

Can the State be a good parent?



Making the Difference for
Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Who are we?

The What Makes The Difference? project (WMTD), partly funded by the European Social Fund EQUAL initiative, is working to identify ways to improve poor outcomes for older children in care and leaving care in England. To facilitate success, young people from care are at the heart of every part of the project. WMTD is a large partnership involving 60 organisations from national and local government, voluntary and independent sectors, with young people's charity Rainer as lead partner.

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service (NLCAS), is a national organisation, supported by young people's charity Rainer, which is devoted to improving the life chances of care leavers. Its work aims to assist, and where necessary challenge, government, local authorities and other agencies who have a responsibility for developing policy around young people in and leaving the care system. NLCAS undertakes public policy work, information, and advice and specific time-limited consultancy and development projects.

Rainer is the national charity for under-supported young people. We work with 18,000 young people and young adults every year who are living at the margins of society. They may be in or leaving care, involved in or on the fringes of crime, out of work, homeless or facing young parenthood without the safety net of a supportive family. See www.raineronline.org

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1.

Foreword: can the state be a good parent?

Making the difference for looked
after children and care leavers

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1.

Foreword: can the state be a good parent?

Making the difference for looked after children and care leavers

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In the UK we have approximately 60,000 children at any one time who are in the care of the state. All of these children will need the state to be a 'good' parent. All will have been assessed as being in need of additional parenting beyond that which their own parents are able to provide to a satisfactory standard. All will arrive with a gap in their experience of being cared for, during their short lives, that will need to be filled.

As parents what we want to provide for all our children is a stable, happy and secure childhood, one in which they can grow to achieve good health and successful education and employment as adults. Growing up is a journey, not a series of events and parenting is a skill that parents do their best to learn along the way. But every child and young person's experience of the care system is different. Some enter care as babies and are adopted. Others may come in and out of care throughout their childhood. Many enter the care system for the first time as teenagers. What is clear is that for this group of very vulnerable children and young people, if the state is unable to function well as a 'good' parent then it will fail in its duty of care.

The What Makes The Difference? project (WMTD), partly funded by the European Social Fund EQUAL initiative, is working to identify ways to improve

poor outcomes for older children in care and leaving care in England. To facilitate success, young people from care are at the heart of every part of the project. WMTD is a large partnership involving 60 organisations from national and local government, voluntary and independent sectors, with children's charity Rainer as lead partner.

WMTD's work focuses predominantly on young people at the end of their care journey – on those who are leaving the care system and beginning adult life. However, to understand how a child's journey in care ends, and how outcomes could be improved, you also have to understand how and why it began and the paths they took along the way.

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service (NLCAS), as a partner within WMTD, is a national organisation, supported by young people's charity Rainer, which is devoted to improving the life chances of care leavers. Its work aims to assist, and where necessary challenge, government, local authorities and other agencies who have a responsibility for developing policy around young people in and leaving the care system.

As the work of the WMTD partnership progresses, it is clear to us that good corporate parenting is the key to successful outcomes for this group. How the state provides services to fill the 'parenting gap' for these children is something that those of us who are responsible for provision of services – at all levels - have to become experts at. We know from national outcome measures that generally we find this hard to achieve. There are some exceptions to every rule – but we cannot deny that our children in care are more likely to pass fewer exams, less likely to go to university and more likely to become homeless than children living with their natural family.

Can the state be a good parent? Can we provide a care experience for children in care that can meet their needs? Are we willing and able to listen and learn about how to improve? This pamphlet attempts to start a national discussion about what good corporate parenting should be.

In partnership with NLCAS, WMTD have gathered views and opinions from a broad range of stakeholders. Their views are published here. It is important to add that these views are not the views of WMTD or NLCAS – although there are many sentiments expressed here that it is hard to challenge. Our aim is to identify the issues and suggestions for answers as others see them and to present them as an aid to discussion.

This pamphlet is the first stage of an ambitious piece of work looking at how best we can fill the 'parenting gap' for this vulnerable group, and is only the start of a process that will last until Autumn 2007. By the end of that period the What Makes The Difference? project aims to draw clear conclusions from the national debate and to have offered support, guidance and practical tools to those out there trying to improve services to help us better parent this vulnerable group.

Most importantly we hope to have clearly identified what can make a difference for young people themselves and to have empowered them to have a strong voice within the debate.

In our search we welcome the Government's announcement of a Green Paper to look at improving outcomes for looked after children and care leavers. This pamphlet and the WMTD partnership seeks to influence that process. To further that influence, over the coming months, What Makes the Difference? will be hosting a series of consultation events for young people currently leaving care or who have left care in the recent past. We will also host several events for politicians, policy makers and professionals aimed at allowing stakeholders to have their say in what would make the difference for them.

Simultaneously, the What Makes the Difference? project and its partners are attempting to harness good practice from up and down the country and to produce materials that will ensure there are no more excuses for poor services to young people leaving the care system. Most importantly, we hope to have clearly identified what can make a difference for young people themselves and to have empowered them to have a strong voice within the debate. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service, in its work to support local authorities, will help ensure the outcomes from the What Makes the Difference? project can be disseminated as widely as possible.

What is already clear from the level of interest in our work is that many people from across the country are recognising that if we are to succeed in our corporate parenting task we have to find answers to the questions explored in this pamphlet.

We would like to thank all those who have contributed to this pamphlet. A special thank you must go to Jo Coles (NLCAS) who has managed the process of pulling together those contributions.

2.

From then to now:
why the political case
for good parenting still
needs to be made

Rt Hon Frank Dobson MP

2.

From then to now: why the political case for good parenting still needs to be made

Rt Hon Frank Dobson MP

All children and young people should have the opportunity to develop to their maximum potential so they can live a useful and satisfying life. That isn't just an egalitarian principle. Nor is it just of benefit to each individual. It is good for society as a whole. That's because the Ship of State needs the most numerous and most talented crew possible. It needs to keep the number of passengers to a minimum and, if possible, avoid mutineers and saboteurs altogether. So making sure that the State does a better job looking after children in care is good in principle, good for the individuals and good for the rest of us.

As the incoming Labour Secretary of State for Health and Social Services in May 1997, I brought to my job the belief that for far too long the State had been making a bad job of looking after many of the children the law deemed necessary to be taken into care. Although making up less than one per cent of the child population, children who had been in care made up 38 per cent of young people in prison. Thirty per cent of young people who were homeless had been in care. Most had poor educational achievements because they had had poor educational opportunities. Many found great difficulty in forming stable relationships and settling down. Treated with little attention and respect, many young people reciprocated by showing little attention or respect in return. Not much of a formula for creating useful members of society!

In response to the publicity surrounding various sexual and others crimes against children in care in 1996, the Conservative Government asked the former head of the Social Services Inspectorate, Sir William Utting, to conduct a review of safeguards for children living away from home. I published

his report in November 1997. It presented a woeful tale of failure at all levels to provide a secure and decent childhood for some of the most vulnerable children. It covered the lives of children whose home circumstances were so bad that those in authority, to use the jargon, took them into care. The report revealed that, in far too many cases, not enough care was then taken. Elementary safeguards were not in place or not enforced. Many children were harmed rather than helped. Those failings were not just the fault of individuals – although individuals often were at fault. It revealed the failures of a whole system. Nevertheless, the review team found evidence of good work done by many children's homes despite adverse circumstances. It considered that residential care remained an important option for looking after children in trouble, but that staffing was a chronic problem.

The report revealed a list of major faults. Many children were placed in homes unsuited to their particular needs because there was too little planning, too little forethought and too few alternatives. Some children went through a damaging succession of placements. Children were at risk in small unregistered homes. More than a third of children in residential care were not receiving an education. Children in foster care could be at risk of abuse while safeguards intended in the Children Act 1989 were not being uniformly implemented. There was no requirement for residential maintained special schools to be inspected for welfare purposes. Some children absconded from residential care and became homeless and some remained untraced. In the past, children who ran away and were traced were often returned to the care of the people who were abusing them or letting them down.

Disabled children, children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and young children were at higher risk of abuse or harm when living away from home. Bullying and sexual abuse by other foster children was encountered. Bullying appeared to be ignored in some children's homes. The mix of fearsome children and vulnerable children amounted to abuse by the system that was supposed to provide protection.

Vetting childcare staff and foster parents needed to be improved. Unacceptable delays arose in checking criminal records. Staff who suspected child abuse could be deterred from coming forward for fear of victimisation by other staff or managers. Some directors of social services said that they were reluctant to dismiss staff, as their decisions could be overturned on appeal.

The criminal justice system was ineffective in deterring offences against children and in securing convictions. Its failures were most marked where the victims were most vulnerable – the very young and the disabled. Prison Service policy was to keep children in separate accommodation. But boys aged 15-16 were still being remanded to prison because there was not enough secure accommodation. As a result, there was suicide, self-harm and endemic bullying.

The report concluded that, although there were no grounds for complacency – and, by God, there should not have been – the repetition of abuse in children’s homes on the scale that had occurred in the past was now unlikely.

The report made 20 principal recommendations designed to improve safeguards in foster and residential care, in schools and in the penal system to provide more effective safeguards and checks to deter abusers from working with children, more effective avenues of complaint and independent advocates to whom children should have access, more vigilant management, effective disciplinary and criminal procedures and effective systems of communication between agencies about known abusers. The report also called for changes to ensure that the criminal justice system provided children with better protection from abusers.

The Government was already committed to improve the regulation of conduct and standards by social service personnel and extending statutory regulations to those institutions not then covered. I set up a Ministerial task force led by me, involving Ministers from other relevant Departments and outside experts to prepare the Government’s response to the Utting Report.

What was clear to me was that many dedicated people were doing a good job looking after vulnerable children away from home, but it was a very difficult task. We owed it to them and to the children to root out and punish wrongdoers and put in place a system which helped, rather than hindered, their efforts. And that system really was failing.

Many children who had been ‘taken into care’ to protect and help them had received neither protection nor help. Instead they had been abused and molested. Many more had been let down, never given the attention that they needed, shifted from place to place, school to school, and often simply turned out to fend for themselves when they turned 16.

This was not just a failure by the care staff directly concerned. It was a failure by social services managers, by councils, councillors, the police, the court system, schools, voluntary organisations, neighbours, the news media, the Government’s Social Services Inspectorate, Government Departments, Ministers and Parliament, Government and Opposition. Some people from all those institutions and in all those categories had worked hard to do a good job for those children, but too many had not and the whole system had failed.

The Ministerial task force included outside representatives from social services, education, the police and the voluntary sector. It also included a young woman who had recently been through the care system. She made some most valuable contributions to our deliberations and provided salutary reminders of the real world in which some children are being expected to grow up. I was grateful to her and all the other members of the task force for their positive contributions to the work of developing a comprehensive and practical set of measures.

We wanted to ensure that in future, children in care were looked after properly and got a decent start in life. We started by recognising that, if the whole system had failed those children, the whole system had to be put right. Tinkering with a few aspects was not enough.

Throughout our deliberations I asked everybody involved to look at the matter from the point of view of the children and to ask whether the care provided would have been good enough for them when they were children, and whether it would be good enough for their own children. That is what the task force tried to do. As a result, our proposals were intended to ensure that those responsible, at any level, for children in care behave towards them as any good parent tries to behave towards his or her children.

With that in mind, the Government accepted the task force's recommendations. We had already launched a three-year programme in the document entitled "Quality Protects". Its job was to transform the care system for children by setting clear objectives and targets, putting action plans in place, and measuring whether those targets had been met. It also provided new guidance to strengthen the hand of conscientious elected local councillors. That would call for joined-up government – all Government Departments, local authorities, the court system, schools, the police and voluntary organisations working together towards a common goal, with clear targets and a demanding timetable. There could be no more excuses. All those measures could not be undertaken for nothing, so I was able to announce that we were establishing a new children's services grant, which would provide an extra £375 million over three years to help fund the necessary improvements.

Quite understandably, a great deal of public and official attention had been concentrated on the sexual and other abuse of some children in care. But little had been given to the fact that far more had simply got a raw deal and had been let down by the system. One aspect that particularly disturbed me was the fact that the law provided that councils had a statutory duty to children while they were in care only up to the age of 16 and a discretionary power to help them up to the age of 18 when they left care. As a result, some unfortunate children were turned out at the age of 16 with little or no help afterwards. I said "that can't be right".

In order that the task force could consider the question of when young people should leave care, and how they should be helped when they do, I insisted that my officials produce a paper spelling out what parents usually provide for members of an ordinary family between the ages of 16 and 18 or 21. In the House of Commons I urged MPs to think for a minute about when they were between 16 and 21, or what they did or were doing for their children in that age group. I asked them to think about having to do without any of that: no home to live in or return to; no shoulder to cry on; no encouragement to do school or college work; no morale-boosting chat before an interview, nor anyone to console us if it went wrong; nobody to give us a lift, make us a meal or, if we are a bit older, take us out for a drink; nowhere to get our

washing done for nothing; no mother or father to touch for a tenner when we were skint.

