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**Corporate Parenting Strategy**

**for children in care**

**2014 - 2016**

**Forward**

Children and young people, who are looked after by their local authority, rather than their parents, are amongst the most vulnerable groups in our society. They are also some of the most engaging and resilient children who have helped us in develop a corporate parenting strategy that meets their needs and assists them in having healthy and fulfilling lives. It is our responsibility to keep them safe, make sure their experiences in care are positive, and improve their on-going life chances. We must approach this parenting role with as much passion and commitment as any family would and ensure that our looked after children have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

This strategy describes how we will develop our current arrangements to improve the lives of the children in our care. The intention is to bring together the range of activity across the council and children’s partnership at all stages of the care journey. Elected members will play a large part in holding officers and partners to account as well as being proactive in the corporate parenting role themselves.

As Chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel I am proud to endorse this strategy and to drive forward the development of services for children in care.

**Shaun Pender**

**Chair of Corporate Parenting Panel**

**Message from Stoke-on-Trent’s children in care**

**Our Corporate Family**

You are our second, but in most cases our first set of parents and we need you to be able to give us backup, support and protection.

There are many reasons why we need you:

* We need you to continue to do the things you already do to help, listen to us about the things we want you to get better at and stop doing the things that make our lives more difficult.
* We want to have a social worker who stays with us and doesn’t keep changing. We want to live with someone who treats us like one of their own family and we don’t want to have to keep moving.
* We need you to look after us, protect us, keep us safe and always be there for us. We need you to listen to what we say and never judge us. We need you to make us feel like we are your own children and that we belong. We want to be able to trust you and know that we can come to you whenever we need to.
* We need to know you are there for us when we need you the most. It is important that we can always be honest with you, share our thoughts and our worries with you and know that you will be honest back.
* We want to have a good relationship with you as that’s dead important. We want you to treat us like our age and not talk down to us. You shouldn’t judge us or anyone around us.
* Our belongings are really important to us and you need to respect this – you need to respect who we are and where we’ve come from. You need to respect our relationships with our families. You need to be patient if sometimes we are having a bad day and we get upset. You need to let us calm down in our own way. You must respect where we’ve come from.
* Sometime we may struggle at school but you should believe in us, believe we can achieve great things if we put our mind to it. You need to help us with our homework, encourage us to do well and help us to get extra support if we need it. You need to help us to take the right path and to fit in.

We like the fact that you have signed up to The Pledge which we as the young people in care and care leavers in this city helped to put together. It is important to us all that the promises you made in that document are kept.

And do you know why we need you to do all these things ……..because that’s what parents do.

**Introduction**

Corporate Parenting is the term used to refer to the responsibility of the council, to provide the best possible care and protection for children and young people who are 'looked after'. At the core of this responsibility is the moral duty to provide the kind of support that any good parents would provide their own children. This includes enhancing the quality of life of looked after children as well as simply keeping them safe'

(House of Commons Children, Schools and Family Committee March 2009).

There are a wide range of reasons why children and young people cannot be cared for by their birth families and come into our care. In these instances the local authority takes responsibility for them and ensures that their needs are met and their outcomes are good.

Corporate Parenting is about how the local authority and its partners, such as the health service and housing, act as responsible parents to children and young people living under their care. It is about how everyone including councillors, council officers, teachers, GP’s, contractors etc. all recognise they are corporate parents and identify what they can do to help us be the best corporate parents we can be to all children and young people in our care.

When providing a service for our children and young people in care we should challenge ourselves by asking ‘would this be good enough for my child?’.

We need to make sure that children and young people feel safe and secure, have stability in their lives and that we help them to achieve their full potential by supporting them in fulfilling their ambitions and aspirations.

In Stoke-on-Trent the overarching vision for the children in care service is to ‘find me a family I can be part of forever’. This expresses our vision that permanency provides the very best environment for children to feel safe and secure which will enable them to reach their potential and enter adulthood being able to achieve happy and fulfilling lives. This links directly with the Mandate for Change which sets out Stoke-on-Trent City Council’s priorities in bringing about positive changes to the City. [Follow this link to find out more about Mandate for Change](http://www.stoke.gov.uk/ccm/navigation/regeneration/mandate-for-change/).

