

Item No: 7.	Classification: Open	Date: November 22 2007	Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		Corporate Parenting Strategy	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Strategic Director of Children's Services	

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Committee consider the draft Corporate Parenting Strategy and agree further proposals they may wish to include in the strategy.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. Children Looked After are some of the most vulnerable children in society; living away from their families primarily because of abuse or neglect. The first placement option for children in care is with an alternative family, either with local authority approved foster carers or extended family. A smaller proportion of young people may be placed in residential care homes. Children may spend a short time in the council's care, either returning to their families or moving to permanent arrangements such as adoption, secure guardianship and residence orders; but for others, their stay is for many years lasting through to adulthood.
3. The Children Act 1989 provides the statutory framework through which the Local Authority's responsibilities towards the care of children are defined. The Act states that a child may be 'looked after by a Local Authority' through either being:
 - i) In their Care (subject to a Court Order, Section 31 of the Children Act 1989) where the Local authority shares "parental responsibility" with the parent for the child to ensure planning for their care meets the child's needs; or
 - ii) Provided with Accommodation (Section 20) where the Local Authority supports the parent in the care of the child through offering accommodation because the parent or person with parental responsibility recognises such support is required to achieve the best outcomes for the child. The Local Authority does not share parental responsibility for these children, which remains with the parent.
4. This strategy refers to all children and young people in the care of the Council, regardless of the route taken and legal status, as this reflects the Council's overarching duty and commitment to safeguard and promote the welfare of all such children and young people.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

5. There are 593 children who are looked after by Southwark, which is one of the highest rates in London. This is partly a reflection of the high levels of deprivation

in Southwark and the fact that it also has the highest rate of referral to children's social care services (approximately 890 per month). By definition, these are some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the community and outcomes relative to the general population of children in the community remain poor.

6. While there have been significant improvements in outcomes for children in care there remains a significant gap between them and their peers. The concept of the Corporate Parent recognises the need for a concerted "whole system" coordinated approach, and the strategy seeks to address this by setting itself within the context of the Every Child Matters Outcomes framework.

Role of Elected Members

7. Elected Members' "special responsibility" for Children Looked After was introduced in 1998 by Frank Dobson, the then Secretary of State, in a personal letter to all councillors. "Think Child" 1999, guided Members through the Quality Protects Programme which introduced responsibilities for all vulnerable children and young people including those looked after by the Council. The Local Government Act 2000 strengthens this responsibility of all Councillors and placed particular emphasis on the lead role of the executive member, and also for those with scrutiny and overview responsibilities.

8. In 2003, the Government reiterated the responsibility of all councillors in the document "If this were my child" which states:

"The Council as a whole is the Corporate Parent, and councillors have a key role in that...Being a good corporate parent means we should seek for (the children in public care) the same outcomes as any good parent would want for their children."

9. All councillors are required to have a basic level of knowledge about issues for vulnerable children in their area and to know or to be able to find out answers to key questions about such children and young people, and how the Council is meeting its responsibilities to safeguard and promote their welfare.
10. This strategy requires all Council services to contribute to this agenda, so that the Council's corporate parenting responsibility can be translated into service delivery across the board. This is underpinned by a commitment to ensuring that elected members are supported in understanding their role as corporate parents, and their role in effectively scrutinising service delivery and outcomes for Children Looked After and young people. This is primarily by the Corporate Parenting Committee and the Lead Member for Children and Young People.

Policy implications

11. The continued development and improvement of services for CLA is essential to secure better outcomes and ensuring this vulnerable group have the best possible start in life. Better outcomes for CLA is a priority in the Children and Young People's Plan and the strengthening of our services will ensure that children and young people can make a positive contribution to the community.

Community Impact Statement

11. The implementation of this strategy could have a differential impact on a diverse community. It is important that implementation should be closely monitored to ensure that all communities are able to benefit equally. The CLA population is monitored to identify possible trends in admissions, which may be influenced by the way legislation, guidance and policy is applied locally.
12. An Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken to explore more fully how the strategy may affect Southwark's diverse community. For example the strengthening services to reduce the care population could have a disproportionate affect on different communities. It is therefore important to consider fully, how the initiatives embodied in the strategy are accessible to all sections of the community.