I was determined to change that and to extend the duty of care for those young people from 16 to at least 18, and ensure that councils' responsibilities for children up to the age of 18 and beyond corresponded more closely with those accepted by any good parent. That included trying to keep in touch with children once they had left home.

I was and remain a strong supporter of elected local councils and the concept of local autonomy. So we issued guidance to help conscientious councillors to do their job better in future and most of them are trying to do just that. But some weren't. When it comes to the welfare of children in care, children and young people's interests override any claims for local autonomy. That was why we initiated the Quality Protects programme, issued the document on leaving care, "What, me survive out there?" and passed the Care Standards and Children Leaving Care Acts.

By the time the Children Leaving Care Bill was before the House I had ceased to be Secretary of State. Freed from the limitations of Cabinet collective responsibility, I didn't just welcome the extension of the leaving care age from 16 to 18, I urged that it should be extended to 21. At that time, we were told that the average age at which young people left home was 22. I understand that it is now at least 24. So there is no excuse for any penny pinching councillors turning young people out at 16, yet some are still continuing to do it. Maybe if their consciences won't get them to do the decent thing, they need some financial incentive. It would certainly be worth it. The cost to the rest of us would be peanuts compared with those young people ending up in jail or having to be treated for the physical and mental ill health that follows from being turned out to fend for themselves when far too young - especially as often they have been two or three years behind in educational terms and in general maturity.

One of the problems with getting decent schooling for children in care has been that schools have been reluctant to take on children in care for fear that they might cause trouble or reduce the school's exam success rate. One of the few good aspects of the Education and Inspections Bill is that it gives education authorities the power to direct maintained schools to admit looked after children whether at the beginning of the school term or, most importantly, in term time. Local people dedicated to promoting the interests of looked after children should keep a watchful eye on how these powers are exercised to make sure some schools aren't allowed to evade their responsibilities. When the children concerned get into schools, special measures will be needed to ensure that they get the special attention they need. Not before time. On top of that, we must remember that a stable school life makes an enormous contribution to a child's successful development. Such stability is only possible for looked after children if they are not being shifted endlessly from placement to placement.

People tell me that things have improved and are still improving as a result of decisions I took and measures I set in train. But it's quite clear that there is still a lot of backsliding by people in authority. Further changes in the law and professional practice are necessary but not sufficient. Changing the attitudes of all those responsible for looked after children is the core requirement. So I think the best thing I can do is remind everybody in authority of the test I laid down. "Would this be good enough for your children?" Maybe, as it is the centenary of the birth of Sir John Betjeman, I should urge people to try to provide for looked after children what he referred to as "the love that in a family dwells".

Bringing up children and young people is difficult for anybody. It is more difficult for the State. But we have got to keep trying because it is right in principle, good for the children concerned and good for the rest of us.

3.

What makes a good parent? The perspective of parents, carers and young people

Sarah Richardson

Press and Communications Officer
What Makes The Difference?

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What makes a good parent? The perspective of parents, carers and young people

Sarah Richardson

Press and Communications Officer

What Makes The Difference?

This chapter is a collection of views from a group discussion with parents, carers and young people from care and not from care.

The group met only once and came together out of an interest in exploring parenting generally and what makes a good parent – corporate or otherwise. The discussion began around the kinds of things that make a good parent and the role or purpose of parenting. The group then discussed where the state might have trouble parenting young people in care and whether there were things that might make the state a better parent. This chapter aims to illustrate some of the themes of those discussions.

Thanks go to all of those who participated in this exercise.

There's no blueprint for what makes a good parent and society expects the skills and qualities you may require to be innate, growing effortlessly from instinct, and shaped by the lessons you have learnt from your own experiences as a child. When the group was asked to discuss what makes a good parent their response was multi-faceted, ranging from the personal qualities you should possess, such as empathy, consistency and patience, to the tasks you could perform such as nurse, teacher or unpaid taxi driver. There was also discussion on how a good parent fulfils their role, whether this is through being an advocate, being ambitious for their child or demonstrating a balance between control and freedom – in effect, setting boundaries.

As the state considers its role as a corporate parent, some of these characteristics seem ostensibly easy to quantify and provide and others are much more about the individual bond with the child; issues around stability and security which could be difficult to replicate in some care environments and under some current legislation. The discussion outlines an ideal and attempts to consider how a child in care might have the same positive experience of parenting from their corporate parent.

Good parents

“My parents will always be there. Always.” Young person

“You can always come back. Home is where you belong and you don’t have a ‘duty’ parent.” Young person from foster care

A good parent is interested in and involved with his or her child and is an advocate. They are ambitious for their child, but in the right way, working to ensure they fulfil their potential and that they have access to education and other help. Good parents look out for their children, provide security and protect them from harm. Parents need patience and energy as well as good communication and listening skills. They also need to be flexible and have self-awareness; parenting is not about you; it’s about your child and parenting is best approached with fun and humour. It’s an exceptional parent who doesn’t take things personally – or never gets wound up – but that’s an ideal.

Some in the group felt that parents should offer unconditional love. Others felt that, in reality, there are always conditions. One difference for the looked after child is that the love is always conditional: if they do something sufficiently bad, their foster placement could end – there’s always going to be less security.

Good parents are good role models. They lead by example, teach their children the right way to behave and are confident enough to be themselves.

“My dad used to embarrass me when I was a teenager but now I’m quite proud of that. He was being who he was.”
Adult

The group felt that, often, children in care and care leavers suffer because of a lack of exposure to good role models.

“The young people we work with all want to be social workers because that’s the only positive working role model they know or have seen. They have very narrow experiences.” Foster carer

"I tell my daughter that she can be a mother and have a career – that she has options." Parent

Knowing when to stand back and when to intervene is key. A good parent is always there when they are needed. They offer support around your education. They play the role of teacher, nurse, cleaner, personal shopper, banker and friend. They are flexible and value their child's own identity.

The purpose of parenting

"The role or purpose of parenting is to provide the child with a loving, caring and stable home. To be there for them when needed and to be able to talk to them about anything. To be able to give them hugs and kisses to show they are loved and are as much part of the family as they can be." Foster child

Children want to feel wanted. They want to feel that someone cares – and the state sometimes manages to achieve this. The group felt dedicated staff members and foster carers, for example, can cross this boundary.

Even the best parents make mistakes. If a foster carer makes a mistake, a child could just be removed from a care placement – sometimes against his or her will. What is OK in a birth family should be OK in care or in a foster family – like the process of mistakes, understanding, forgiveness and reconciliation. As a foster carer, if a placement breaks down, that marks the end of your relationship with the child. With a real parent, a breakdown is never a complete end.

Parents start to give children choice, often at an early age. They might let them decide what they wear, what they can have for breakfast or what the family does on a particular day. This is part of preparing them for independence – like children helping in the supermarket or learning to cook alongside a parent. Compare this experience to the artificial nature of some care homes, where laundry and cooking gets 'done' and the children are most commonly not involved in the process of day-to-day living. Or compare this to foster care, where pocket money is set by a remote council via committee, or the option of a holiday includes an extended admin process which can include weeks of waiting for forms to be signed and a series of police checks.

For children in care, choice is sometimes not going to be possible. But involving them in the decision-making process – or letting them see why a decision was made, needs to be part of their preparation for adulthood.

Parenting in care

Carers and other 'corporate parents' can be ambitious for their children, but sometimes only if the budget allows them to be. Good parents are likely to

move heaven and earth to get the state to respond to a problem their child may have. But there was some cynicism in the group.

“The state isn’t always ambitious because it’s worried about its wallet.” Foster carer

There’s a real conflict of interest here for corporate parents. Ordinarily a good parent will fight for the rights of its child in the community. When the parent also provides the services to that community who wins?

Expectations for looked after children are rising

“Sixteen years ago when I started working in policy, my responsibilities for looked after children were limited to getting their benefits sorted and finding them somewhere to live. Education wasn’t on the agenda but to succeed in life it is recognised now they need to get the same GCSEs or to have similar experiences to their peers”. Parent

However, it’s important to get a balance. Good parents also know to have fun with their child and the group felt the state could be too ‘outcomes-driven’. As a teenager, would you prefer a trip to Alton Towers – or a one-to-one chat about your feelings? Personal one-to-ones are not normal. Fun can be an outcome:

“You can engage with a young people over a game of cards – or in a more relaxed environment than sitting down in a meeting and saying ‘give’.” Parent

While carers should be advocates for their charges, the group acknowledged a carer’s position is different from a parent’s role. Carers and advocates could be challenging the people who employ them and this could lead to dangerous compromise.

As a parent, the state has resources and procedures rather than empathy. Getting help and advice should be easy from the state, but often there could be a question of priorities:

“The state cares when there’s a crisis: if yours are the problems which don’t make you difficult, you’re less likely to get help. You might not get praise just in case someone else [in your care environment] hasn’t done as well and they’ll be upset.” Foster child

Setting appropriate boundaries is one of the hardest parts of being a parent and yet it was felt, particularly in care homes, young people’s behaviour might not be challenged. The group gave examples of teenagers who

might already be 'on that side of being out of control' because they were in care, not attending school or going missing overnight and this being seen as broadly acceptable. If we don't challenge this behaviour because 'they are in care', we send mixed messages.

Similarly, sometimes foster carers may not feel supported in setting and keeping boundaries – or feel undermined if the rules they set are at odds with guidance from a local authority. It's a situation which makes it easier for the child to play carers off against each other.

For a child in care there is sensitivity around money. Children can be financially better off in care – and that can drive a wedge between them and their real family. Similarly they may embrace the prospect of independent living and be happy to move out and manage on less than they would be getting in allowances in a foster home – because they are personally receiving more than they would be getting in pocket money:

"Care leavers can think the streets are paved in gold and you can do what you like." Foster carer

Money - like a full fridge, a nurse or a teacher - should be easy for the state to provide; emotional support is much more difficult to substitute effectively.

Moving towards adulthood

"My son's 28 and he has no plans as yet to move out."
Parent

"Society has moved on so much. We have a much more extended period of adolescence which didn't exist 30 or 40 years ago. The looked after children system hasn't caught up with this and is still planning around young people leaving home much earlier." Parent

For good parents, the parenthood contract never expires. Children leave home secure in the knowledge they have somewhere to go back to. They have a safety net. Some children are still living at home with their families in their late twenties. They have flexibility while a looked after child has no option and has to become independent much faster, often returning to old networks or no networks for support. They can be the very networks that we felt it so important to remove them from in the first place.

For many foster carers and social workers, looking after children isn't a business proposition. Why shouldn't a carer continue to have a relationship with a young person after they've left 'official care', without risk of being challenged for breaking professional boundaries. Should this now be a cut-off point for sending Christmas and birthday cards, for example?

“It can be difficult to speak to people who you have cared for in the past.” Foster carer

The group suggested supporting a young person, not just informally, but formally for six months once they’ve moved into accommodation should be a minimum.

“She’s moved on but I’m still her carer and by keeping in touch she’s still in her accommodation. Regular contact can be the difference between a young person having to move or losing their tenancy. My involvement was not expensive; it was easy to set up and took the pressure off the social worker. We communicated well and we both had a longer term interest.” Foster carer

Good parents think in terms of long-term outcomes as well as the immediate ‘managing’ of children. But a long-term commitment to a looked after child can cost more – at least in the short term. Securing the right package for a care leaver’s transition needs to be formally planned and a support package in place, ideally ensuring continuum. The group endorsed planned ways in which relationships can continue even if the placement can’t.

Consistency and the corporate parent

The state could provide more security by providing some consistency in relationships at a far earlier stage - or have a limited number of people dealing with a child’s future. As a foster carer, you could be one of 15 staff involved in a child’s upbringing. As a child in care, everyone has an ‘in’ into your life. Young people want to feel as though they’re normal – and consistency is normal - up to 15 people trying to be consistent is not.

Of course, the state can provide resources, like a full fridge and money; a cleaner and a nurse. But a parent does these things because they want to and because they should, rather than because they are paid, and that makes the relationship different. A key move, the group suggested, would be investing time and resources in stopping placements from breaking down and working to resolve placement issues. The state may often overreact to these issues and is often unwilling to take risks - and can make it far too easy for a young person to move on from a placement, for example, rather than confronting the situation. The group felt not enough emphasis is placed on developing relationships and the importance of them. While it’s hard to see the state as ‘loving’, an individual carer can be, if a placement is well-matched.

“As a carer it can be more difficult parenting someone else’s child because they have a different history from your own child.” Foster carer

As a parent what are you trying to create - or achieve? Your success as a parent is judged according to the child you produce. The group felt that, as a parent, you are trying to raise a child who is confident and has a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. A good parent wants to ensure their child feels happy and content and has social and practical skills. They form positive relationships and have a sense of right and wrong. They are emotionally and physically healthy and will achieve their potential.

As a child grows up, a good parent will ensure they are increasingly self-reliant. They will have respect for themselves and others and be able to achieve financial independence. A well-parented child will be happy with who they are and accept others as they are. They feel secure, have an interest in other people and know that their actions affect other people. They become good role models and good communicators. They're resourceful and able to stand up for themselves.

