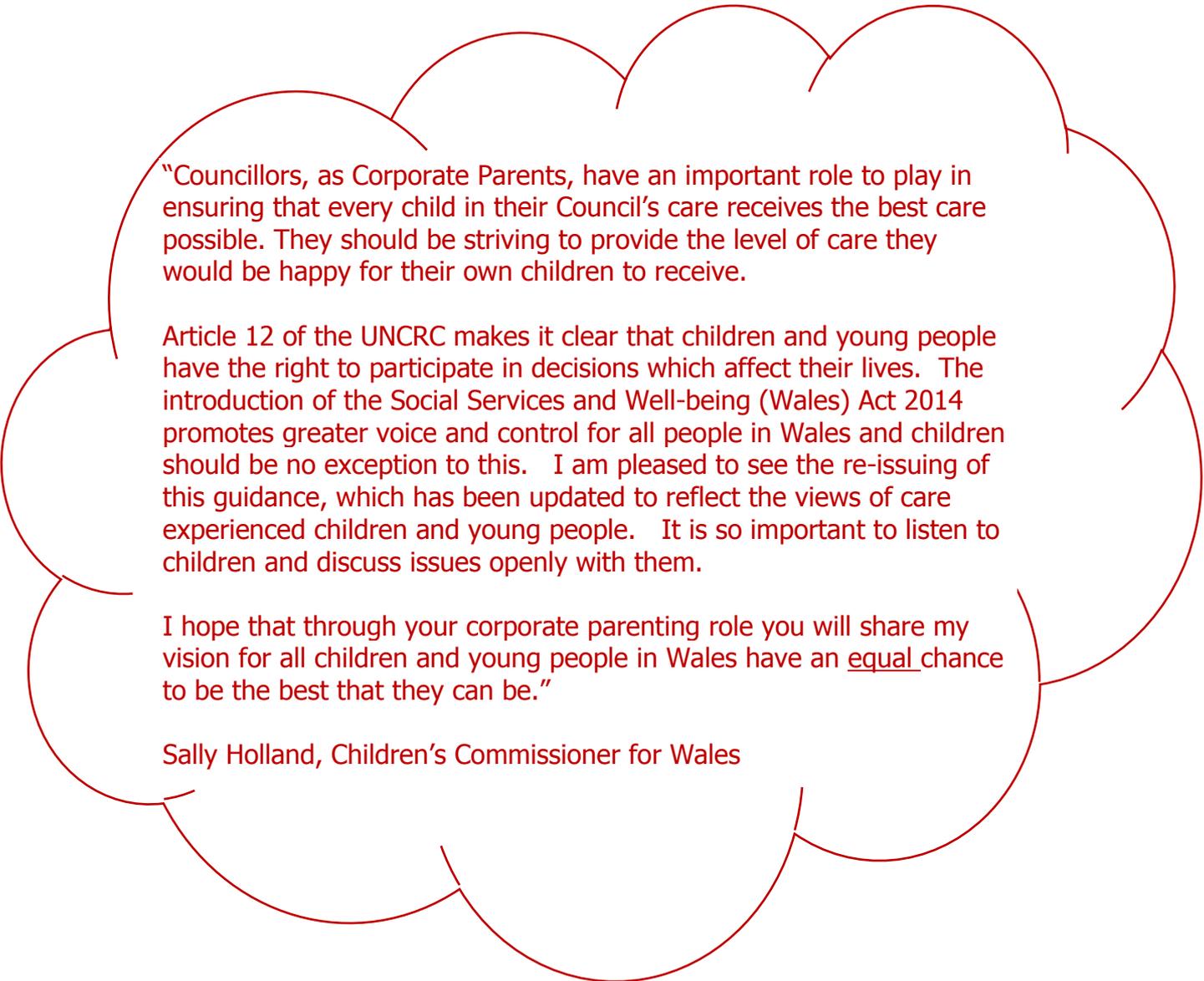
Part 6 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 ("the Act") is the core legislation, and Section 78 states the duty of your Council to safeguard and promote the welfare of each child it looks after, and every care leaver.