In order to achieve this we will always, wherever possible, try to return children to their parents or wider family. If this is not an option we will look for a family via Special Guardianship, Residence Order or long term fostering. For some children none of these routes will be appropriate and they will remain in care for the rest of their childhoods. Corporate Parents have a responsibility to ensure that this vision is realised and that children who remain in care on a long term basis receive the very best in parenting and have the same opportunities that all children have.

This strategy sets out how Stoke-on-Trent City Council intends to fulfil its Corporate Parenting responsibilities ensuring that children and young people are at the centre of our plans.

**How does Corporate Parenting work in this council**

Corporate Parenting is not the sole responsibility of the children’s social work services. It is the responsibility of the whole council, including councillors, our health service and other partners.

In Stoke-on-Trent corporate parenting is overseen by a Corporate Parenting Panel. This panel is chaired by the Lead Member for Education and is made up of elected members, including the Lead Member for Social Care, officer representation from Vulnerable Children and Corporate Parenting, Housing, Health, Learning Services and the chair of our Foster Carers Association.

The panel meets on a bi-monthly basis and receives reports on a range of issues relating to children in care. They also receive regular presentations from the Children in Care Council who take the opportunity to raise issues which are pressing to them. Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Panel are presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which ensures oversight and scrutiny at an even wider level.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

Lead Member and Director

The Lead Member for Education and the Lead Member for Social Care are both members of the Corporate Parenting Panel and alongside the Director have a duty to make sure that the Council, the health service, education services and their partners, are fulfilling their corporate parenting responsibilities, which are:

* To assure themselves that children and young people in our care are receiving good quality care and that both their physical and emotional needs are being met.
* To know how the Corporate Parenting Strategy is progressing and that they are ultimately responsible for making sure that it is achieved and that any issues raised or gaps in service provision are addressed promptly and appropriately.
* To know how well are children are progressing whilst in our care and in their journey into adulthood.
* To meet on a quarterly basis with the Chairs of Out Loud and Tune In – our Children in Care Council.

The Director of People

The ‘Statutory Guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children’s

Services and Lead Member for Children’s Services’ (dated April 2013 and updated September (2013) describes the key statutory roles in relation to services for children and young people.

The DCS and LMCS are appointed for the purpose of discharging the education and children’s social services functions of the local authority. The functions for which they are responsible are set out in section 18(2) of the Children Act 2004.

The Director for People has a responsibility to ensure that:

* Services are planned and provided to take account of children and young people’s views so that they have a real say in decisions that affect their future.
* We provide children and young people with stability.
* Partner agencies are engaged and taking their corporate parenting responsibilities seriously.
* The Children, Young People and Families Plan prioritises meeting the needs of children and young people in its care.

Elected Members

Stoke-on-Trent City Council prides itself on being a council lead authority. Elected members have a crucial role to play in ensuring that children in care receive the best care possible and have every opportunity that is available to all children – this includes their health, education and leisure interests. They need to have high expectations for our children and young people and encourage their hopes and aspirations. The Children Act (2004) contains a statutory requirement on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of looked after children. The Children & Young Persons Act (2008) reinforces the message that all councils, and particularly Elected Members, carry responsibility for ensuring good outcomes for children looked after by the local authority. Councillors should consider whether the standards of care provided would be good enough for your own children and, if not, to take steps to improve it. ‘Looked after’ children are not the sole responsibility of Children’s Services. The council, as a whole, is the corporate parent, and councillors have a key role in that. For these vulnerable children to thrive, the entire council, both councillors and officers, must play their part. Elected Members receive a strong message from the Council Leader as to the importance of the corporate parenting role. He has been clear that cabinet members have a responsibility to fulfil their duties.