What would make the state a better parent?

"I think that there is a gap, [between parenting for looked after children and other children and young people] Being a looked after child; for 10 years I have seen what it's like. You don't get the love that comes with having a natural family as the foster carers have so many rules that they have to abide by, such as not being able to give the looked after child a hug if he/she is upset or if they have hurt themselves. The foster carer is not allowed to put even a plaster on - the young person has to do so." Foster child

At the heart of good parenting is respecting the individual. No two looked after children are the same and yet there are too many rules which apply to every looked after child. Ditching the stereotype and perhaps allowing carers/professionals to have more say in what's going on in the child's life could be an answer.

"Be a bit more lenient: allow the children to have hugs and kisses from foster carers if they want to and it's ok with the foster carers." Young person

Good parents are flexible

Workers and foster carers may not be ambitious for young people if they are not ambitious for themselves – and this includes them taking full advantage of training opportunities. The group felt that often nothing is done if carers do not attend training and highlighted how some local authorities pay carers for attending training and others don't. Some felt there needed to be an incen-

tive for carers to attend training; others felt they needed to keep abreast of the changes in policies to do their job effectively and if they didn't they should be deregistered. Choose the stick or the carrot.

Concern was expressed that residential social workers have the most demanding and difficult jobs and yet often care homes can be staffed by unqualified people doing vital work for low pay. It was felt that 'bank' staff don't have the same relationships and commitment to the children in homes and it was essential to train the right people to do the job. All corporate parents involved in frontline provision need - and should - be trained in communication and listening skills.

No parent has a limitless budget – and access to one might not be in the best interests of any child. But, wherever possible, decisions should be made on the basis of what is best for the child, rather than on the basis of procedure and allowances. Corporate parents need to be open and honest – foremost with the child - about what can and cannot be done. They must also free up the carers/professionals working with that child to make the decisions that are in the best interests of that child.

The group felt that the more placements a young person has, the more confused they become about their identity. There needs to be consistency in both standards and environment. If a child goes missing the carer should be out looking for that child. There should be no option for the child not to attend school regardless of their care or home situation. The state needs to work with the individual and their needs, like a parent does with a child – and stop working with them on the basis of whether or not they still need support, not arbitrarily according to their age.

Ultimately a good parent protects their children and keeps them safe – and that includes taking risks. But they'll also go the extra mile rather than just follow procedures.

"I have a place in the world – a family; an extended family."

Young person

"A good parent is there no matter what and can be someone to turn to if you're feeling down or upset. They're someone to talk to if you have any worries or fears, but also someone to teach you the ways of life and the right from wrongs. A good parent is someone to praise you for doing things right but also to discipline you if you have done things wrong." Foster child

With thanks to: Amanda Allard, Pete Breathwick, Donna Woods, Karen Lacey, Sarah Strachan

4.

“It’s just the basic stuff that would make such a big difference”:
views of young people from care

Modi Abdoul

Service User Involvement Worker
What Makes The Difference?

4.

“It’s just the basic stuff that would make such a big difference”: views of young people from care

Modi Abdoul

Service User Involvement Worker,
What Makes The Difference?

The information used in this chapter has been gathered from young people across England. They are from differing backgrounds and circumstances and have had a variety of care experiences. All of the young people were either in care or had just left the care of their local authorities. The young people were aged between 16 and 23. None of the young people are named, as was their request. Each was asked the same question:

‘How do you perceive the state as a parent?’

I have structured this chapter according to the main themes that emerged and as far as possible have used direct quotes from young people themselves. I have drawn some conclusions based upon my discussions at the end.

After analysing the information gathered it was clear there were many recurring themes of significant concern. Above all, one thing was apparent; the state needs to constantly evaluate the way it handles young people in care in order to improve the services they receive and to meet their need for parenting.

What do young people in care expect from a good parent?

- **Accommodation/Housing: A safe, secure environment. Satisfying the need for a home, not just a base.**

"What I needed at the time was a settled environment where normal family things were going on. It was a place where I lived and I still kept my school. I got some stability and just that normal household which helped balance it out a bit."

With a general sense of something missing from their lives and an overall sense of wanting to belong, a secure and happy home life is probably the number one priority for most of the young people interviewed. With a large number of the young people currently in state (corporate) care previously coming from unstable backgrounds, to have a normal life - or as normal as possible - will lead to the child feeling cared for and being supported. Normality for the young people meant a settled environment where they could live for a longer time frame to allow them to settle in a local school and get to know their carers.

- **Continuity and Consistency: The need for one place to call home and for clearly defined behavioural boundaries.**

"If there'd been less consistency I would have gone off the rails."

The general experience of accommodation in the care system is that young people are moved constantly between children's homes, foster care, semi-independent accommodation and hostels - to name but a few. This constant movement, combined with what is probably already an unstable background, increases mistrust of adults. This may be the result of a lack of a consistent adult and home in their lives, and I believe certainly adds to the issues young people have to deal with.

"I've stopped trying to remember all their names, I am only going to get a new one next month".

There is a wide variety of research to indicate that placement breakdowns can contribute to some of the poor education outcomes of young people in care. This could be because of the fact that young people have to keep starting all over again; building new relationships and moving school - and with shortages of school places, they may be out of mainstream education for a period of time.

Imagine if you were a young person and came home from school one day to be told you had to move to a place where you had no friends or family, and had to live with people you'd never met or even spoken to until the day you arrive with all your belongings. Statistics from the DfES indicate that this happens to young people from care at least twice a year. It's clear that placement stability, continuity and family links are all essential. Young people who feel supported and encouraged by family members or former foster carers are more likely than others to be able to cope with the major changes facing them.

- **Support network: A few close 'corporate family' members who are available 24/7 are more accommodating than being passed around from 'pillar to post', around several 'part-time' social workers.**

"In a normal family you would have your mum and dad and you'd probably have your uncles and cousins and maybe some grandparents...but young people in care have a corporate parent that ranges from 14 to 15 people - it can become ridiculously big."

There was an overwhelming feeling from the young people I spoke to that the state as a corporate parent is getting it wrong. In a normal family there would be a mum, dad, children and few extended family members. But for young people in care their network extends much further, including a social worker, personal advisor, numerous different professional workers, duty managers, service managers and councillors. This list could extend to dozens of people all making different decisions for one young person. Most people in this list will have specific tasks because of the way services are currently structured, with different people having differing levels of responsibility. This is really unhelpful to any young person.

"You don't know whether you're coming or going, and you don't know where you are with everyone...It only needed one person to say, 'look don't do that, that's wrong.'"

This inevitably arouses feelings of ambiguity for young people with the individual they meet on a particular day. The more people who are involved, the more confused or displaced young people feel. They have to build, or attempt to build, relationships with all the different parties involved in their lives.

"It's really confusing, to keep on the ball with everyone... you just want two people there. Just a mum and a dad. You don't want everyone else there, butting in, because you just can't get on with trying to live a normal life, and have a family."

Another factor that seemed to worry these young people in care is that they felt their time with their social worker was increasingly limited. With a regular family there would always be someone to call on if a problem was to arise, whatever time of day. There is a need for 24 hour support which is not currently being met fully by any of the workers/carers appointed by the state:

"When you're in care you get lonely...all social workers now are part time...if anything happens on a Monday or Tuesday I have to wait until Wednesday or Thursday afternoon...it takes too long, anything that you get from Social Services takes too long."

We have to stop the problems caused for young people by having too many adults making decisions. Young people need one or two professionals who are able to say yes or no – in discussion with the young person.

- **Financial support: Being able to provide for the child financially, allowing them to live above the Government guidelines of subsistence until they can provide for themselves.**

"It's money problems...I think they should give you a little bit of support after you turn 18...a clothing allowance and all that sort of thing."

Figures suggest that the average age for a child to leave the family home is now 25 and possibly as late as 29 for young men. Yet the state still expects its children to leave home by the age of 18 in most cases, which puts the majority of the young people back where they first started and often living a life on an income that is below the national guidelines for subsistence.

The majority of the young people interviewed felt that the state gave them a better life than they had before they went into care; better education opportunities, support, materials, getting their life back on track. However, they were living their lives in fear of the consequences that may occur when they leave care and are out in the big wide world by themselves. Does a parent really let go of their children when they get to 18 or 21? If they are a good parent they don't, so why do corporate parents get away with that?

"You're taken into care because you have some problems in your life and social services give you things to try to fix some of your problems. You actually start to have a normal life and get used to this new life and one day they just kick you out - putting you back where you started."

Young people from care are becoming more independent at a younger age than their counterparts who are not in care, and as a result they are missing some of the best elements of being young - such as being carefree, playful

and everything else that comes with being a young person. Having missed so much at a younger age, the time to enjoy and play is cut short. These aren't young people a lot of the time - there's no chance to be a young person. They should probably be called young adults.

Bearing in mind that young people become independent and self reliant at different ages, the interviewees all agreed that support was needed and financial support was seen as a good indicator of being a good parent. Supporting your children, not necessarily forever or even as long as their counterparts - whose parents will continue to support them even after they have left home - but long enough until they can support themselves.

- **Someone to talk to: Preparation and education for adulthood, parenthood and independence - helping them to build their own futures and to break away from the cycle of dependency.**

"If I was a parent I would talk to the child more, if they wanted to. I'd be there and listen...I'd try to help...if my kid was struggling I would make sure they get all the support and education."

There was a general consensus between the interviewees of wanting to learn from the bad experiences which they have gone through and to make things different when they became parents themselves. The young people wanted to learn from their corporate parents' mistakes. They didn't want to repeat the same mistakes when they one day become parents.

"I wouldn't make the mistakes my foster parents have made."

"I'm struggling with my literacy and they know that from when I was at high school and no one has picked it up."

Education was a major issue too. Any good parent would fight for their children's educational needs. If children are failing in a particular subject parents would be the first to phone the school and enquire why their child isn't getting that extra help. Given that the state is also in charge of the school systems, there's no excuse for not adjusting this anomaly. Perhaps the problem is that social workers have to argue on behalf of the young person whilst representing the state. A corporate parent for an individual young person shouldn't have that conflict of interests – a natural parent wouldn't.

But it's not all bad...

The state is not failing in all departments. The opportunities which are available to care leavers, if they can access them, can be good in terms of services. The state can get it right, and often does provide the consistency of

a stable placement and one person for a young person to interact with. These lucky ones out perform those for whom the state has not got it right. But when the state gets it right, it can have a really positive affect on the young person's experience of care. The state just needs to work on getting it right like this for every young person in care.

"I got given a computer to help me out with my school work."

"They gave me an opportunity to get my own flat."

"I didn't have a particularly close relationship with my foster carers but I felt that I got a safe, secure environment, if you like, which was what I needed at that time. I think I had a strong relationship with my mom already so I didn't need that side, the emotional, I don't think."

Conclusion

"It's just basic stuff that'd make such a big difference."

This chapter has set out the main areas in which the young people interviewed considered the state to have failed. These were the major contributing factors that led these young people to brand the state as a pretty bad parent. The young people interviewed were often being forced to grow up faster than their counterparts, and often had to take on responsibilities at a young age that would 'normally' be expected to be provided by a family. In some cases the young people had to support themselves, take on a flat at 16 and all the responsibilities which come with having a flat, and at the same time try to juggle employment or education.

From the interviews I felt that the majority of the young people believed that the state was not meeting their needs and in many ways offers an abysmal substitute for the theoretically powerful "Nuclear Family" support network they expected the state to be.

From my discussions with young people I believe that the state is not a very good parent and sometimes is even a bad parent. You only need to look at the low level of education achievements of young people in care, the high numbers of young people out of employment, the number of young people forced to leave care unprepared and even the numbers who are homeless.

"I've learnt so many things (from the care system) that I am not going to do when I am a parent".

The state should be identifying the best ways to help children in care and care leavers through the difficult stages of their lives. To be effective the state

needs to involve young people in every step of their journey to adulthood, and consult them about life changing events - as any good parent would. Unfortunately the state as a parent - usually in the form of a social worker or personal adviser - has much less contact with its children than 'normal' parents do and those acting as 'parents' spend more time filling in paperwork than they do actually spending time with young people. My worry is that we are creating a generation of young people where the only real lesson they are learning from their experience of the state as their parent (at least in part) is how not to do things. More support and overall attention – from one or two workers - is needed from the state to educate its children about the real world – as a good parent would provide. If this was happening to our own children what would we do? And what will you do about it now you know?

"If it isn't good enough for them, why is it good enough for me?"

These young people have summed up in just a few sentences what it's taken professionals years to identify in research messages. There's an important message here for all of you about the value of listening to young people.

5.

Doing their best: Profiles of Hull and Gloucestershire local authorities

Jo Coles

Senior Policy Officer
National Leaving Care Advisory Service

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Introduction

When a child is taken into care their local authority becomes their corporate parent. Replacing, at least in part, the one or two parents and wider family network that is the norm for most children and young people, an army of professionals take over. Decisions about everything in a young person's life, from where they live to what they have for breakfast, become the business of Chief Executives, strategic committees, social work professionals and managers as well as frontline carers in foster and residential care.