What does "welfare" mean in the "duty to safeguard and promote the child's well-being"? It encompasses the Act's universal well-being outcomes.....

- Physical and mental health and emotional well-being
- Protection from abuse and neglect
- Education, training and recreation
- Family and personal relationships
- Involvement in the local community
- Securing rights and entitlements
- Social and economic well-being, including not living in poverty
- Living in suitable accommodation

..... and adds, in respect of children, "physical, intellectual, emotional, social and behavioural development".

What are a Councillor's responsibility to these children, in practical terms, and what does "corporate parenting" mean? Frank Dobson introduced the term, when Secretary of State in the Westminster Government, in 1998, in a letter to all Councils. He said "all Councillors should take an informed interest in how the Council supports this very vulnerable group". The Improvement and Development Agency has said "Corporate Parenting places collective responsibility on local authorities to achieve good parenting for all children in their care. It requires ownership and leadership at a senior level, and this includes all elected members." Alun Michael commended it in Wales the following year, launching the "Children First" initiative.



"Councillors, as Corporate Parents, have an important role to play in ensuring that every child in their Council's care receives the best care possible. They should be striving to provide the level of care they would be happy for their own children to receive.

Article 12 of the UNCRC makes it clear that children and young people have the right to participate in decisions which affect their lives. The introduction of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 promotes greater voice and control for all people in Wales and children should be no exception to this. I am pleased to see the re-issuing of this guidance, which has been updated to reflect the views of care experienced children and young people. It is so important to listen to children and discuss issues openly with them.

I hope that through your corporate parenting role you will share my vision for all children and young people in Wales have an equal chance to be the best that they can be."

Sally Holland, Children's Commissioner for Wales

All this of course, is in the context of our shared commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## Chapter 3

### The Council as a Good Parent

So what do these heavy responsibilities mean in practical terms?

What does a good parent do?

- feeds, shelters, clothes, cuddles, nurtures
- senses and adjusts to each child's unique nature
- fosters healthy growth and development, friendships, and confidence in relationships
- protects, sets boundaries, and mends when things go wrong
- conveys positive values and principles for living
- ensures a good education and opportunities to develop skills, talents and interests, encouraging taking measured risks
- supports the about-to-be young adult into taking growing responsibilities and enjoying growing freedoms.

***Question to ask. How many children are in your Council's care or supported as care leavers? There will be hundreds in most Councils.***

How can you possibly play a part in that for all those children? Plainly, as a Councillor, you cannot actually do those things for the children in your Council's care, nor would it be right for you to do so. So, the Council must task and equip people to do those things on its behalf. Ensuring ensure that they are done, and done well enough.

Who are the key people in achieving good parenting for children in care?

- social workers
- foster carers
- residential workers
- teachers
- nurses
- managers
- independent reviewing officers (IROs).

Inevitably, responsibilities for each child are spread over a number of people. So there is potential for breakdowns in communications, things falling between stools. It happens in the best of families, and it must be a greater risk here. And it is why planned, coordinated and effective teamwork is so vital, and checks and balances.

The Councillor's key contribution to this effective corporate parenting is

- to make sure all those parental responsibilities are being fulfilled, and well enough
- to make sure you know how well the Council's children in care are doing
- to identify where things need to improve and to make a difference for good.

The next three sections will look at each of those three key duties. We have drawn on experience where Councillors are playing a key role and making a real difference.

## Chapter 4

How to make sure all the corporate parenting responsibilities are being fulfilled, and well enough?

The following section will look at how our children are actually doing, ie the outcomes for them. This is mainly about processes. Is the Council doing the right things with and for our children?

Swansea Council asked its Fe FI Forum of looked after children what they wanted from their corporate parents.