The requirements of elected members are:

* To be advocates for the children and challenge the system to maximise the opportunities available to them
* To know about our children in care population – how many children in care do we have? How old are they? Where are they living?
* To know about our Pledge and what promises we have made to children and young people and ensure that we are fulfilling these.
* To understand the impact on children and young people when making decisions that affect services for children in care.
* To ensure that children who remain at home are safe, by undertaking visits to the safeguarding teams, ensuring that they understand the role of social workers and any challenges that they may be facing.
* To undertake Regulation 33 visits to our small group homes.
* To ensure that they attend fostering and adoption panels as observers to understand how decisions are made.
* To attend Corporate Parenting Panel training.
* To ensure that robust governance is in place to monitor our role as corporate parents.
* To support and attend events to profile the work of the service and celebrate the achievement of

The roles and responsibilities of elected members are overseen by the governance and leadership framework and were reiterated to elected members in January 2014

Every member has the opportunity to be a member of this panel subject to no issues being found on their DBS disclosure.

Officers

Officers have a crucial role to play in ensuring that services are developed and delivered to a high standard and that they inform Elected Members of the progress of the plan and any challenges that are being faced. They need to know about the children who are in our care and strive at all times to deliver the highest quality service. They are responsible for advising the panel and ensuring that any agreed actions are carried out as well as:

* Reporting to corporate parenting panel on performance relating to children in care and care leavers.
* Reporting on information relating to fostering, adoption and small group home provision
* Ensuring that Corporate Parenting Panel has all relevant information to ensure that they can provide robust monitoring of services provided to children in care and make decisions based on the most up to date information.

**Stoke-on-Trent’s Pledge to children in care**

Our Pledge to children in care and care leavers was launched in 2011. This Pledge was developed with our young people, is publicly available and covers four areas:

* Service Delivery: ensuring they have a good home and help them to stay fit and healthy
* Involvement: ensuring they are asked for their views about the decisions that affect their life
* Achievements: ensuring they are helped to get the best from their education and make a successful move on from care into adult and independent life
* Retaining and developing identity: encouraging and supporting them to develop into the best person they can be.

The Pledge was presented to full council meeting in 2012 by young people from the Children in Care Council and signed by all elected members.

**The Local Picture**

Detailed information about the local picture in Stoke-on-Trent is contained within the Sufficiency Strategy.

 **What we need to do now**

We know our children and young people as individuals, but we also need to know about them as a whole in order to understand how well our services work and our effectiveness as corporate parents. This will also help us shape where we need to go in the future to make sure we do our best for our children and young people. Our performance information gives us excellent data about our children in care population and we need to ensure that we understand the underlying reasons for our performance. In doing this we can identify current issues, address any concerns, improve our performance and in doing so improve outcomes for children in care and care leavers.

The council spends a significant amount of money on services to support children and young people in our care. In light of reductions in government funding, however, we must continue to look for savings and efficiencies across our services. We have an action plan to reduce our spend on agency placements, whilst continuing to ensure high quality placements for our children.

We have a sufficiency strategy that details how we plan to increase our in-house provision and provide for our more complex children with appropriate placements.

We need to monitor and review both these plans to ensure that they remain current, that we identify trends and plan how we meet any gaps that may become apparent.

We need to ensure that we have the right children in the right part of the system. Our numbers of children in care have been rising and we need to continue our monitoring and reviewing process to ensure that we have the right children in our care.

We need to improve our outcomes for care leavers ensuring that we have increasing numbers of young people who are in education, employment or training and have an EET strategy in place. The Quality2Care Buttle action plan was signed off at DLT in January 2014. We also need to improve the housing options to care leavers to ensure that appropriate choice is available.

High numbers of children adopted or made subject to Special Guardianship Orders shows that our permanence planning is good. We need to ensure that we continue to recruit adopters and continue to build on our permanency planning so that children can leave care in a timely way and join their permanent families as soon as possible.

We can only achieve good outcomes for children in care if everyone takes their corporate parenting responsibility seriously, fully understands their role and takes action in every arena to promote good outcomes for children in care. In order to achieve this we will ensure that all our Elected members are provided with the information they need to understand our children in care population and the challenges they face, are offered appropriate training to undertake their corporate parenting role and the support to carry this out well. We will also ensure that officers across the council have an understanding of the children in care in Stoke and consider their needs in all strategies and plans that are put in place.