By interviewing staff at every level of a local authority this chapter seeks to better understand how the state is parenting the children and young people for whom it has legal responsibility. It will attempt to outline where things work well, what doesn't work well and where managers and staff themselves see a need for improvement. Finally it will identify some general points that might be useful in improving the parenting ability of local authorities and what role there might be for national government.

In July 2006 interviews were undertaken with staff working at all levels throughout Kingston upon Hull and Gloucestershire councils. These local authorities were chosen as both are relatively large authorities with similar numbers of young people leaving care. Both of the authorities we feel currently perform well as corporate parents for their looked after children and care leavers.

Gloucestershire

Gloucestershire is a relatively large county council in the south west of England. It is essentially a rural area that includes the district councils of Gloucester, Stroud, Cheltenham, Forest of Dean, Tewkesbury and Cotswold. The county is relatively affluent and unemployment is well below the national average in most areas. Education standards are good with well over 60% of the county's children getting five GCSEs A-C (national average 57%). The districts making up Gloucestershire county council range from 40th most affluent to the 139th most deprived council areas in England. The council has been controlled by the Conservatives since 2005.

Gloucestershire's Children's Services department has two stars. Looked after children and care leaving services are relatively well funded and feature in the council's strategic plan. Children's Services have recently been restructured into a children and young people's directorate. Within this, looked after children's services sit directly under children and young people's services whilst the leaving care services sit under young people's support.

Key statistics:

- Number of children (0-18) 125,278
- Number of looked after children 399
- Number of looked after children (for 12 months or more) 244
- Number of young people in leaving care service (age 16-21) 270
- Budget for leaving care service £991,000

Hull

Hull is a relatively large unitary authority on the Humber estuary. The city suffers from a low skills base and has some of the lowest wages in the country. Unemployment is more than double the national average and education standards are poor with only around 44% of the authority's children getting five GCSEs A-C (national average 57%). Hull is ranked as the 9th most deprived council area in the England. The council has not been under the control of any political party since 2002 and is currently run by the Liberal Democrats.

Hull's Children's Services department has two stars. Looked after children and care leaving services are relatively well funded. The council has also recently put in place a Children and Young People's Plan for the city which aims to ensure that no child is left behind. Looked after children form a central plank of that plan. Children's Services have recently been restructured and services now sit under one of the Every Child Matters criteria (being healthy, staying safe, achieving economic wellbeing, enjoying, making a positive contribution, and - separately - achieving). Looked after children sit under the staying safe criteria and leaving care services sit with achieving economic wellbeing.

Key statistics:

- Number of children (0-18) 56,920
- Number of looked after children 524
- Number of looked after children (for 12 months or more) 397
- Number of young people in leaving care service (age 16-21) 272
- Budget for youth support service (including leaving care) £1,600,000

Part 1 - Roles

In order to understand how a local authority operates as a parent to its looked after children and care leavers the first step was to see what people think they should be doing. Clearly within such a large corporate structure there is considerable difference between what a Chief Executive will see as their role and how Personal Advisors to a specific caseload perceive theirs. Interviewees were asked about their role, where they thought their responsibilities started and ended and if and how their responsibilities towards looked after children and care leavers were different than towards other children and young people.

The Chief Executives saw their function as securing the life chances for looked after children. Both saw a role for themselves in making sure the strategic priority for the local authority prioritised children and young people and that looked after children and care leavers were treated as a distinct group.

For elected councillors, serving as the lead members for children and young people's services, both felt the buck stopped with them and that they had a responsibility to ensure outcomes for looked after children were at least as good as for other children. One added that she saw her role as ensuring the needs of looked after children and care leavers were being met and that people were paying attention to things such as remembering young people's birthdays and making sure carers attend parent evenings.

The Directors of Children's Services both considered their role as one of putting a strategy in place for all children in their areas but one that also prioritised the most vulnerable groups such as looked after children. Both said they were working to ensure children in or leaving care got the best opportunities to do well in life.

The Associate Director of Youth Support interviewed saw his role as developing a coherent system of support for young people that enables them to navigate their way through the complicated range of services provided in and beyond the local authority.

The Service Managers for leaving care services recognised their statutory responsibilities but saw a further duty on themselves to generally try to improve the lives of young people in care. One emphasised the challenge in their role of trying to ensure older young people are not overlooked. Both mentioned the challenge of trying to ensure care leavers get equal status to looked after children.

Three Personal Advisors were interviewed and all stressed the relationships they were able to build with young people in their ability to be successful. This could take time but they emphasised the importance of mutual trust in their ability to achieve the more practical side of the role; accessing services for young people and keeping them motivated about their futures.

From residential care, a children’s home manager and two residential care-workers were interviewed. Working on the frontline, they all highlighted the need in their role to try to create a home, provide things for young people day to day and ensure they were kept safe. Two also mentioned their role in helping to navigate different services and systems on behalf of the children and young people in their care.

Part 2 – Who’s responsible for decisions about parenting and where does the buck stop?

Successful parents will be united in how they parent their children and will do whatever it takes to get the best they can for their child. Given the large number of people involved in the lives of looked after children and young people it may be easy for young people to fall between any gaps in management levels. Interviewees were asked where they thought their role started and finished, who in the end acted as the corporate parent to looked after children and care leavers and how were roles valued?

.....
 : Young person, Gloucestershire :
 : “I think the people at the top don’t see what’s going on :
 : below them, they just make the rules but they don’t see. :
 : They should go and see what’s going on and what could :
 : be changed, listen to people’s views and start with the kids. :
 : I don’t think my local authority is a good parent.” :
 :

Hull

Kim Ryley (Chief Executive): “Staff can go to the Director of Children’s Services, and technically beyond that to me if they have concerns. There has to be a respect for the professional judgements people make which means we have to be prepared to look into anything that someone thinks is a problem.”

Rob Murray (Leaving Care Service Manager): “Legislation says that our responsibilities stop when a young person reaches the age of 21 or 24 if they’re in education. My own view, which has been tested over the last couple of weeks, is that, if you’re a care leaver, you’re always going to be a care leaver. So if somebody comes back to us later on, say when they’re 23 and left the service a couple of years before, and says they’re really struggling we would try and

offer whatever support we could to try and get them back on track.”

Personal Advisor: “As a personal advisor my responsibility starts the minute I come in that door, meet the young person and start looking at what needs doing. That’s the ethos we have here, 100% working with young people. It’s about listening to what they say and trying to achieve for them. Unfortunately our responsibility ends when they’re 21, which is a shame because it shouldn’t. If you’re achieving, you should carry on.”

Residential Home Manager: “Once they’re here my responsibility is for those children throughout their care here. We’re more sensitive now to encouraging children to do things themselves. We have two domestics, but we don’t have cooks so we do all the cooking and the buying of food. I manage the budgets. But it’s just like a normal home and we try to treat them like you would any other child. Support continues after they’ve left too. Even though we’ve moved five children on over the last two years, we still support them for example calling them or taking them out for a meal.”

Gloucestershire

Pete Bungard (Chief Executive): “I see part of my role as strategically closing that gap in achievement between young people from care and other young people, but also between young people from care where outcomes are also radically different. Our role for looked after children is different. We may actually be the only champions for them. There are a hell of a lot of people who have corporate parenting responsibility; me; councillors; anyone involved in scrutiny of services.”

Bill Robinson (Associate Director Young People’s Support): “There are the social workers who are actually dealing with things day to day and they’re the foot soldiers in a sense. But I think the critical responsibilities are actually with elected members and senior officers to ensure that the strategies, systems, processes are in place to make sure that staff aren’t spending half their time navigating around systems.”

Personal Advisor: "You've got your professional boundaries and as a worker it is about striking a balance. I'm not at the end of my phone at 2am on a Sunday, although there are emergency contact numbers, but I will work with people into the evening when that's needed. There was an instance where I was there for somebody who gave birth and that made me think about my boundary. But at the end of the day the young person was going into labour and she wanted me to be with her and she didn't have anyone else to ask. I think, what would a good parent do in this situation? And that's the measurement I tend to work to."

Residential Care Worker: "If a young person wants to go out, no matter what time of the day or night, there's nothing we can really do about it. We don't want to be a secure unit, but for their safety I know this isn't the best for some of these young people because we don't have the power or the ability to keep them safe. It doesn't feel homely here. The kids hardly ever use the front room. They tend to just watch TV in their rooms. This place isn't treated like a home, it's treated like a hotel."

With so many different people involved at a different level in all local authorities it's not surprising that there could be confusion over parenting responsibility for children and young people in care. Nationally, government holds elected councillors and lead members to account. Strategic decisions are made by Chief Executives and Directors of Children's Services. Managers set the tone for their teams and day to day decisions are made by foster carers, social workers and residential workers.

A unified approach is key to successful parenting yet, if a large number of professionals are involved, children and young people are able to divide and rule, as any child would, to get their own way. Whilst it's true that children cannot choose who their parents are, this is one way in which the state could empower young people by allowing them to live with people they genuinely like. In Hull and Gloucestershire, where there is a clear will to improve their parenting, having looked after children and care leavers involved in the recruitment of residential care workers, giving them a choice of social worker and ensuring they are fully involved in the planning and preparation for any placement move are areas where they were either planning change or were already changing practice on the ground.

Part 3 - Emerging Themes

The interviewees were asked a range of questions about what was and was not working well, and about the checks and balances in the system. Their comments highlighted a number of themes that underpin corporate parenting.

● Leadership, Structure and Resources

.....
 : Young person, Hull
 : "The Chief Executive is the main man so he should make
 : sure he knows everything that's going on. I think if there
 : were chances for me to tell the Councillor about my
 : problems she might be able to help sort things out.
 : Perhaps the Director should be speaking to his staff more
 : and checking whether or not they have problems that
 : need sorting out."
 :

Cllr Jackie Hall (Gloucestershire): "We have to do the best we can. I have almost 400 looked after children, limited budgets and a Government telling me to spend money on X, Y and Z. It feels like a small pot of money with many commitments. You can't spend the money twice. Looked after children are one of our top priorities – it's in our corporate plan. We have to try to work around our statutory responsibilities and give a good service. The last thing we need is Government coming in with a heavy hand and telling us what we can and can't invest in for looked after children.

Bill Robinson (Associate Director Young People's Support, Gloucestershire): "There's too much individual assessment from different agencies. Young people could have three or four assessments from different organisations and there is little evidence that those assessments actually relate to more coherence of services. I had a letter from a care leaver who was distressed about housing issues. I felt extremely uncomfortable that there are young people in the system, who are extremely vulnerable but who are still being bounced around between agencies."

Kim Ryley (Chief Executive, Hull): "I don't think local authorities set out to be poor corporate parents, it's not wilful neglect but by not giving the issue focus and

attention, services can end up drifting. At the moment we're ring-fencing children's resources and trying to build them up despite other pressures. But there will continue to be financial pressures. But if you look at the local budgets for health, education and other players, the combined budgets are huge. If collectively you start using money more flexibly there's real scope to make a difference. Having integrated Children's Services and a strategic focus is part of the answer but we're now trying to extend that focus to every part of the council that deals with children and young people, and particularly looked after children. There also has to be a political commitment to make sure you get the resources amid all the other pressures."

Cllr Christine Randall (Hull): "What we have to do is make sure that the way in which services are structured works properly, to the benefit of young people, not against them. Accountability is key. We have to make sure that what should be delivered for every young person is being delivered. Things could become more arms length if we were more confident about our commissioning frameworks.

Personal Advisor (Hull): "Quite often the management will have to say you can only deal with a case until a young person is 19 and a half. I don't think it is a good service. Of course there's a resource issue but the reward for your work is seeing someone through from 16 to 21 and seeing the remarkable transition. I think we're very effective while we're involved but once things are out of our hands it's almost goodbye, good luck, all the best. There's no fall back position for care leavers."

In both local authorities there was evidence of a clear strategic priority for children and young people with children and young people in care a high priority. Both are trying to 'positively parent' and both saw being a good corporate parent as both a moral obligation and making long-term managerial sense. In both authorities this prioritisation seemed to be key to ensuring that services were being adequately resourced.

However there were clearly challenges for both authorities in spreading this message beyond those services that deal with children and young people directly. This was a big frustration at all levels and something they were grappling with. However, whilst those at a senior level, including lead members,

recognised that the buck stopped with them, are they always using the best weapons at their disposal to secure change for looked after children and care leavers themselves and those who work with them on a daily basis? Are young people and service managers being asked to appear at meetings where they might have more success in persuading council departments and others (housing and leisure departments, the NHS, the Learning and Skills Council) to take their corporate parenting responsibilities seriously?

● **Relationships with young people**

.....