They said:-

- ♥ keep them safe
- ♥ help when they are ill (consider our health)
- ♥ provide pocket money and clothing allowance (clothes, trips, Christmas)
- ♥ pay for school trips
- ♥ help and care
- ♥ celebrate birthdays (presents for big birthdays at 16 and 18)
- ♥ support them (talk to teachers to help sort things out if finding school difficult)
- ♥ listen and decide things together
- ♥ support and encourage (sit down and talk about what they want to do, eg education, placements, but not push them into things)
- ♥ no suits (dress down). They did not want to be different or picked out. And they did not want to have to give everyone their whole story.

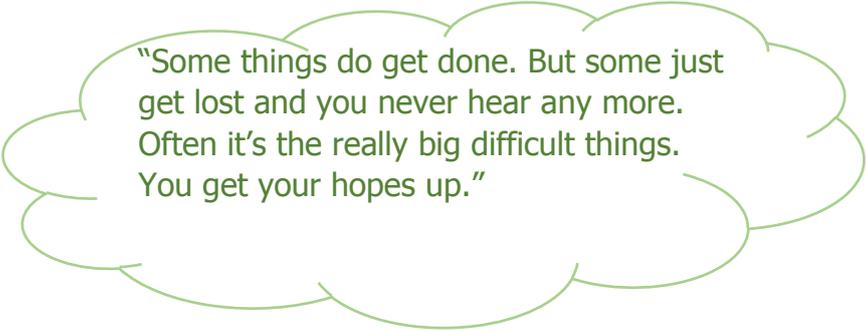
### Questions to ask. Does your Council.....?

- Ensure that leadership and accountabilities for looked after children, young people and care-leavers are clear, understood and effective, and that reporting lines are also clear.

Some of the key accountable people will be

- a Cabinet Member with lead responsibility
- a member of the Corporate Management Team with key responsibility
- chairs of the relevant Scrutiny Committee and Corporate Parenting Group
- an operational head of service
- case-holding social workers
- direct carers, either foster-carers or residential key workers
- lead clinicians for the health of our children

- lead teachers for our children in schools.
- Make sure that services, performance and outcomes are regularly and robustly scrutinised, and that the right checks and balances are in place
- Appropriately brief all elected members about their corporate parenting responsibilities, and support them in carrying them out. **Some Councils provide mandatory briefing sessions for all Councillors shortly after elections**
- Engage actively with children and families who are still together but where the child might not be safe or achieving acceptable well-being and development. It is by making sure that their needs and circumstances are really understood that the right plans can be made to help them. If this is done, then the right children will come into care, and at the right time, and with a positive plan
- Employ and engage the right people to carry out these parental responsibilities on their behalf:
  - Does every one of our children have a suitably qualified social worker with a manageable caseload?
  - How do turnover rates for social workers compare with other similar Councils?
  - **What do our young people say about their access to their social workers?**
  - One of the most frequent complaints from looked after children is that they have too many changes of social worker and they don't see enough of them.
- Ensure that staff and foster-carers feel well-supported, trained and equipped for their work with our children. What do they themselves say about this?
- Plan actively and positively for every individual child. Are reviews timely (there are statutorily defined maximum intervals between reviews)? What do IROs say about the effectiveness of planning? **Do our children feel involved and listened to, and that promised action are delivered?**
- Have effective links with your Regional Adoption Service so that children with an adoption plan are placed in a timely way and supported where they need to be
- Make sure that all our children are routinely offered the chance to talk in their preferred language with their social worker and other professionals. And also that they can readily use their language of first choice in school, and in their placement
- Have an up-to-date and aspirational Personal Education Plan in place for every school-age looked after child? Are they regularly reviewed to make sure they reflect the child's wishes and needs, and are they actively pursued?
- Make sure that childrens' health assessments and dental checks are carried out on time
- Promote healthy lifestyles through foster-carers and residential workers, and to young people themselves
- Delegate responsibility clearly to foster carers and residential workers so that decisions about childrens' lives can be made as close to the child as possible, and quickly. **Looked after children often express frustration about decisions about their lives (things like staying over with friends) being referred up to people they don't know and who don't know them.**



"Some things do get done. But some just get lost and you never hear any more. Often it's the really big difficult things. You get your hopes up."

