



Corporate Parenting

A Guide for Councillors

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Introduction

All councillors have a duty as a corporate parent for children looked after.

As corporate parent for children looked after, the council has a duty to ensure that there is a sufficient supply of appropriate, high quality placements for all children in care, known as the “sufficiency duty”. In practical terms this means that all elected members should ensure that Somerset County Council (SCC) is recruiting sufficient foster carers, providing appropriate foster care placements as well as high quality residential care homes, and that there are efficient plans for adoption, adopter recruitment, or special guardianship where appropriate.

The Cabinet member for Children and Families, who has the statutory responsibility should both understand arrangements to support young people leaving care, including housing, progression to further or higher education, training or employment and ensure that officers have the necessary resources to put appropriate measures in place to meet SCC’s statutory obligations. The council, as a major employer, can play a key role for example, by supporting apprenticeships. In this instance elected members can support this valuable action by providing the link between local employers and SCC commissioners to open up discussions to assist in providing these opportunities.



What is corporate parenting?

When a child has to enter the care of Somerset County Council for whatever reason, the tasks that would normally be the responsibility of their parents become the responsibility of everyone at the council, including officers, elected members, school staff, and also our partner organisations. Effectively, we become corporate parents for those children looked after and care leavers.

This means that we have a legal and moral responsibility to improve the lives of all of those we look after and who leave our care. Just as we would with our own children, we must prioritise their needs and create the right conditions for them to thrive and have happy and fulfilling lives. This is a priority across the whole council and not just for those working in children's services.

Good corporate parenting requires ownership and leadership at the most senior level and this includes elected members. As corporate parents, it is the responsibility of all elected members to be satisfied that there is a joined up, effective and holistic approach to meeting the needs of children looked after and care leavers through policy and planning. It is a councillor's duty to ensure that they are prioritised in decision making. In your day-to-day councillor activities this can be achieved by ensuring that in whatever capacity you attend meetings and committees of the council that you challenge and question the decisions, whether key or non-key, that are made that can affect the outcomes of our children looked after. It also goes beyond this in your day-to-day engagement with your local community, including schools, healthcare providers and other key partner agencies and organisations in your area.



Why is corporate parenting important?

Children looked after are among the most vulnerable children in our community. They are unable to live at home with their immediate family, for any number of reasons. Therefore they become looked after by Somerset County Council. This may be through a voluntary agreement with the child's parents or through a court order. Whatever their journey into care looks like, most children looked after will have experienced some form of neglect, harm or emotional distress in their lives before becoming looked after.

Outcomes for children and young people who are in, or have left care, remain stubbornly worse than for other children and is something that we must take collective responsibility for. They do not do as well at school, are less likely to go on to higher education, more likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) and are over-represented in youth offending institutions.

- Only 13 per cent of children looked after achieved five good grades at GCSE (or equivalent including English & maths) in 2015 compared to 59 per cent of all children in Somerset.
- 10 per cent of children looked after were classed as persistently absent (missed 15+ per cent of school days) in 2015 compared to 5.3 per cent of secondary school children in Somerset.
- 7 per cent of children looked after aged 10 to 17, were cautioned or convicted for an offence during 2014

As corporate parents elected members can play a key part in narrowing the gap in outcomes between children looked after and other children in the community. The part you can play as an elected member is to engage with your local school and pre-school providers to identify at the earliest opportunity any areas of concern and to contact the relevant officers and Cabinet member to seek an explanation and to promote an appropriate course of action.



What should councillors do?

All services that support children looked after have a corporate parent responsibility, and we are all accountable to the children and young people who are looked after in Somerset. As an elected member you can help by playing an active role in your community, by regularly attending meetings of organisations that have involvement with children and who will provide a valuable source of information in helping you to identify the local issues affecting children, and to ask those questions that will give you confidence that local services are supporting their welfare. We must all strive for children in our care to succeed in the same way that any parent would strive for their own child/ren. This can mean providing advice and guidance to a young person who is starting to live independently, supporting carers, ensuring that children's mental health is safeguarded, helping a young person find a job, or listening to their hopes and dreams, problems and insecurities. There is a wide range of people and organisations who need to work together, and it is your responsibility within your area to find out they are doing this. You are in effect the oil in the engine that will drive progress forward.