Resource implications

13. The Strategy sets out how the Council and its partners can work more effectively together to secure better outcomes for children in care and those leaving care. The implications of this for local practice and service delivery can currently be met within existing resources.

Consultation

14. The Strategy has already been considered by the Children's Services Management Team and is undergoing redrafting before being consulted on more widely. This will include an event with young people in care to ensure their views are fully incorporated.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

15. No supplementary advice has been sought at this stage but will be sought as part of the consultation on the strategy.

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Children and Young People's Plan Review 2007	Children's Services Department 49 Grange Walk London SE1 3DY	Rory Patterson 020 7525 3846

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Corporate Parenting Strategy Draft 06/11/07

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Rory Patterson	
Report Author	Rory Patterson	
Version	Final	
Dated	13/11/07	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / EXECUTIVE MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Strategic Director of Legal and Democratic Services	No	No
Director of Finance	No	No
Executive Member	Yes	Yes
Date final report sent to Constitutional/Community Council/Scrutiny Team	13/11/07	

CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY

2007- 2010

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1. Introduction

'Corporate Parenting' refers to the collective responsibility of the Council and its partners to provide the best possible care and protection for children and young people who are 'looked after'. That is, any child or young person for whom the authority has, or shares, parental responsibility, or for whom the authority provides care and accommodation to the child or young person on behalf of their parent.

Children Looked After are some of the most vulnerable children in society; living away from their families through no fault of their own, and often because they have suffered abuse and neglect. Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide these children with a permanent alternative home if they are unable to return to their families. The main placement option for children looked after is with local authority approved foster carers. There are a small percentage of children, with more complex needs, whom are placed in residential care homes.

There is a considerable amount of turbulence in the care population, and some children may only spend a short time in the Council's care, either returning to their families or moving to permanent arrangements such as adoption, secure guardianship and residence orders. For others, their stay is for many years lasting through to adulthood, and it is for this group in particular, that the care experience seems to have failed most.

Southwark has a good record in achieving successful outcomes for the majority of the children in its care relative to other local authorities. However, in comparison with all children and young people in the local population, those who are looked after do less well, and there remains a significant gap in a range of outcomes.

1.1 Purpose of Strategy

The purpose of this strategy is to set out the framework within which the Council and its partners can transform the lives of children and young people in care, through the provision of excellent services. It aims to break the cycle of poverty and deprivation that characterises the lives of so many young people who have experienced local authority care.

The Strategy should be viewed in the context of the vision, values and priorities set out in Southwark's Children and Young People's Plan Review 2007. It also links to the core aims contained in our Parenting Support Strategy 2007-2010, which aims to strengthen parenting, and where possible, enable children to be retained within their families.

1.2 Our Vision

Southwark Council shares a vision agreed with partners developed through the Young Southwark Children's Trust:

"We want Southwark to be a place where every child and young person can have high expectations and the best opportunities. We work together with children, young people and their families so that they can grow up in good health, feeling safe and secure, and realise their full potential in life."

Southwark is committed to maintaining children and young people within their families, schools and communities wherever possible. Residential Care will only be considered where there are no other alternatives and where this is clearly in the best interests of children and young people.

1.3 Background

The Children Act 1989 provides the statutory framework through which the Local Authority's responsibilities towards the care of children are defined. The Act states that a child may be 'looked after by a Local Authority' through either being:

- i) In their Care (subject to a Court Order, Section 31 of the Children Act 1989) where the local authority shares "parental responsibility" with the parent for the child to ensure planning for their care meets the child's needs; or
- ii) Provided with Accommodation (Section 20) where the Local Authority supports the parent in the care of the child through offering accommodation because the parent or person with parental responsibility recognises such support is required to achieve the best outcomes for the child. The Local Authority does not share parental responsibility for these children, which remains with the parent.

This strategy encompasses all children and young people in Southwark's care regardless of the route taken and legal status, as this reflects the Council's overarching duty and commitment to safeguard and promote the welfare of all such children and young people.

The Children Act 1989 defines a 'child' as being aged 0-18 years. However, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 extends the Local Authority's responsibilities to care leavers to those aged up to 21 years, and in some circumstances for young people in further and higher education to 25 years.