: Young person (Hull)

: "It was good when my foster carers took us on outings,

: bicycle rides or trips away in the caravan. You're in foster

: care to sort things out and it's good when your foster

: carer is there to help you sort out your problems. Tracey

: is the main person in my life at the moment. She does

: all sorts and doesn't have much time for herself. In other

: placements, things didn't go well when I didn't want to be

: there and when my foster carer didn't understand things

: about me and how I do things."

.....

Cllr Christine Randall (Hull): "I know I could be a better parent because at the moment I need to find out more about the looked after children and care leavers in Hull. I'm in the process of doing that. If I don't know what their needs are I can't ensure I'm fulfilling them."

Nigel Richardson (Director of Children's Services, Hull): "We need to put an additional emphasis on the quality of relationships and on the quality of conversations that take place between professionals and children. Because it is those relationships that will make the difference. Young people say they want consistency, and for them it's the quality of a relationship that matters."

Personal Advisor (Hull): "I'm here to do a job. I think it's important how you build up the relationship which might last for a period of five or eight years. Paramount is the kind of respect that's shown. It has to be a mutual respect. As time progresses a young person can start to trust you and I think that's a massive thing for a 16 or 17 year old."

Personal Advisor (Gloucestershire): “We’ve got certain duties but for each young person it has to be individual doesn’t it? People on this team go out and spend as much time as possible with people, face to face. I value that time, and I think having those good relationships really is the vehicle for achieving far more and I think if I look at times when I really have put a lot of time in, I think it does pay dividends, you do see results.”

Trish Ashenhurst (Residential Care Worker, Gloucestershire): “If a young person is out of control you need to be able to take them away and give them some quality time away from everyone else. You can have all the experience and all the knowledge in the world, but for a young person in distress who just needs some space and time it will boil down to the person they eventually decide to talk to.”

The quality of the relationships young people have, particularly with their carers and those they have a lot of contact with, is clearly crucial. Most of those providing that direct care for young people acknowledged that and were keen to do what they could to build up strong relationships. However, many also clearly felt stretched. Within current structures and regulations the time they could spend with children and young people is limited by their caseloads and dealing with emergencies. This reflects a national issue. Does the increased administration and bureaucracy now so central to the role of the lead professionals mitigate against one of the roles core objectives? It was also noticeable, particularly in some of the residential homes, that relationships were very difficult to develop and young people didn’t always feel that the adults present in their lives cared about them.

Higher up the management structure it is understandably more difficult to have large amounts of direct contact with young people. Yet, when such contact did take place and senior managers and councillors were made aware of particular problems, there was a genuine desire to intervene. At a senior level the challenge seems to be maximising the effectiveness of the time senior managers and councillors do have to spend with young people, whilst at face level prioritising the amount of time available to work with often very damaged young people to build positive, trusting relationships has to be a core strategic aim for all local authorities.

• **Stability and Continuity**

.....
 : Young Person (Gloucestershire)
 : "I wasn't ready to live on my own. I knew I could but I
 : wasn't ready at all. I was pregnant and I had to move
 : out but it was really hard on my own. I had Lindsey (my
 : personal advisor) and she did most of the work getting my
 : flat up and ready. She helped a lot and if I needed help, all
 : I had to do was ring her. There were points when I didn't
 : want to live on my own, even though I knew I could. I was
 : tired and everything. All I had was Lindsey to help me. I'm
 : going to teach my children right from wrong. They'll know
 : I'm always there to support them no matter what and I'll try
 : and teach them the best I can. I'll always love them and let
 : them know they're loved and can always come and talk to
 : me. If you've got a family and friends around you then you
 : don't need anything else."
 :

Personal Advisor (Hull): " Unfortunately our responsibility ends when they're 21, which is a shame because it shouldn't. If you're achieving, you should carry on. I was still getting help from my parents at 21, I still do now here and there."

Personal Advisor (Hull): "Most young people have families and friends to turn to and if they're doing well at school there will almost be a plan of where their life's supposed to go because they're not carrying that emotional baggage. But I think it can be difficult for care leavers to map out their life because they're still trying to understand the early part of their life. I'm from a housing background and I'm a big believer in accommodation being the foundation to other services. I think when young people are transient, chaotic, often the very places we send them, hostels etc, breeds some of the negative outcomes that we see, like high custody rates or low educational achievement."

Residential Home Manager (Hull): "We've got a fairly stable staff group so although children will see different people coming in every day they know those people. Children have their own parents too and so on another level we try and enable parents to be parents still."

Jo Davidson (Director of Children's Services, Gloucestershire): "Young people are just like adults, they work better with some people than others. If you take the lead professional role, the social worker might hold the ring, but who should lead a particular child's case when each child has different needs? Sometimes the foster carer might be the right lead, for someone else it might be the youth worker, for someone else a school teacher might be. Everybody needs to accept they've got a responsibility to make sure that this child has as much going for them as we can possibly muster. And the social worker needs to feel they are supported by a range of other players that also have this child's interest at heart."

Jo Moore (Leaving Care Service Manager, Gloucestershire): "There's evidence certainly within Gloucestershire that if you leave care at a younger age, your life chances and opportunities and the route you take, even with a high level of input from your personal advisor, are less than a young person who would be in a stable placement at 18. If I think of my own child, there's no way that I would consent to him leaving home at 16 to live in a bed and breakfast."

Residential Care Worker (Gloucestershire): "I think it's dreadful sometimes how kids get placed. When a young person comes to the unit there should be an introductory period, a planning meeting, risk assessments - will they fit in with the other children? Finally there's a placement meeting where the young person is here and moved in. But whilst that's the principle, invariably and unfortunately that doesn't happen. I think there must be an awful lot of pressure for senior management to get kids into beds so all the planning and preparation for the placement gets all put to the side. So if you have a space most of the time a kid will come in regardless. It's hard to make anywhere like a home when there's no consideration to the influence of someone arriving on the rest of the household. When things have been stable here there is a really nice atmosphere and it has been a real pleasure to come to work."

The need for stability and continuity for children and young people as they grow up is well documented and it's unsurprising that this was identified as

a key theme in both authorities. Yet whilst this was an area of concern at senior management levels (not least because of the government indicators in this area), concern was voiced most fervently by those who saw the direct consequences of instability on the lives of the children and young people they work with.

● **Skills and Support**

.....

: Young person (Gloucestershire)

: I think the rules in the care homes were fair, like being

: in by 11, that's fine and checking your safety is fine and

: respecting other people's stuff because everyone's got

: to live there. But in a normal home you wouldn't get the

: police if someone broke something but they do in a care

: home. They're stretched in the ways they can tell a young

: person off. I think with me it would have been better to

: just leave me alone and I ended up with a criminal record.

: I can't blame the care system but I think it made me the

: person I am now, a stronger person who doesn't take any

: rubbish off anyone.

.....

Jo Moore (Leaving Care Service Manager, Gloucestershire)
 "We've got a great family support service within Gloucestershire. I think we're very good at returning young people home and supporting the family. There's a child action project, which includes workers placed in schools who can signpost children before they become in need so we can get support into families early. There's some great work that goes on. We're getting better at avoiding just going for a head on a bed. There's got to be time to avoid that. But life is sometimes a fight for care leavers and I think that even with good managers with pretty healthy budgets and a really motivated team with strong young person focus, it's a real challenge."

Trish Ashenhurst (Residential Care Worker, Gloucestershire): "I think one of the most important skills is caring about what you're doing, because if you don't care about your job and the young people that you're looking after, then what's the point of being in it? The job does wear you down – physically and emotionally. But every single staff member has his or her own qualities. I'm

good at solving problems and I'm a good listener. Years ago, I would have just reacted if someone did something by imposing a 'consequence'. But with experience I now analyse things more and try to sit and chat with young people. Sometimes, people coming into this profession haven't worked with young people before. I have though. I've worked with young people and I've got children. I know what it is about."

Bill Robinson (Associate Director Young People's Support, Gloucestershire): The key is working out how to support good practice at practitioner level without dragging the good people out and making them managers. Some of our best people here, they won't stay on the frontline because they won't see it as career development. We've got a model here which is probably more complicated than it needs to be but it's a process of professional development for frontline staff."

Jo Davidson (Director of Children's Services, Gloucestershire): "One of the reasons we've put all the youth support staff together within the directorate's structure is because we recognise there are some real tangible differences around that age group and the skills you need. How often do placements break down because the foster carer or the residential provision just need a weekend off? We've got enough knowledge and expertise between us to understand the stages that people go through. We need better planning around the emotional side of things as well as the concrete practical side. We have to help foster carers understand that they shouldn't assume the whole thing's breaking down just because they need a break."

Personal Advisor (Gloucestershire): "One young woman I worked with needed quite a lot of support to access training which consisted of me picking her up every morning and taking her to college when she first started. On the way, if there was anything she was a bit concerned about, we could talk it through. It might seem quite intensive but it really wasn't a lot of my time when you think about it - 15 minutes every morning. But it got her

going to college and after a couple of weeks, when she settled in and she got to know people, then she took herself. But the key thing is that she might not have done that if that intensive work hadn't happened."

Personal Advisor (Hull): "Family support has been assimilated into social work but it all comes apart with the kids' social workers. Everything's moved towards ticking boxes because we have to constantly evaluate what we're doing. Most social workers can tell you they now just sit at a desk writing reports all day and don't even get to go and meet the families. It's not their fault, it's the system they're working in."

One way to ensure you have successful staff working particularly with older young people in the care system would be to ensure they actually like teenagers and have the skills needed to work with that particular age group.

Working with teenagers requires different skills than those required for working with younger children. All the personal advisors interviewed in both authorities clearly enjoyed working with their client group. All commented on how much they liked their job. Maintaining morale in areas such as residential work - which can be one of the most stressful areas in social care - can be much more difficult. At a senior level, the skills and work done by frontline carers was acknowledged as a key issue. There was clear awareness of the kinds of skills it was most important for carers to have and of the importance of valuing frontline staff. Looking to the future, how both authorities demonstrate their support and commitment to their frontline carers will be key to any success.

● Empowerment

.....
 : Young person (Gloucestershire) :
 : "I didn't want to be in care at all and I blamed the care :
 : system for taking me off my parents. I wanted to be at :
 : home. Every family has their tough times. They could have :
 : had a social worker coming to help the family out rather :
 : than taking us off. I know they were trying to protect us but :
 : none of us wanted to leave. I was scared, I was just scared. :
 : We weren't put in the same place. I would have preferred :
 : them to keep us together although I saw my brother and :
 : sister more than my parents at first. I used to run off to my :
 : dad's after school. He wanted us to be at home." :
 :

We know that young people need to be involved in decisions about their lives.

Kim Ryley (Chief Executive, Hull): "There can be a tendency for local authorities to do things to young people rather than for them. When we've consciously gone out to involve children and young people in designing and re-designing services they use based on their own experiences we get much better results."

Rob Murray (Leaving Care Service Manager, Hull): "We tend to identify problems through consultation with young people and asking for their feedback. There's a complaints process to highlight problems but we try to resolve as much as possible by having good communication within the team with staff able to raise concerns easily. I think we could do better if young people were able to feed back issues at a higher level. I don't feel that as a service I have the opportunity to go and represent issues at a more senior level."

Personal Advisor (Hull): "A lot of the young people we see have bad experiences in care. They hate Social Services, they hate social workers. The good thing about this place is they don't see us as being Social Services. I think, well I'm a social worker, that's why we're here, but they don't equate us with the social workers they've had before because we work with them differently and try to give the control and power back to them. Some of the best planning happens with young people when you go away. There are real opportunities to do team building, it's hard to explain, but if you climb a mountain with someone then they know where you're coming from."

Both authorities were making considerable effort to empower the children and young people in their care and were aware of the challenges they face in ensuring this was done in a meaningful way. It is too easy to de-personalise the needs of children and young people in care and disempower them as a result. Modern pressures of the system combine to reduce our ability to empower our young people. The logical outcome of this can be the low expect-

tations for young people of some professionals working on the front line and the sense that there is nothing that could be done. This can cause feelings of considerable rejection and isolation by any child or young person in care, limiting their opportunities to succeed and cutting them off from the social and enjoyable aspects of life. All too often for care leavers there is a widely held expectation among staff at all levels that young people leaving care will 'get a flat' and live alone. The reality of that can mean that shopping, cooking and even eating alone happens far too regularly for many young people. If we are to really have a chance to improve the outcomes of this group we must overcome these issues. Listening to young people, giving them time and valuing their thoughts and opinions is essential to improving individual outcomes.

Part 4 - Concluding thoughts

Pete Bungard (Chief Executive, Gloucestershire):

"We know we could do better, and I suppose that applies to any parent in a normal mum/dad relationship.

You're never achieving your full aspirations because there are always other pressures. That doesn't mean we've achieved everything we could but I think we've got a much better understanding now of where we'd like to be."

It was an exciting journey meeting all those who could make the difference for the lives of almost 1,500 looked after children and care leavers in Hull and Gloucestershire. Perhaps most striking was how much everyone really cared about doing as much as they could for the children and young people in their care. Nevertheless, there were some sad and tragic moments when it became clear just how difficult a task it is, albeit unintentionally, to be a successful corporate parent.