- Encourage young people approaching 18 years of age to consider opportunities open to them under the new "When I'm Ready" arrangements and support foster-carers to offer those opportunities.

In line with When I'm Ready, the Council must facilitate, including with financial support, our young people to go on living with them beyond the "leaving care age" of 18 years. This is where both the young person and the foster carer want this, and where it is "not inconsistent with" the young person's well-being.

### Questions to ask. Has your Council.....?

- Encouraged and supported a representative group of our children, which
  - meets regularly and often enough to be effective
  - has had training opportunities, so that they can speak out clearly and persuasively
  - has direct contact with decision-makers and those with influence over their lives
  - receives feedback on the requests and suggestions that they make
  - feels that it is listened to, and "makes a difference"

Looking further afield at examples of good practice, *A National Voice*, which is the national body of looked after children and young people in England, produced "10 top tips" for corporate parents, which included the following:

- Get involved with important events for young people such as awards ceremonies and events which celebrate and recognise achievement
- only attend our meetings when invited (this is our meeting, and we should decide who is required)
- if agreed with young people, attend their outings, events and residentials, and dress down (don't always be the formal one)
- keep your young people informed of decisions being made as a result of their requests (if the decisions don't go in their favour, make sure you fully explain why, don't just give them a refusal)
- if you can't attend a meeting to give feedback in person, consider using other methods (do you have time for a Skype call or a phone meeting, or could you send a DVD with a recorded message?)
- consider holding a session with your young people dedicated to getting to know each other (they can ask you questions about yourself and your role, and you can find out

more about them

- try ice-breaker exercises (they do work!)
- arrange for your young people to deliver some tips or training to your Corporate Parenting Group on how to relate to young people (even better, let some young people shadow you for a day and vice versa)
- when making any decisions, always ask yourself "would this be good enough for my child?"

- Involved our children in service development and the recruitment and selection of key staff
- Got a group of Councillors who take a special responsibility for Corporate Parenting, with a named lead Councillor
- Made any plans to raise the attainment of looked after children and young people
- Made sure that every school addresses the needs of our children who are its pupils, and encouraged Councillors to champion them in their Governor roles
- Made sure that the NHS locally has a senior lead person or champion for looked after children, and that there is a designated doctor and nurse taking responsibility for their health status
- Thought hard about whether it has the right range and quality of placements available to meet the needs of our children, and what can be done to better meet needs.



"I wish there could be more foster carers. So that young people in care could be better matched to foster carers."

- Taken active steps to ensure that the diversity of our childrens' culture, race, religion, and sexuality will be respected, encouraged and valued
- Looked carefully at the CSSIW (or Ofsted if in England) evaluation of any out-authority placement providers, and ensured that effective monthly oversight visits are made to its own residential homes. How does the Council keep in touch with children and young people in more distant placements, keep an eye on their welfare, keep them in touch with family and friends?

- Effectively supported its foster-carers by
  - ensuring good communication with representative groups
  - providing the training and development experiences they need
  - providing regular contact with named social workers to support, advise and supervise
  - offering an out-of-hours response
  - linking them to specialist help where the need arises
  - responding carefully to any complaints from or about them.
  - Understanding what foster carers themselves say about the support they receive?
- Made sure that our children have access to independent advocacy and Independent Visitors, where the law requires

Councils must make an Independent Visitor available where EITHER a child has not lived with a parent or someone with parental responsibility during the preceding 12 months OR there is infrequent or no contact between a child and his parents.

Under S.178 of the Act, Councils have a duty to make arrangements for the provision of assistance and advocacy for our children. They must provide independent advocacy, inform our children about it, and help them to access it.

- Offered enough support to young people as they leave care
  - information and advice, and help to get into education, training or work, and into secure housing
  - **what do the young people themselves say about this?**

## Chapter 5

### How can you know how well our children are really doing?

What follows is a list of indications that will give you a good idea. Most of this information should be available to you. It will come from two principal lines of enquiry.