1.4 The Southwark Context

There are about 590 children who are looked after by Southwark. Of these, over 80% are placed with foster carers. These placements involve both foster careers that are recruited, trained and supported by the Council, or those placements made using Independent Fostering Agencies. The remainder are placed in residential establishments, or in semi-independent accommodation for those over 16, who for various reasons cannot, or do not wish to remain in foster or residential care.

Southwark has one of the highest referral rates to children's social care in London, which is partly a reflection of the significant levels of social deprivation and need. In 2006/07 the Children's Services referral and assessment service received somewhere in the region of 10,000 contacts about 7,600 children. One would therefore expect to see more children in care as a result. However, Children's Services has developed a range of preventative services to enable children and young people to remain within their families and communities. The success of these services has resulted in a gradual reduction in the total number of children looked after.

2. Roles and Responsibilities

2.1 Strategic Commitment

To achieve these aspirations the Council needs every Department to have an appreciation and awareness of the importance of prioritising services for children looked after. Practical support should be offered by all services within the Council, particularly in relation to opportunities for employment, education and training. In recognition of the needs of young people leaving care, the Council's housing service will provide a range of accommodation opportunities, including tenancies for those who are assessed as being capable of maintaining a tenancy.

Officers and Members, through effective working partnerships with other agencies, will seek to influence the delivery of services to support the corporate parenting agenda and to develop joint commissioning strategies to achieve this end. This will have a particular focus on ensuring access to education and health services which will ensure children and young people secure the best possible outcomes from their care experience.

2.2 Elected Members

The Local Government Act 2000 placed particular emphasis on the lead role of the Executive Member, and also for those Members with scrutiny and overview

responsibilities to take responsibility for ensuring that services worked together to improve outcomes for children looked after.

In 2003, the Government reiterated the responsibility of all councillors in the document "If this were my child" which states:

"The Council as a whole is the Corporate Parent, and councillors have a key role in that....Being a good corporate parent means we should seek for (the children in public care) the same outcomes as any good parent would want for their children."

All councillors are required to have a basic level of knowledge about issues for vulnerable children in their area and to know or to be able to find out answers to key questions about such children and young people, and how the Council is meeting it's responsibilities to safeguard and promote their welfare.

This strategy requires all Council services to contribute to this agenda, so that the Council's corporate parenting responsibility can be translated into service delivery across all children's services and other services which have an impact on outcomes for children and young people. This is underpinned by a commitment to ensuring that elected members are helped to understand their role as corporate parents, and their part in scrutinising service delivery and outcomes for Children Looked After and young people.

2.3 The Corporate Parenting Committee

In Southwark, the Council has established a Corporate Parenting Committee to give looked after children the appropriate status within the Council and secure greater ownership from partners. Membership includes elected members and two non-voting members nominated through the Primary Care Trust and the Children's Trust. The Chair of the Committee is the Executive Member for Children's Services and Education.

The Committee meets regularly with Children Looked After and their carers to listen to their views and ensure they are incorporated in policies, procedures and practice where there is clear evidence that these will secure improved outcomes. Members, through effective scrutiny, will ensure children looked after are considered in the development of all policy and service provision for children. The Children's Service's and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee receive regular reports on the work of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

The Committee will oversee the implementation of the Strategy, with delegated responsibilities to heads of service or senior managers within all departments and partner agencies. The Children Looked After Steering Group, chaired by the Business Manager for CLA, will report on a regular basis to Members and receive reports from other groups with responsibilities for children looked after.

2.4 Children's Services Department

Southwark Children's Services Department is committed to providing an excellent service for children looked after. In the last year it has established a new business unit for children in care, which is well placed to respond to the challenges set out in the Care Matters White Paper. The business unit covers many aspects of the care experience and has developed integrated services to bridge the gap between children in care and their peers in the community. It is responsible for delivering the actions outlined in the Children Looked After Business Unit Plan, which supports the work of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Through Young Southwark, the Children's Trust for the borough, a whole-systems approach to co-ordinating and delivering improved outcomes for children looked after has been adopted. The Trust provides an overarching mechanism for monitoring the effectiveness of service delivery and securing the support of key partners to meet the needs of this vulnerable group.

