



Edward Timpson MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

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To Lead Members and Directors of Children's Services

5 June 2013

Dear Director,

Corporate Parenting and the Voice of the Child in Care

I am writing to you today around the importance of strong corporate parenting and embedding the voice of the child in care in local practice.

Children and young people in care have a unique place in society. Central government and local authorities share responsibility for being their corporate parents. I know that each one of you is as committed and determined as I am about giving children in care the support and opportunities they need to turn their lives around. Many local councillors have become champions of the children in their care and are already making a real difference to improving their lives.

I want all Lead Members for Children's Services, working with Directors of Children's Services, to have a real sense of parental responsibility for their outcomes. This concern should encompass their education, their health and welfare and their aspirations as they enter adulthood. I recognise that it is a huge challenge and responsibility to be a good corporate parent, particularly if you are a newly elected councillor or Lead Member. That is why we have funded the National Children's Bureau to develop materials, based on the best local practice, to support corporate parents to narrow the gap between the outcomes of looked-after children and their peers. These were published today at : www.ncb.org.uk/corporateparenting. Please use these to improve the support you provide to children in your care.

Children in Care Councils (CiCC)

At the heart of the care system should be the voice of the child. Listening and talking to children is crucial to their development. It helps them learn thinking skills and improves self-esteem and confidence. Children in care know better than anyone else what works well, what is less successful, and what needs to change. They need to be able to challenge and influence strategic planning and day to day decisions. That is why every local authority has a Children in Care

Council and I would urge Lead Members and Directors of Children's Services to hold regular meetings with their local CICC to discuss how support for children in care can be improved.

Role of Independent Review Officers (IROs)

IROs also have a key role in promoting the voice of the child. I recently held a roundtable discussion with IRO Managers and local government and voluntary sector partners to consider the role of the IRO. We agreed there was some excellent local practice which needed to be spread to all local authorities. Key aspects of a good service that we identified are:

- IROs having the required skills, training, and knowledge to undertake all duties set out in the IRO Handbook;
- IROs having manageable caseloads and the ability to effectively challenge poor practice;
- The quality of the IRO service is continuously improved by managers and IROs acting on feedback from children and young people;
- Annual reports on IROs performance are published and discussed with lead members and DCS.

I would ask Directors of Children's Services to use the forthcoming Ofsted thematic report on IROs to review and improve their services in line with its recommendations.

Advocacy

I meet regularly with groups of children in care and separately with care-leavers and have been struck by how many of them say they do not have access to advocacy services. All children in care have a statutory right to have access to advocacy services and I would ask all Lead Members and DCS' to ensure that children in your care know how to access your local services. I am also delighted to announce that the Government will, from April 2013, support both the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) and Voice to provide an advocacy advice service for looked-after children and care leavers.

"Freezing" decisions whilst a complaint is investigated

The Children's Rights Director recently told me that he regularly has to remind local authorities of the statutory guidance on "freezing" decisions. I would like reiterate that when a decision is made that a child objects to e.g. a placement move, the decision should be frozen whilst the complaint is investigated. (*Getting the best from Complaints*. Statutory Guidance 2004.) Of course, the decision may well not alter, but the key point is that a child is given the chance to have their voice heard before final decisions are made.

NSPCC Childline number and services

The NSPCC Childline is an important service which offers children in care help, advice and counselling. Many children and young people in care experience

instances of loneliness, depression or a feeling of isolation. A child in care can contact a ChildLine counsellor at any time who will listen and offer advice and support. I am therefore asking all Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members to ensure children in their care know about the NSPCC Childline. The NSPCC website is: <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/> ; and the Childline number is: 0800 1111.

Keeping children informed

Children in care often tell me that they do not know what they are entitled to while they are in care. I am aware that many of you already provide very helpful and accessible information, often utilising innovative websites. The Department has also produced a looked-after children and care-leavers' entitlements information sheet, which can be found at <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare/a00208882/leavers>

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all Lead Members and Directors of Children's Services of the need to regularly review and improve the information given to children in care so that they are aware of their legal entitlements.

Thank you for all you are doing to support children in care.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ed Timpson'.

Edward Timpson MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families