During the time of our visits we observed or were told of the teenager who 'doesn't attend school' and who sits in a children's home during the daytime. The young man who moved from a foster placement just before his 16th birthday and sitting for his GCSEs and was now on the verge of prison having being in trouble constantly ever since. The 15 year old young woman, referred to as 'misper'd' (missing persons) to the police because they stayed out all night. Working to motivate and support these young people – to fill the parenting gap for them – is a very difficult task. Their past experiences bring about a whole range of feelings, attitudes and behaviours that require the greatest of skills and enormous patience over time if they are to succeed.

There's little doubt that those interviewed would be as concerned by these cases as anyone. This specialist task of care has to be performed successfully

in a context where there are ever increasing pressures on all professionals and at all levels. I would suggest you wouldn't have to look very far to find these young people in every local authority. Improving communication from those at the top of the corporate tree with those at the bottom – and particularly young people – is key, as well as empowering those people to positively challenge decisions when necessary.

What these case studies do seem to illustrate is a series of factors that need to combine successfully if the state is to be a good parent:

- **Use the structures and resources at its disposal and show strong leadership in prioritising children and young people in care in and beyond the local authority.**
- **Build strong relationships with the children and young people in care and get to know what their needs are.**
- **Ensure young people have stability and continuity of support throughout their time in care.**
- **Support those working with children and young people in care to behave like good parents.**
- **Empower children and young people in care during their lives in care so they will be empowered as adults.**

Both Hull and Gloucestershire are achieving all of the above at some levels, some of the time, as any 'good' parent would. However, in order to be successful, those working at all levels in any local authority (and beyond the local authority too), will need to embrace all of these if they are to be better parents in the future. And of course most parents wouldn't say they were 'good parents'. They're far more likely to say they do their best. Local authorities need to do the same. To be a more successful parent, local authorities have to be prepared to go the extra mile – especially for children in care and care leavers as they have assumed, at least in part, the role of the parent. In Hull and Gloucestershire there was definitely clear evidence that they were trying to do their best. But can any local authority, within its structures and all of the difficulties that will of necessity apply, go the extra mile in the way a parent would to secure the best possible life chances for their children?

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6.

Whatever happened to social work? A professional perspective

Alastair Pettigrew

Senior Manager
Local Government

6.

Whatever happened to social work?

A professional perspective

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Local Government

This chapter examines the looked after children service from the point of view of the front line practitioner working within it. Whilst it focuses predominantly on the role of social workers, many of the points raised could be equally be applied to other roles such as foster carers and residential care workers. It seeks to explain some of the pressures that contribute to the state being a less than adequate parent. It says something about performance measures and it makes some suggestions that could bring about improvement. They have probably been suggested before but ignored. Governments often behave towards social workers like the rich man in Tolstoy's fable – they will do anything for the worker except get off his back.

We need to ensure that the recommendations that emerge from this examination of the looked after children's service will have a resonance on the ground – that they will make sense to those who work with looked after children and to children themselves. The history of the care system is a history of poor outcomes and yet in general those who work with looked after children come into the work with a moral purpose, with idealism, energy, enthusiasm and commitment to rectifying injustice. The persistence of the shocking outcome statistics suggests that the aggregate failure to significantly improve outcomes is less likely to be the result of individual failures of individual workers with individual children and more to a wider malaise.

Children in care have had overwhelmingly damaging experiences before they enter care. It is not surprising that many of them do not yet exhibit signs of successful childhoods. The first task of addressing their disadvantage must be to seek to ensure that intervention from the State does not contribute

further to a deterioration in their plight by maintaining or aggravating the factors which have contributed to their situation. In enabling this to take place, the role of the child's social worker is paramount. In January 2003 Sir William Utting, in a foreword to the publication 'Looking after children – the role of the child's social worker', stated:

“Corporate parenting is not ‘good enough’ on its own. Every child and young person needs at least one individual to whom she/he is ‘special’, who retains responsibility over time, who is involved in plans and decisions and who has ambitions for the child’s achievement and full development. It is difficult for a large welfare bureaucracy consistently to present a single, human, recognisable face to the world. It is particularly difficult for a local authority encumbered with diverse statutory obligations and powers. The human face, however, is important to the thousands of individuals in the community who look to the local authority to provide them with personal services. It is indispensable in the care of the children to whom the local authority acts as a parent. Such children need a human intermediary, a known and trusted adult, who is responsible for regarding them as a whole person and representing their needs to the officers and members of the complex body to which their welfare is entrusted.

My experience of the children’s safeguards review reinforces the belief acquired over 30 years that the child’s social worker is normally the most fitted among the corps of paid officials to discharge this duty.”

Keith Bilton in the B.A.S.W. pamphlet “Looking after children” (2003) described the goals for children as –

- To enable the child to remain in her or his own family
- To restore the child to his or her own family
- To achieve with this child a secure attachment to a substitute family
- To help the child to develop the capacity for mature interdependence

These remain today the goals of social work with looked after children. They are clear and simple and it is worth spending a little bit of time trying to discover why they are not fulfilled in so many cases.

I believe there are six basic factors operating which are currently impacting on both service provision and practitioners on the ground to the detriment of looked after children and young people.

1. **Workload priorities.** Events in a proportion of looked after children's lives, particularly those who have become looked after in adolescence, are often characterised by crises – exclusion from school, placement breakdown, self harming, drug taking, arrest for offending, absconding from placements. The service has to react to today's crisis; those who are not in crisis inevitably get less attention and prepared plans are often abandoned to deal with higher priorities.

2. **Risk taking.** Our society is deeply uncomfortable with young people who appear to be out of adult control and who are harming themselves or others. It recognises that they are at great risk. Its institutional responses however reflect its discomfort in taking authoritative action. Young offenders will normally be allowed to commit repeated offences and be given a number of opportunities to correct their behaviour before they receive custodial sentences, while mental health units will seek to avoid admissions except for the most severely ill youngsters. Foster homes and children's homes can themselves no more contain out of control youngsters than their original families could. This leaves a minority (albeit small) of young people who on any one day in any inner city authority are effectively out of control and taking part in high risk activities; drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuous behaviour, sleeping rough, committing offences. These young people will all have social workers because their parents are unwilling or unable to exercise authority over them. Yet, their social workers will feel that they are left managing the risk to that young person. There are few if any immediate interventions that they will have any confidence in. Yet if they do not intervene and something serious happens to the young person, they risk being excoriated in the media for displaying an absence of responsibility. And if they move a child to an alternative living situation, they may just be replacing one unsatisfactory option with an equally ineffective one.

3. **Absence of effective authority.** If we really want to make a difference in looked after children's lives we absolutely have to give the lead professional the authority to make decisions and see them implemented. This means giving the capacity to secure, on behalf of a looked after child, high quality health and education, regular family and peer contact (if appropriate) and choice of appropriate placement to the responsible worker.

4. **Absence of incentives to produce good outcomes.** There are some obvious current disincentives. Firstly, social workers who wish to secure promotion and additional responsibilities are incentivised by improved pay to change jobs, join another team or go into management and therefore pass their caseload onto a colleague. Secondly, foster carers are incentivised to have their foster children removed at age 18 and not to offer accommodation for them to return during further/higher education vacations because the foster carer loses out financially. Thirdly, highly motivated people without a so-

cial work qualification but with relevant expertise in children's development, mental health, education, health, psychology, residential and foster care etc., are unable to become lead professionals for looked after children in the sense that I will argue, without undertaking a three year social work qualification course. Finally, there is no incentive for schools to secure 100% attendance of looked after children or ensure their entry and success in examinations. Indeed some would argue that it can be in a school's interest not to enter a child with a disrupted education history in state examinations for fear that the outcome will impact on that school's aggregate performance.

5. Too many cooks. Inevitably because many looked after children have profound difficulties and their family histories are often complex there are many professionals involved in their lives; many more than would be involved if they were living with their birth families. The impact of layers of local authority management needs also to be addressed. Currently there are too many people involved in decision making who do not have a personal knowledge of the child but rely on the descriptions of others or on written reports.

The social worker is then left to convey and represent decisions to a young person which they may not have personally advocated.

6. Performance measures which do not measure performance. The current government outcome measures for looked after children, which feature in the key performance indicators, principally address the failure of the system. They ignore the many looked after children who are successfully restored to their birth families after a period in care. Predictably, such children are likely to be the most damaged and the prognosis for them is likely to be more pessimistic. That is not to advocate that we shouldn't collect information about the quality of the services. It can be disheartening however if most of the measures developed actually measure failure and few measure success. It is a bit like listening to football results and only hearing the number of fouls, red and yellow cards issued without hearing about the goals scored.

Of course some performance indicators have great relevance to looked after children. Stability of placement is a good example of a measure that clearly predicts a more positive outcome. But it is not necessarily an easy measure to influence since it is dependent upon a number of related and unrelated factors. On the other hand, another of the indicators - the number of assessments completed on time - is relatively easy to influence but is completely unrelated to any impact on the child or the family.

I will shortly explore what changes might improve services for looked after children and young people. Firstly though, I want to pause and look at what life is like on the frontline.

A week in the life of a social worker

Imagine for a moment that you are a local authority social worker. You have 36 hours a week of remunerated employment to undertake the duties imposed upon you by your employer and to fulfil a myriad of requirements which central government prescribe to ensure that your clientele, vulnerable children and their families, benefit from your involvement in their lives. How you spend that time will be partially dictated by the structure of the Children's directorate which your local authority has established and by the specific specialism or area of activity in which you are engaged, but there are common elements that are present in most local authority social work posts.

• Duty

To begin with there is duty. This refers to your presence in the duty room where you will be required to respond to the sudden crises that emerge on any day. It could be a distraught birth parent unhappy about a contact meeting with her looked after child; a depressed and unhappy teenager who has had a row with their foster carer and wants to be moved; an outraged foster carer who has had to accompany their foster child to the police station last night. If you're lucky you may know something about the circumstances of some of these cases, but it is unlikely you will be up to speed with details. If their allocated social worker is not available you will need to quickly locate the file, skim its contents and arrive at a decision about how to respond. You may need to consult others involved with the case, perhaps in other agencies, seek managerial approval for expenditure, determine the priority assigned to this particular activity and ensure that an adequate record is kept. All the while the next phone call is unanswered and you know it may be of much greater significance than the one you have already dealt with.

Social workers broadly fall into two camps in their opinions about duty. They either love it or dread it. Whether they like it or not it is likely to be a feature of their lives and will take a large slot of time away from what most regard as their prime interest and responsibility – their allocated cases.

• Allocated cases

What are those allocated cases? Let's say they work in a typical looked after children team. They will have 15 children on their case-load; maybe 11 will be in foster homes, three in children's homes and one will be placed with their birth parents. Many will be placed far from both their home and the social workers office; preparation for the visit, travel, meeting the young person and recording the issues dealt with will take a minimum of half a day. Depending on the distance the worker has to travel and the extent of the difficulties which the young person faces that could be a full working day. Dealing with issues that have emerged on that day is likely to involve a whole series of communication with others involved in the young person's life – the school, the birth family, the social work colleague who monitors the foster carers,

the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) worker, the person who supervises contact between the child and their birth family. All this activity will eat into the time available to the other 14 children on the case load – who require attention, engagement, interest, involvement, trust and the full parenting responsibility which is the local authority's duty to exercise.

● **Accountability**

Of course a local authority social worker does not just have responsibilities to the children and families in their care. They belong to a large local employer and in order to deliver their accountability to the local authority they will have to take part in team meetings where work is allocated; team performance on the key performance indicators is reported; new developments are considered; training is requested and reported on; sickness absence is noted; new procedures are introduced; request for involvement in departmental working parties, council developments, complaints etc. are considered; and the issues that arise when one team with a particular perspective has to deal with another team or agency with a different perspective in relation to the child involved. Then there is supervision with the team manager where they are updated on progress and where cases can be discussed in detail and plans formulated, endorsed or changed. There is the appraisal process where performance is reviewed and evaluated, plans made and targets drawn up. All worthwhile activity presumably, but time consuming and drawing the worker away from the prime focus of their energy and commitment – their looked after child.

Every local authority seeks to promote professional accountability, sound decision making, effective planning, value for money and robust risk assessment together with a historic record which will enable a future reviewer to understand what happened, why it happened and what it cost. That record needs to be available for many years to ensure that on maturity the looked after child can retrace the history of their life and come to an understanding of what happened to them and why it happened.

● **Paperwork**

To enable staff to deliver on that expectation a plethora of mechanisms, meetings and forms have been developed in every local authority. All have positive aspects associated with them, many have related data and information and all tend to involve extensive written contributions by the social workers, such as: initial assessments, pre-birth assessments, core assessments, child protection reports, child in need plans, family support plans, reports for adoption and or fostering panels, assessment and action records, consultation reports for looked after children's reviews, case chronologies, looked after children reports, missing children reports, personal education plans, pathway plans, transfer summaries, care plans, placement plans, contact plans, family assessments. Of course not all children have all these in their file; but most have many.