3. Providing Support to Improve Outcomes

The strategy is designed to meet the requirements of the 5 Every Child Matters outcomes:

- Be Healthy - enjoy the best possible physical and mental health and live a healthy lifestyle
- Stay Safe - are protected from harm and neglect and feel safe both at and outside of home and school
- Enjoy and Achieve - are given encouragement and opportunities to learn, develop, enjoy and achieve, both in and outside school
- Make a positive contribution - are encouraged to play a full part in their communities and behave in a socially responsible manner.
- Economic Well-being – are encouraged to progress into opportunities for employment education and training.

Key actions are outlined below under the 5 outcome areas.

3.1 Be Healthy

Children looked after have often had some of the worst outcomes across a range of health indicators including: immunisation rates; teenage pregnancy; mental ill-health and obesity. The Council and its partners, through the Young Southwark and Healthy Southwark partnerships are increasingly working together to address these issues to improve health outcomes for children in care and reduce health inequalities. These support and dovetail with the many health strategies and initiatives across the borough and include:

- Dedicated nurse practitioners to facilitate health assessments;
- Care Link child and adolescent health services, which provide assessments, treatment and support to children and young people regardless of where they are placed;
- Piloting a programme of mental health screening for all young people entering care;
- Delivery of a range of interventions to reduce the rate of teenage conceptions; and
- Commissioning a dentist to provide dental care at the CLA Business Unit and break down barriers to effective dental hygiene.

Service strengths include:

- Increased participation of young people in service design and evaluation, and supporting improvements in areas such as teenage pregnancy, obesity, and substance misuse services.
- Improved accessibility of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provision including increased access points and provision.
- Increased number of young people receiving interventions for substance misuse.
- Progress continues towards integrated delivery for looked after children with disabilities and / or learning difficulties.

Areas for Development and Priorities

- Further improve the level of health assessments for children and young people in care.
- Continue to improve access to child and adolescent mental health problems and ensure those with acute problems are prioritized assessed and treated by mental health services regardless of where they are placed.
- Continue to work with universal services to reduce the level of teenage conception among young people in care and care leavers.
- Work with universal services and foster carers to establish a baseline for obesity among children in care.

3.2 Stay Safe

Few children want to come into care, even those who have experienced abuse and neglect usually still love their families and want to remain with them. While there must be no hesitation about bringing children into care who need to be protected, wherever possible, children should be supported within their families where it is clearly in their best interests to do so. It is imperative therefore that every effort is made to ensure that children are safeguarded while in the Council's care.

There is a strong sense of ownership and strategic leadership of safeguarding responsibilities across the borough and this has led to innovative and partnership wide approaches to improving the safety of children and young people. Southwark has the second highest rate of care in London, which partly reflects the high needs of the borough. However there is no doubt that more could be done to reduce the high numbers in care and develop services which support children and young people within their families.

The Children's Service has a number of strengths in this area which include:

- Innovative and multi-agency service developments in place to help support early intervention, reducing numbers of children in care
- Strong fostering and adoption services with a wide range of support across universal services, universal and targeted provision for children and foster carers including advocacy.
- A well developed parenting strategy which sets out a range of responses to supporting parents and building parental confidence and resilience.
- Established use of family group conferencing to draw upon the strengths of the extended family and provide friends and family placements for children and young people on the threshold of care.
- An alternatives to care team dedicated to maintaining young people with their families.
- There is a well established participation strategy for looked after children with the efficiency of reviews being better than the national average and that of similar councils. A variety of effective approaches enable young people both to express their views and directly influence the shaping of services and training of staff.
- Effective advocacy and independent visitor services to enable children's voices to be heard.

Areas for Development and Priorities:

- Continue to develop targeted youth support services as part of the locality programme, which will provide a range of early interventions and reduce the number of children in care.
- Complete the redesign of services within the Shaftesbury contract to provide greater variety and flexibility for children and young people on the threshold of care.
- Further improve performance on completing statutory reviews with timescales and improve monitoring systems to identify deficits within the existing system.

3.3 Enjoy and Achieve

Southwark Council provides a range of services and provision to enable children looked after to get the best of educational and leisure opportunities. Foster carers

have access to early years provision to ensure that children can get access to the best childcare to prepare them for entry to mainstream school.