One is data performance and management information. The other is talking to key people see page 6 but as we've said most importantly is what the young people themselves tell you.

So how are they doing in all of the following areas:

#### **Educationally**

- How many are excluded from school and why
- How many are missing out through non-attendance
- How many moves of school are children experiencing, and could any of them be avoided
- How do their test and exam results compare with looked after children and young people in other similar authorities
- How many are going on into further or higher education or training
- Are they able to join in after-school activities
- Are they supported to develop interests and talents
- **What do the children themselves say about their aspirations, the help they get, and their achievements**

#### **Health-wise**

- Do they have ready access to advice about healthy life-styles
- Are they receiving regular dental checks, and interventions where necessary
- What access do they have to services if they need help because of substance misuse, sexual health concerns, or pregnancy
- How long do they have to wait if they need help from mental health services
- **Do the children themselves have worries about their health, and do they feel they are getting the advice and support they need?**

#### **Stability and security**

- What proportion of children are in stable placements (the national measure is that they have been there more than two years), and compared with those in other similar authorities
- What proportion of children are not settled (national measure is more than three moves in the last year), and compared with those in other similar authorities
- Is there more that could be done to achieve greater stability for any of these children



"Don't chuck kids from place to place. Not letting them settle in the right place causes disaster."

- Are introductions to new placements carefully made, and childrens' views listened to

"My life in foster care is only recent. There's been ups and downs but it will always work out with a bit of love."

- If children have to move home, what efforts are made to keep children at the same school
- How are children kept in touch with important people in their lives
- Is the possibility of family and kinship placements thoroughly explored, and are they supported where made
- Where adoption is the right plan, is that identified urgently and active plans made and carried through including for post adoption support
- How many children are waiting too long for permanent placement, and what can be done about that. Is it because suitable foster or adoptive placements are not available?
- **What do the children themselves have to say about where they live, how happy they are, and how their needs are met? Do they feel involved and listened to and do they see that any promised action is delivered?**

## Leaving care

- How good are we at keeping in touch?
  - The national measure is what proportion are still in touch after three years and with this information you can compare your Council with other similar authorities

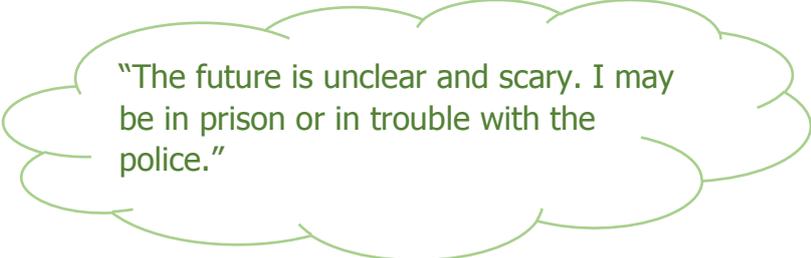
"Always someone to talk to. A form of security. You can get a cup of tea.... And some nagging."

*Quote from a young person using a leaving care support service.*

"Drugs have destroyed my life and my relationships with my family, but they have stuck by me and shown me faith."

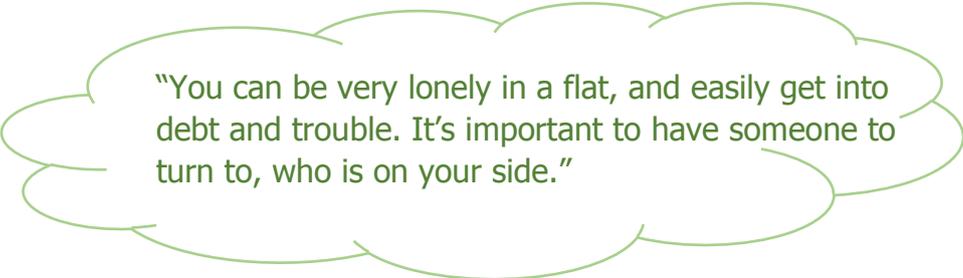
*Quote from a young person using a leaving care support service.*

- How many drop out of all education, employment and training by the time they reach 19?
  - this is another national measure, so that you can compare how well your Council does.



