

Solihull MBC: Corporate Parenting Strategy 2016-2018

Getting the best for our children

1. Purpose and scope of the strategy

Solihull MBC looks after some 370 children and young people and has enduring responsibilities for nearly 200 care leavers. This strategy establishes the broad framework through which Solihull will provide the best possible support and care for them. It sets out a clear vision of how we will be a good, compassionate and aspirational parent for our children. In doing so, it defines:

- corporate parenting
- who are corporate parents
- objectives
- how we will work with looked after children and care leavers to respond to their views and aspirations
- how we will work with other public sector bodies to secure their commitment to improving the lives of looked after children and care leavers
- how we will work with private and third sector bodies to secure their commitment to improving the lives of looked after children and care leavers
- governance arrangements

This strategy does not set out the detail of how our vision and objectives will be realised. This is done in a separate action plan that will be reviewed and updated regularly through formal governance processes.

2. What is corporate parenting?

Corporate parenting is the term used to describe the duties and responsibilities a local authority has to ensure that the children it looks after are safe, their needs met and their aspirations promoted. At its heart is the principle that **everyone** who is part of the local authority should regard looked after children as if they were their own. This means that all elected members and officers, particularly senior leaders, should champion the interests of looked after children and only accept standards for their care and development that they would see as good enough for their own children.

3. Solihull's corporate children

At 31 March 2016, Solihull MBC was corporate parent to 360 looked after children and young people. Of these, 269 lived with foster carers; 20 lived in children's homes; 205 lived outside Solihull's boundary; 35 lived with their parents; and 67 were unaccompanied asylum seeking children. In addition, Solihull was corporate parent to 2132 care leavers.

4. Solihull's corporate parenting vision and principles

At its minimum, being a corporate parent means we all assure ourselves that looked after children and care leavers are safe, in good placements or accommodation, engage in learning and have their health needs met. That is not enough for us in Solihull. We are ambitious for our looked after children and care leavers. For us, corporate parenting is about how we take on the mantle of the pushy, sharp-elbowed parent that looked after children often lack. We will be a champion for them in securing high quality placements, education, health, employment, housing and leisure opportunities. We will not be complacent about what our children can achieve, but instead will challenge and motivate them to achieve to the very best of their ability. When they struggle we will stand by them and mobilise the best possible help. We will provide them with opportunities to pursue sports, hobbies and cultural activities, and to make and sustain friendships. Crucially we will recognise and acknowledge their efforts and achievements.

To make sure that we are getting things right, we will listen to our children and young people. We will provide the necessary support and resources for our children in care council to be a thriving, vibrant and assertive group that represents the views of all looked after children and care leavers, whatever their age, understanding or whereabouts. We will encourage them to tell us how we are doing and to influence the design and evaluation of services.

5. Research on corporate parenting

There is limited research on the link between corporate parenting and outcomes. Most research in this area has focused on children's views of good parents and their experiences of being looked after.

A study by the National Care Advisory Service (*Corporate Parenting for young people in care – making the difference?* March 2015) found that children see a good parent as someone who is reliable, listens, understands you, treats you like family, keeps you safe and does not turn their back on you when things get tough.

The same study reports the views of practitioners about what helps good corporate parenting. This includes good links with other organisations supported by clear protocols, the capacity to spend time with children and young people to build good relationships, clear procedures, good management support and good professional development.

Leadership factors were found to include member commitment and training, well defined partnership working, an explicit commitment by members and senior officers to the pledge for looked after children, and good quality management information that enables scrutiny and challenge. In considering the question of partnerships, the study identified the concept of corporate aunts and uncles, in effect those public sector partners such as the health community and police who also have responsibilities for children.

6. Corporate parenting in Solihull today

In April-May 2016 Ofsted carried out an inspection of Solihull's services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. Their report said that senior leaders take corporate responsibility seriously and that the corporate parenting board (CPB) is making a difference. Nevertheless, our services for looked after children and for care leavers were both judged to require improvement. This is a clear indication that Solihull needs to become a better corporate parent.

Our own analysis of corporate parenting is that the CPB has been effective in analysing performance information, leading to improved compliance with the requirements of legislation and guidance. However, its membership is narrow. It now needs to broaden its approach to develop the vision articulated above. It has also lost focus on the children in care council which has, as a result, 'been allowed to stagnate' (Ofsted report). This strategy aims to develop Solihull's approach to corporate parenting from its important successes in improving compliance to the realisation of its vision. If we do this we will become an excellent corporate parent.