While significant progress has been made in improving educational outcomes, it remains a concern that relative to their peers in the community, children looked after continue to do less well. Significant absenteeism by children looked after is lower than average and more such children aged 16 took at least one qualification in 2006 than nationally. However, the proportion of them gaining five or more higher grade GCSEs was below that in similar councils. The Council is determined to narrow this gap by providing additional targeted support for education and widening access to services in the community to give children looked after the best possible chance.

Strengths in this area include:

- An integrated approach to securing improved educational outcomes in the Children Looked After Business Unit, including the development of the Virtual Head Teacher role and additional tuition for those in need of extra support;
- Access to early years provision for children to maintain the stability of foster placements;
- Development of the new integrated child development centre, Sunshine House, where the role of the lead professional and team around the child is being developed.
- Maintaining the low level of unauthorized absence from school and continuing to support schools where there are concerns about behaviour.

Areas for development and priorities:

- Improving access to leisure services for children looked after and ensuring it is incorporated in Council contracts;
- Continued focus on improving the range and accessibility of information on recreational activities.
- More work to identify the specific needs of children at the various key stages and identify actions to address deficits in learning and achievement.

3.4 Make a positive contribution

Communication and consultation with children and young people is an underlying principle of corporate parenting and at present is facilitated by Southwark Children's Services. An advocacy service is provided to enable children and young people to represent their views and young people have a representative group to facilitate consultation and communication, called 'Speakerbox'.

Members of the Corporate Parenting Committee meet bi-annually with a representative group of young people to seek their views on service design and delivery. This is then incorporated in service development.

This strategy endorses an on-going commitment to increased communication, consultation and involvement with Children Looked After and young people. The opinions and views of our Children Looked After need to be taken into account by all providers of services and their representation needs to be increased on important issues.

Strengths include:

- Transition planning for young people with disabilities and children looked after, is good and improving. Effective protocols and partnerships exist between the council's adult services, the housing department, Connexions, and voluntary sector services for young people with continuing care needs.
- Children and young people's achievements are celebrated at an annual celebration event each year. It is well supported by the Council and the feedback from children and young people is very positive.
- All young people with disabilities who are looked after have transition plans, and this ensures that their needs can be met when they transfer to adult services.
- Specialist Services effectively consult with severely disabled Children Looked After and young people by ensuring that people with skills in communicating with children work directly with this group.
- A high proportion of young people leaving care are in education training and employment relative to the community;
- Low levels of offending amongst children looked after compared to the wider community;
- High levels of participation of children looked after in their statutory review;
- The continuing strength of Speaker Box as a mechanism for facilitating ongoing communication between young people in care and Children's Services.

Areas for development and priorities:

- Sustaining improvements in transition of children with disabilities and / or learning difficulties, and improving the range of local respite services available to families.
- Improving access to leisure facilities for children looked after by agreeing new arrangements with the Council's leisure provider to allow subsidised membership.

3.5 Achieve Economic Well being

Southwark recognises the importance of ensuring that young people in care and leaving care have access to opportunities to improve their economic well-being. This is important if they are to achieve their potential and break the cycle of deprivation. Rates of employment, education and training for young people leaving care compare favourably with those of their peers in the wider community.

Children's Services work with partner agencies to enable vulnerable young people preparing to leave care with the opportunity to develop their independent living skills. The Adolescent and Aftercare Service, provides a range of opportunities for young people to learn independent living skills and can support young people to find accommodation which can meet their needs. These can range from supported lodgings, through to semi-independent flats, Council tenancies and opportunities in the private rented sector for those more able young people.

Strengths include:

- A work experience and employment scheme, to enable young people to complete additional work experience successfully and increase employment possibilities and opportunities has been developed through Children's Services.
- High levels of care leavers in education training and employment and access to a range of accommodation opportunities.
- All Children Looked After, including those from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds and disabled pupils are made aware of the post-sixteen opportunities of University entrance and are provided with information about entitlements and support from the Universities and schools.

Areas for development and priorities:

- Increasing participation of children looked after entering higher education
- Improving linkages with Further Education colleges and agencies such as Jobcentre Plus
- Continue to develop the work experience and employment scheme offered through Children's Services