"The future is unclear and scary. I may be in prison or in trouble with the police."

- How have the "when I'm ready" arrangements worked for our children?
  - how many have taken up the opportunity?
  - is there any evidence of young people or carers who might have liked to, but for some reason could not?



"You can be very lonely in a flat, and easily get into debt and trouble. It's important to have someone to turn to, who is on your side."

- How are children with disabilities supported through transition to adult services
- **What do the young people themselves have to say about how they are supported at this vital stage**
  - do they get ready access to secure housing, employment opportunities, further and higher education or training, continuing support

### **How safe are our children and how do they feel?**

- How many go missing from home
- Are urgent steps taken to make them safe, and, on their return, to understand why they went missing, what risks they ran, and how to prevent it happening again
- Are all adults who work with our children carefully screened before appointment, and is their practice supervised
- Are all allegations of possible abuse thoroughly investigated, and is appropriate action taken
- Are all adults with responsibilities for our children alert to the risks of Child Sexual Exploitation, will they recognise the tell-tale warning signs, and are agencies ready to intervene protectively on a multi-agency basis
- **How safe do our children themselves feel, and do they think more could be done to keep them safe?**

## Chapter 6

How can you identify where things need to improve and make a difference for good?

6.1. You can make sure there is a dedicated group of Councillors who focus specially on these corporate parenting responsibilities. It might be called a Panel, or a Scrutiny sub-committee.

Whatever it is called, it should

- meet regularly and often enough to carry out the three central functions we identify here effectively
- bring all those who contribute to Corporate Parenting together (P.?) and draw on their experience and wisdom
- talk with and listen to groups of our children, who are encouraged and helped to speak out - **theirs are the most important voices**

Advice and guidance for Councillors about “what contact I should have” with our children.

“You can be an effective corporate parent without having to know individual looked after children and care leavers personally – personal contact on an individual basis is not generally appropriate, although children and young people, as any local resident, can choose to contact or visit their local Councillors.”

It is vital always to avoid compromising either yourself or a child by meeting in circumstances which could be misinterpreted. It will usually help to have a responsible and trusted adult along to facilitate any meeting.

- interrogate all relevant performance and management information
- where possible, compare the Council’s performance with other similar authorities, and look at trends over time
- identify where things are not good enough, and ask for remedial action from officers, partner agencies, or the Council itself
- track that the action is taken and is effective, and escalate if not
- focus special attention on the most vulnerable children and young people, and seek to ensure their safety and well-being

Some of the most vulnerable children in care, are or have

- disabilities
- communication difficulties
- been in trouble with the police or courts
- been in secure accommodation or custody
- mental health issues
- gone missing from home
- at risk of sexual exploitation
- truanted or been excluded from school
- made frequent moves of home or school
- waited for a permanent family placement
- been subject to a safeguarding enquiry
- from a minority background
- been unaccompanied asylum-seekers.

- receive regular reports on complaints made by our children, and ensure that lessons are learned from them, and any appropriate remedial action is taken
- speak up and advocate for our children in private and in public.

6.2. Ensure that the Council is wielding its corporate influence powerfully in the interests of our children. Is it making a difference for good?

- Devoting appropriate resources
- Insisting that partner agencies are prioritising our children (health, schools, leisure and fitness facilities, libraries, etc)
- Celebrating success and achievement by our children (awards, events, etc)
- "Talking them up" publicly:- a really important point!  
**Many of our children say that everyone assumes they're in care because they've been naughty.**
- Linking them to mentors who can inspire and encourage high aspirations
- Encouraging Councillors to look to the interests of our children in their school governor roles.
- Using all its capacity to offer work experience, training and job opportunities to looked after young people and care-leavers - after all, the Council is their "family firm".