7. Strategic objectives

This strategy has three main objectives.

- To champion the interests of looked after children and care leavers. We want elected members, senior Council officers, other Council staff and senior leaders in partner organisations to know what these children and young people need and can offer so that they can contribute to improving their lives.
- To ensure that all parts of the Council and its partners in the public, third and business sectors take practical steps that will enable looked after children and care leavers to be lead safe, fulfilling and ultimately economically independent lives.
- To provide a governance framework for elected members and looked after children and care leavers to evaluate the impact of our services, influence their development and hold officers to account.

7.1 To champion

The Council's senior children's services officers will raise the profile of looked after children and care leavers within the Council. They and their staff will work with the children in care council and the corporate parenting group to prepare and deliver information that reminds elected members and officers that they are corporate parents. They will make reasonable demands of them to take practical steps in support of this strategy.

In their work with partners, council officers and members will ensure that the interests of looked after children and care leavers are promoted so that understanding, commitment and action extends beyond the Council.

7.2 Practical steps

Senior children's services officers will work with colleagues across the Council to identify how each directorate can play its part. They will support the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills in gaining strong support from a wide range of elected members.

Examples of positive action could include the adoption by each council directorate of at least one business objective about corporate parenting. Council champions should encourage key partners to do the same. The Council should provide a minimum number of work experience placements for looked after children; and should seek priority access for such placements with partners in all sectors. Directors and assistant directors in the Council should offer mentoring to care leavers at university or who are pursuing other careers and should encourage partners to ask the same of their senior leaders. The Council should take steps to ensure that its own services, such as housing, and others, such as in mental health, understand the needs of looked after children and care leavers and prioritise them.

7.3 Governance

The corporate parenting group has dual roles: to oversee the work of championing the interests of looked after children and care leavers; and to provide specialist scrutiny and challenge of work done by the Council and potentially its partner. It should include elected members and senior officers from across the Council.

There will be senior member and officer representation from children's services. It is important that there is also senior representation covering housing, public health, leisure and economic development. In addition to Council membership, the corporate parenting group should consider co-opting senior leaders from 'corporate aunt and uncle' organisations such as the CCG, Heart of England Foundation Trust (HEFT) and West Midlands Police. It may also choose to draw in others as and when necessary, for example from the third and business sectors. It must develop explicit arrangements for hearing regularly the views of looked after children and care leavers, working closely with the children in care council to do this.

Within Solihull's overall governance structures, the corporate parenting group should be incorporated under the Health and Wellbeing Board. This has the benefit of establishing and maintaining wider awareness of the importance of looked after children.

The corporate parenting group should meet quarterly. It should establish an action plan and should monitor progress against this plan. It should receive reports and provide challenge on performance, activities and outcomes. This will include children's social care, virtual school, health agencies, housing, YOS, police and others as necessary.

8. Priorities for action

- Confirm new membership and terms of reference for the corporate parenting group. These should include the scope of the group. Establish a programme of meetings and an agenda plan. Items to consider could include performance, IRO annual report, virtual school and children on the edge of care.
- Agree a programme of championing activities for corporate parenting group members.
- Publish information about corporate parenting, designed by the children in care council, and disseminate to elected members. With the children in care council, design and deliver training for elected members, senior Council officers and leaders in other organisations.
- Provide the children in care council with the right support to be a strong representative body for looked after children and care leavers. Seek business sponsorship for the children in care council's activities.
- Agree with the children in care council how the corporate parenting group will work with them to achieve the objectives set out in this strategy.
- Arrange a celebration event for children in care and care leavers. Seek business sponsorship and a high profile guest for this.
- Work with the Council's directors to help them identify a corporate parenting objective for their areas of the business.
- Secure the agreement of the Council's directors and assistant directors to mentor care leavers who are at university or in the early stages of careers.
- The Council should guarantee an interview to all looked after children and care leavers who meet the minimum requirements for a particular job or apprenticeship. Seek the same commitment from other employers in the Borough.
- Initiate discussions with the Chamber of Commerce about engaging the business community.
- Agree a detailed work plan with actions, owners and timescales.