All councillors should be aware of their corporate parenting responsibilities. This will be supported through training sessions on the role of a corporate parent, which will also form a compulsory element of the induction process for councillors. Support from officers and training will enable councillors to undertake their role in the most effective and timely way and develop knowledge in the following areas:

- Have a clear understanding and awareness of the issues for children looked after and care leavers in the authority area and those placed out of area
- Champion the interests of children looked after and care leavers in all they do by ensuring those who are responsible for their welfare and education are held to account through regular meetings.
- Ask questions and constructively challenge outcomes for children looked after and care leavers
- Communicate with children looked after and care leavers through appropriate channels so they have a say in how decisions are made about the services that affect them, so that they can influence those decisions positively. Your membership of the Corporate Parenting Board would support this along with

opportunities that may arise from time to time to engage with children looked after and care leavers through the Somerset Children in Care Council and Somerset Leaving Care Council.

- Lead on securing work based training opportunities, including apprenticeships for care leavers within the Council and its partners and contractors to improve their future prospects by engaging pro-actively with local employers to seek opportunities
- Children that come into care, but who may be placed outside of Somerset County must not be forgotten. Your role here may be a limited one but is something you should be aware of.
- Question and challenge whether the Council, as corporate parent, is keeping the promise it has made in the Corporate Parenting Pledge, and the Care Leavers' Charter
- Demand evidence of positive outcomes for Somerset children looked after, especially those in your division.
- Ask how all elements of council business have an impact for children looked after
- Make connections and links between council plans, strategies and decision-making for children looked after
- **Consistently ask “*Would this be good enough for my own child?*”**

Somerset County Councillors

All county councillors are in the unique and privileged position of being able to promote opportunities for children looked after and care leavers through their political power and influence and through their connections to the community, schools, health services, youth justice, local businesses, employers and voluntary organisations.

The Somerset County Council Cabinet Member for Children and Families has the lead political role and statutory responsibility in ensuring that children looked after by the local authority have their interests protected, their opportunities maximised, their educational achievement enhanced, their voices heard and have services shaped to meet their needs. Other councillors who are members of the Corporate Parenting Board have a specific role in ensuring that corporate parenting responsibilities towards children looked after and care leavers are being fulfilled.

District Councillors' specific responsibilities – (Taunton Deane Borough Council, Sedgemoor, South Somerset, West Somerset and Mendip District Councils) – elected members of SCC should also be aware of the key role that District Councils, both officers and elected members play in meeting the needs of our children. SCC elected members can make those vital links to ensure that we all collectively and individually do our very best – as we would for our own children.

Some ways in which this can be achieved are:

- Help support the development of work experience opportunities for young people looked after and care leavers within their respective organisations across Somerset, and with key partner agencies
- Help support the development of apprenticeships and employment opportunities, having a buddying system, so individual support can be given to young people
- Have a system in place to support and prioritise care leavers for housing/move-on housing in all areas – you could ask how this is being done in your area and at the very least make yourself known to the relevant officer
- Support/request foster carers being a priority housing group
- Provide priority access to leisure facilities to children looked after and care leavers up to the age of 25 years
- Promote fostering for Somerset at a local level
- Be champions for children looked after and care leavers at every opportunity

“Elected councillors, you have a crucial role. Only you can carry it out. You can make sure the interests of children come first” (Government 2003)



Communicating with children looked after and care leavers

Somerset in Care Council



They meet monthly and talk about subjects that affect young people in care. They use their views and ideas to tell the managers who make decisions what they think works well in the care system and what could be done better.

Somerset Leaving Care Council



This is a group of care leavers who meet approximately every four weeks to discuss how best to improve the experience of being a care leaver. The group is consulted about changes that are being made that will affect care leavers, takes part in meetings with managers, and attends the Corporate Parent Board with county councillors. They also meet up occasionally with care leavers around the country.

Resources

Working Together to Safeguard Children:

<http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/w/working%20together.pdf>

Early Intervention Foundation

www.eif.org.uk/

Local Authorities Research Consortium

www.nfer.ac.uk/research/projects/larc/

The Knowledge Hub, Safeguarding Children Group:

<https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/>

'Staying Put' practice guidance

www.ncb.org.uk/media/1154341/staying_put.pdf

The Children and Families Act 2014

www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents

The Southwark Judgment

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldjudgmt/jd090520/appg-1.htm

Adoption Scorecards

www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards

Centre for Public Scrutiny (examples of corporate parenting scrutiny reviews)

<http://www.cfps.org.uk/>