This then is some of the context in which the local authority social worker functions. But what of looked after children? What do they expect of their social worker?

● **Customer expectation**

The sad truth is of course that looked after children don't want a social worker. Like children everywhere they want kind, supportive, sympathetic, understanding, loyal, emotionally generous PARENTS with whom they can live together with their siblings and who offer them unconditional love - who are available to them when needed. As a looked after child they haven't got these kind of parents and the likelihood is, unless they are adopted at an early age, they never will have. The looked after system is therefore destined to fail at the first hurdle of customer expectation. It cannot deliver the prime requirement. At best it will provide an inferior substitute; an experience of care by people who perform the task because they are paid to do so. In the majority of cases currently managed in local authorities that task will be organised by a succession of social workers who take responsibility for a period of years (if the looked after children are particularly lucky) months (if they are not so lucky) and weeks if the local authority, like many inner city authorities, is excessively dependent on temporary staff.

Deprived through no fault of their own of a permanent family of their own, children's expectations of the system and the personnel which the state has made responsible for them are both predictable and actually surprisingly limited. They would like their social worker to be reliable, punctual, trustworthy and to respect their confidential information. They dislike their personal information being shared with others whom they don't know (wouldn't we all).

Roger Morgan's report 'About social workers' makes it clear that although children's views of their social workers cover a wide spectrum, many rate their social workers highly. Despite this the service can be a demoralising one to work in. The rewards of the social worker's involvement in terms of making a tangible difference in a disadvantaged young person's life are often only experienced by those who are able to remain involved with the child and family over a prolonged number of years. In too many departments this is the exception rather than the rule.

● **Issues for staff**

Front line staff often share with looked after young people a sense of impotence, a feeling that they are not able to deliver the service which has been promised in ministerial speeches, elegantly written government guidance, detailed local authority children's plans, and indeed often in the assessments prepared by themselves and their predecessors in the child's file.

Central to the problem is the question of accountability. Who is accountable for the identification of the child's needs and the plan to meet those needs?

Sir William Utting stated that it was the child's social worker. Unfortunately that easy assignment of role and responsibility ignores the fact that the local authority social worker belongs to a large and complex bureaucracy. She doesn't have control of the numbers on her case load, the budget for her looked after child, the access of that looked after child to the school of choice, the access to the foster or residential placement of choice, the access to the CAMHS treatment of choice, the access to additional tuition or psychological support. She is the least powerful member of the department. Until we change that we will not address the first requirement of the system; to ensure that there is a social worker who is part of the looked after child's life throughout his or her care lifetime. A social worker who is responsible for writing the plan, reviewing the plan and ensuring delivery of the service.

Making a difference – new partnerships for social workers

How do we make such a thing happen? First of all we need to know what will not make it happen. Tinkering with local authority bureaucracies, more detailed guidance, more extensive training for social workers, more intensive inspections and improved pay for social workers will not address this. We need to incentivise social workers to dedicate themselves to localities for the length of their professional lives so that they will be available to looked after children and their families throughout their care experience. How can we do that?

I propose following the example of the medical and legal professions and establish social work partnerships for looked after children in local areas, attached perhaps to local health centres or schools, but create them as small private sector organisations which encourage partners to be adequately remunerated for remaining in place. These partnerships could be contracted by local authorities and paid for each looked after child at the average cost of a looked after child. Partnerships would then be expected to perform the local authority field social work functions. The social workers who are the partners in these organisations would be investing their personal time and resources, both in these communities and in the looked after children within them. As in all partnerships in the legal and medical sectors, partners will have a different range of expertise, skill and experience. But the important component is to create a mutually dependent team in which a choice of social worker can be offered to young people in care, and that that choice will be made in the knowledge that the social worker selected will be committed for the long term, not just because of the commitment to the young person, but because of the workers commitment to the partnership of which they are a member.

Stability of social worker is vital to the young person in care. A huge element of the current bureaucracy which surrounds a young person is required be-

cause their social worker doesn't actually know them well enough – hasn't had the time to read their voluminous files. So local authorities have created systems to ensure that, as a corporate parent, it can cross the 'T's and dot the 'I's of young peoples lives. But sadly that information, extensive and detailed as it is, emphasises that the young person is a case rather than a person. It is not very fulfilling to be merely a "case" on someone else's workload. We need smaller, more personal organisations to deliver a fieldwork service to looked after children.

Of course what such partnerships would enable is the establishment of real personal accountability for looked after children. The social worker would be accountable and answerable for the work that is done.

Naturally they could only be answerable if we give them other tools that enable them to be effective. And their caseloads might need to be a little smaller; but of course there wouldn't be the small army of middle managers, reviewing officers and directors who populate local authority departments. Believers in bureaucracy will say that surely all such officers have a role and a function which is vital to the looked after children service. Each level within the hierarchy has a degree of responsibility in relation to a particular child. Of course those in a more senior position tend to be more experienced (although not necessarily) and may have more knowledge and expertise (although not necessarily), so there is a limited justification for these organisational layers, isn't there? Perhaps they do have a function but one thing they definitely do is shield the social worker from the personal accountability of their role. The result is a diminution of personal responsibility, job satisfaction and personal commitment of the individual worker.

Additionally local authorities provide a number of professional audit mechanisms to ensure that work is undertaken satisfactorily – managerial supervision, professional audit, independent reviews, scrutiny by elected members. Once again I believe these mechanisms provide labour intensive second guessing rather than professional accountability. In any department there is likely to be as many people employed in managerial and advisory posts together with administrative posts as there are front line practitioners.

It's no secret that large government organisations frequently suffer from large bureaucracy and poor management as a result of multiple layers of hierarchy. A concern with this proposal is perhaps that the creation of social enterprise partnerships with small team structures, dealing with manageable case loads of perhaps 60 or 70 looked after children is an answer which is so obvious, innovative and practical, so potentially effective for social workers and looked after children that you can practically guarantee that no government would pilot it. However, I believe that until we create individuals with clear responsibilities and accountabilities for looked after children and encourage them to remain in localities attached to partnerships with colleagues of equal stature, and financially reward them for discharging these responsibilities, we will be whistling in the wind.

Would it work?

Of course there are a number of questions to ask around such a proposal: Would social workers be interested in leaving the comfort of secure employment in local councils? Would this model really make a difference to the experience of a looked after child? Would a lead professional within a partnership need to be a qualified social worker? Would such a model enable the government to be reassured about the consistency of service provided to looked after children? We can anticipate some of the answers to these questions but would only have a clear indication of whether this model would have the desired affect of improving the support received by looked after children if it was actually formally piloted.

Resources

However, I said earlier that just creating a completely different type of organisation and giving social workers professional accountability for looked after children will be insufficient unless they also have the tools to be effective. The most significant tool is cash – not for the social worker but for the benefit of the looked after child. Local authorities waste a lot of money on looked after children and they spend a lot of money trying to ensure that they don't waste it.

Much of that the money is wasted because of lack of accountability; decision making about placements is split into specialist functions and social workers rely on others to advise on suitable placements and to negotiate with providers around price and quality. It's pretty hard to be effective at this if the buyer is a large anonymous Council. However, if the partnership to which we belong will benefit financially by our negotiation there is an incentive to seek better value for money. Some people will say that this brings a danger of social workers settling for a cheaper service for a child in order to benefit themselves and their partnerships. That is a clear danger but it already exists within local authorities who also make budget decisions. Such an objection also assumes that there are no checks that could be put in place. I believe there is a way round.

Whilst changing the structure within which social workers operate will help, I believe there are other things that would help social workers ensure their work with looked after children has positive benefit.

Other changes that could help

Ensuring a child has the right to a school place in a high performing school (and the transport to get them there); having a dedicated school budget of £1,000 for each school age looked after child within the local authority; full health assessments and access to CAMHS or other therapeutic support such as speech and language therapy for all looked after children who need it; a

requirement on schools not to exclude looked after children in years 10 and 11 save for wholly exceptional reasons; and if this happens a duty on the local authority to provide a full time individual programme of tuition.

The Inland Revenue should disregard remuneration to foster carers who have their looked after children remaining with them into adulthood – at least until they are 21.

We need to stop setting up social workers and other frontline workers to fail. As a society we need to decide our response to young people who are out of the control of their parents and carers. We either need to build more secure facilities, or accept that present mechanisms of containment, dependent as they are on personal relationships and compliance by the young person, are inadequate for the task of safeguarding out of control youngsters.

Stop measuring and start doing

Lastly, we must stop thinking that repeatedly weighing the cow will make it fatter. Over recent years Government and local authorities have introduced more and more individuals to examine and pronounce upon the care offered to looked after children - from advocates and mentors to Independent Reviewing Officers and CSCI Inspectors.

As far as I can tell there is not a scrap of evidence that this army of officialdom has added a single strand of improvement to the outcomes of looked after children. They have simply further diminished the accountability of social workers with operational responsibility. We need to develop a series of performance measures which have some relevance to children and their families and to the social workers who work with them.

In summary, this chapter has made some suggestions intended to improve the experience of looked after children from the point of view of frontline staff. It proposes the setting up of small, 1 private sector partnerships of lead professionals to provide the field social work function on behalf of local authorities (who will commission their service and provide the funding). It argues that, to be successful, such partnerships would also need other support.

My own conclusion on the current system is to echo the now infamous words of the Home Secretary in referring to the institution of social care for looked after children as "not fit for purpose". Radical change is needed and must be made to improve the life chances of looked after children and young people.

7.

Corporate parenting: in defence of local government

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Ask most residents in any typical local authority to name the purpose of their council, and they will first highlight emptying the bins or cleaning the streets, perhaps running the leisure centre and occasionally they'll mention schools. But rarely do 'social services' feature in common recollection, and even when prompted most people are unsure what aspects of social services local government undertakes. So what? Unless there is a major scandal or failing that gathers media headlines, there is a default assumption among the public that everything is probably "OK", and that if there are few complaints, then the system must be working relatively well. Most people take for granted the existence of a welfare state that protects children whose parents die or who need to be protected from abuse or neglect. On the face of it, does it matter greatly how this welfare is provided and who provides it?

New Local Government Network argues that social services – and services for looked after children – should continue to be commissioned locally because they need to remain part of the services for which there is local democratic accountability. We believe that the arguments are rarely set out in favour of maintaining a strong role for local government in this area of policy but that now more than ever it is important to ensure that corporate parenting continues to be the mainstay of councils across the country. In this chapter I will set out why this localism of service provision is important and why it can be successful for looked after children and young people. I will also outline some of the challenges that local government faces and how I believe these can be overcome. Finally the chapter will clarify where the role for local government stops and national government starts.

Localism for looked after children

There are a number of reasons why the local commissioning of services for looked after children and young people must continue, and be enhanced. First, given the complicated nature of parenting, any centralised commissioning in this area raises the spectre of organisational chaos. Vulnerable young people need to be supported in a caring environment, in touch with their friends and family where possible, rooted in their community, and given a stable and secure home in which they can make as smooth a journey to adulthood as possible. The circumstances and experiences of a teenager in Camden will be entirely different from those of a young adult in Cannock Chase. To minimise upheaval and ensure their individual needs are met in terms of the right foster or care home placement, local commissioning and provision of services is essential.

The physical practicalities of ensuring that each young person is given a tailored package of help and support commensurate with their needs means this can only be done by skilled professionals, empowered at grassroots level. Creating a new agency for service provision won't improve services on the frontline and pulling resources out of local authorities in order to construct such an agency may tick a box for a national politician, but will do little to help the young person in need of a decent quality of life.

Second, only local commissioning of services for looked after young people offers the tangible benefit of local knowledge of available existing facilities. Service providers may not need to ensure extra access to leisure, entertainment and recreation for children if a particular neighbourhood is rich in such facilities. However, it is also easier to support the hobbies and recreational activities of looked after children and young people by negotiating free access to leisure facilities when these facilities are provided directly by the local authority. There may also be an historic lack of appropriate school or training places in some neighbourhoods, which a locally commissioned service would be better attuned to counteracting, able to deal with these environmental problems more flexibly.

Third, there is a mutual dependency surrounding relevant public services which those commissioning these services should be mindful of. If education, healthcare and adult social care issues continue (rightly) to be coordinated on a sub-regional or local basis, so too should the arrangements for looked after children. We shouldn't underestimate the importance of having systems and services operating side by side with equal value.

Councils can succeed in the right circumstances

Some people will be convinced that local commissioning makes sense, but that subjecting it to the vagaries of election and party political contest is a distraction at best, damaging at worst. Perhaps the concept of true local

democratic accountability for services affecting a small number of vulnerable people is a mirage, precisely because so few individuals are directly affected in comparison to schooling or street lighting. What difference could children and young people in care make to the corporate parenting policies pursued, or the relative priority given to social services, when its constituency is so small and politically quiet?

Here again, I would argue that democratic accountability can and does work in harmony with local commissioning, adding value and advantage – a value that is not properly appreciated. Local politicians are the only ones who can make the difficult decisions around service provision and be held to account for those decisions. Imagine for a moment if services for looked after children and young people were provided outside of local government responsibility, or even if that responsibility was diminished; where would the buck stop if problems arose or, heaven forbid, if any kind of scandal of the kind revealed in residential care in the 1980s and 90s came to light again? Local government has to provide such services precisely because it can be properly and democratically held to account.

Multi-functional local government is precisely the right manager for services to vulnerable people, as no one agency or specialist organisation can on their own help with the multi-layered challenges and difficulties faced by these individuals. For instance, because the lives of children – like anyone else – are diverse, varied and require sophisticated combinations of support and help tailored to individual need, it would be impossible to say that leisure services or special educational needs or healthcare were of most importance to these 'clients' as a whole. The point is, each child has differing needs and an approach that is disconnected from the fullest possible array of public services and facilities will struggle to meet those needs. Multi-functional local government is the closest we have at present to the concept of one public service in operation, at the heart of a network of public organisations, not marginal or quangoised. If services for looked after children are floated off and separated from local authorities, there is a distinct danger of isolation and disconnection, when it is precisely the benefits of the networks that should be placed at these service users more than most. Former Health Minister Liam Byrne was right in 2005 when he said "It is only local government that can bring together a well-being package of transport, housing, education, welfare to work, regeneration and all the other factors necessary to (strengthen) social care."

Failings of the state

The reputation of the welfare provision for looked after young people is at best 'shaky', at worst criticised relentlessly for the blighted lives of a great number of vulnerable children leaving care. The majority of children in care are there because they have suffered a great degree of neglect and abuse

in their lives before care. Sadly sometimes that suffering continues during their time in care which means although the challenge for local authorities is therefore greater, the responsibility is also higher. In law local authorities have certain 'parental' responsibilities for care leavers until they are 21 years of age. In practice, the stewardship of the state for most local authorities tails off dramatically after day-to-day care moves on, still all too often at age 16 or 17. This is a problem that goes much deeper than reversing reputations - it requires a wholesale revision in the nature and quality of care. I would argue this must continue to be within the context of networked and locally focused service provision.

Distant care placements

Many of the worst cases of failing services afflict those whose parent authority has chosen to arrange care for looked after children in areas far away from their original home, too often resulting in problems where authorities have difficulty keeping track of the progress of these children. In arguing for a new localist approach to children's social services, it is this area of state failing that disappoints most greatly. Being passed from 'pillar-to-post', from temporary foster care to an unfamiliar care home and surroundings, can be debilitating for a vulnerable young person.

Continuity of care and strong community roots are vital for all children, and the current contracting culture of procuring places across the country is a sad indictment of the stretched resources local authorities have faced in recent generations.

Challenging behaviour

Many authorities fail to get further than basic care for looked after children, providing the necessities of life but not tackling disruptive or dysfunctional behaviour, or stretching these children with positive or encouraging tasks or situations. Local authorities need to radically alter the support that they give for their staff and care workers, who need to approach their work in an entirely different way to other staff who do not have such emotional and continuous duties of care to vulnerable individuals. Staff need to be backed fully so they can in turn take tough decisions to shape the behaviour of the children in their care.

These are employees who need to act as if they were day-to-day parents, able to console young people through the trials and tribulations of early and teenage years, a series of skills which can test ordinary family bonds but which are even more testing for the social care worker. Acting in ways that challenge behaviour as if they were children of the council staff and councillors themselves is vital, and is of course a core theme of the 2004 Children Act. And DfES guidance on the duty to promote educational achievement is right, but too little regarded, when it says councils "should be doing at least

what any good parent would do to promote their child's educational aspirations". Promoting and rewarding positive activity, and challenging behaviour when things go wrong is a real test of the boundaries of state provision, but is vital if local welfare services are to succeed.

Accountability – who has responsibility for this young person?

The number of resident objections to new planning permissions for care homes for looked after children and supported housing for older young people from care is perhaps the saddest manifestation of 'nimbysm' today, though it is hardly surprising given the reputation and fear that many communities have of parentless children and young people 'roaming' neighbourhoods. In rural and semi-rural communities in particular the reported problems of care homes facing innumerable complaints about loitering, vandalism or worse illustrates the problem with accountability. The public do expect that each child and young person will be the responsibility of a parent, guardian or responsible adult – and if care homes, supported housing and responsible local authority departments do not find solutions so that named individuals are available to discipline and tutor these children and young people, then is it any wonder that confidence wanes in what many (wrongly) feel are faceless, bureaucratic, failing state institutions?

Addressing this lack of named responsibility and accountability must go beyond the remit of the CSCI inspectorate and into the core of policy pursued by local authorities. Just as times change for other consumer services, times also change requiring a connection between concerned local residents and those responsible for the daily management and oversight of looked after children. Hiding behind the excuse of data protection or child confidentiality just will not do – social care is a vocation and not a matter of clocking-in and clocking-out of a shift pattern. Those working in care homes need to be visible, integrated more into the local community, and behave as responsible parents would – chastising and punishing poor behaviour.

Looked after children need intense guidance and emotional support, and authorities that coast through the process of raising these young people without supplying the full array of parental roles will fail themselves and these children.

How to overcome the failings of the state

The answer to improved services for looked after children does not lie in marketisation, outsourcing or competitive tendering, nor does it lie in the nationalisation of local state service activity.

As with other public services such as schools, there is no evidence that having a key public service provided by someone other than the state will solve com-

plex issues, and in the case of looked after children and young people, improve their safety, emotional wellbeing and ability to achieve in life. There is a risk that, if faced with marketisation, there could be even greater pressure to compromise on key issues such as an expensive supported placement. Instead, I propose several basic steps that need to be pursued rigorously in order to raise the game of local authorities:

1. Strengthen the leadership of social care for young people

Are councils collectively appointing the right portfolio holders or officers to run services for looked after children? Controlling party groups should take a lead on their corporate parenting responsibilities and require the lead members for social services (or increasingly lead members for children's services) to give full information on a regular basis across an array of performance measures - educational, vocational, and behavioural - so that progress or failings and the direction of travel can be visible and for all to see. Council Leaders should take particular care to nominate the right portfolio holder to oversee social services for looked after children. And a failing of this leadership should be viewed as a failing of the Council Leader too.

2. Improve the scrutiny of services to looked after children

Leadership from the top of a local authority is clearly crucial, but so is the availability of challenge and critical questioning to that executive leadership. Public officials, external agencies, officers from other council departments and, critically, frontline councillors should all raise their game in the scrutiny and oversight process. The Local Government Association has recently produced strong new guidance as a toolkit to help councillors fulfil their scrutiny role more effectively. Council Leaders and executive portfolio holders should welcome this challenge rather than fear it or feel threatened by it. Healthy criticism and monitoring of performance, challenging the validity of claims and uncovering weaknesses is the role for the local authority as a whole, not simply those leading or specialising in social services.

3. Extra attention in 'hotspot' regions

The same problems and difficulties are not experienced uniformly across the country – London and the South East face by far the greatest pressures, with most difficulties in terms of population transience and mobility, resource pressures, criminality in the inner-city and shortage of skilled social workers. Equally, there can be particular problems faced in county council authorities in building up working consensus with districts, with housing and leisure issues particular challenges across the local government divide. National Government should have a particularly intense dialogue with those authorities facing the greatest combination of these social pressures, should look again at the funding formula arrangements, and should also encourage a risk-based approach from the inspectorates and advisory teams to help and assist those councils most likely to be stretched.

4. Additional schooling and tutoring

The life experiences of looked after children will invariably differ from those of other children, and will mean that there are greater and earlier calls on their independence at a younger age than for many other children. While it would be preferable to move towards a culture where seamless parenting takes place until the early twenties for a young person, in reality experience shows that independent living is often a feature for looked after children at an earlier age than for most others. Because these additional skills are required sooner for looked after children, they should be supported by learning that goes beyond the normal national curriculum requirements, with personal social and health education teaching provided on a one-to-one basis more frequently – and including new modules such as financial literacy, childcare and parenting skills, and presentational and personal behavioural mentoring. Local authorities are well placed and should stand ready to purchase this additional learning support and factor into future budget requirements the additional learning needs of children in their care.

5. Resources

Finding sufficient long-term resources in the form of capital sums to upgrade care facilities and learning resources, and revenue for one-to-one support, coaching, mentoring and care are the real challenge for many local authorities. Practice and budgets vary widely from authority to authority. And while there should of course be nationwide minimum standards of funding and expectation governing services to all vulnerable people, the nature of local management and accountability should allow some flexibility for additional local resources to be raised and invested at the behest of elected members. It is typically the services for the voiceless and less empowered that are squeezed in difficult times, and unless local councillors take on the proxy role of demanding more for the children in their care, resources will continue to be the main source of pressure.

I am not convinced, however, that taking these services away from local government will somehow strengthen the championing of looked after children in budget priorities. If elected members have their personal and legal responsibilities reduced or removed in future reforms, there will be less pressure, not more, to protect social service budgets. What is needed are better links to those at a national level to join with local government in 'championing' the fight for greater investment in spending reviews and budget rounds at a national level. This is a basic tenet of good campaigning, but it is too often left to local arguments rather than taken up both locally and nationally.

Combining adequate resourcing with improved accountability and supported new skills for staff are the way ahead – and the way to move away from the 'poor parent' label that has been placed on this corner of welfare provision for too long.

Certainly there is a role for national government in corporate parenting and improving the lives of looked after children and young people. The current pressure from ministers to see the issue as a priority, emphasising the wider political duty to make a fairer society is welcome and will ensure that the issue remains important in the eyes of local government policy makers. Equally, I would also suggest that whilst it is down to local government to implement parenting responsibilities towards looked after children and young people, national government does have a role to play in encouraging all authorities to deliver on their parental obligations, helping ensure that non-voting children and young people are not being swept to one side in favour of more voter-friendly policies. This also means that national government has to ensure that local authorities have the resources to meet their duties and responsibilities in this area. If local authorities are given the support and trust necessary to lead and be creative with improvements in services for looked after children, they are more likely to respond well than if Whitehall takes a "we always know best" attitude.

The commissioning of social services for looked after children and young people must continue to be carried out by local government. Only local government can secure the breadth of services they need. And only with services provided for children and young people in this way can we ensure that we have the kind of focused parenting approach that children and young people deserve from the state in loco parentis.

8.

Could social pedagogues make a difference? Looking beyond the UK

Siobhan Miller

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What Makes The Difference?

8.

Could social pedagogues make a difference?

Looking beyond the UK

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What Makes The Difference?

Setting the scene

In the UK, the children's social care system has not been developed in a child friendly way – instead, children and young people are expected to fit round the service, rather than the service being fitted around them. This does not belie the excellent and innovative work carried out in many local authorities. However, a growing body of evidence on the views and experiences of looked after children and care leavers points to the fact that there is something distinctly lacking in the way services are delivered.^[1] Not only is there regional variation in the range and quality of services, but, despite the introduction of legislation to extend their duties to looked after children and care leavers, many local authorities don't meet the needs of individual children in a holistic way. Indeed, the very way services are delivered may even reinforce the damaging experiences children had before being taken into care.^[2]

For the children and young people concerned, the message is loud and clear – for them it's all about relationships – ones that are caring, dependable and that last. They want care workers who are genuine and respectful, who make them feel special and safe and who are good listeners – they want someone to be there for them, who really cares and treats them like individuals, not problems.

The case for ensuring that children have strong and enduring parental-type relationships is also supported by an understanding of child and adolescent development in the context of attachment and relationship theory. We know that providing stability in a looked after child's life, and facilitating 'compensa-

tory attachment' to a carer, can make up for earlier trauma, but that frequent placement change in the care system greatly reduces their chance of this.

We also know that the resilience of children and young people can be strengthened not only by ensuring stability, but by offering them the opportunity to make significant changes in their lives ('turning points'), giving them a good education, and helping them to plan and problem solve, build a sense of identity and contribute to society.

A good corporate parent could therefore be regarded as one that treats and cares for children and young people in a way that makes up for the bad things that happened to them before they came into care, and prepares and smoothes their path towards adulthood. A good corporate parent removes the barriers to instability and ensures that care workers behave consistently and act like 'good parents' do, including setting boundaries, fighting their child's corner, rewarding and encouraging them and saying 'no' when they need to.

The reality of the UK children's care system is that of a barrage of professional workers, all involved in the welfare of a single child. This includes social workers, foster carers, residential care workers, doctors, teachers, nurses, child rights officers, mentors, independent visitors, free phone lines, guardians, personal advisors, complaints officers and so on.^[3] Their challenge is to try to provide the type of consistent parental care that would be expected of a good parent, one of the most fundamental aspects of which is being there. Another challenge is to address the factors that prevent workers from frequently appearing and disappearing out of children's lives at a rate that is painful and counterproductive.

One idea recently suggested as a possible answer to resolving some of the current problems is the practice of 'pedagogy'. This chapter will look beyond the system for looked after children in the UK to see whether this approach is something we might learn from. Whilst fraught with danger in terms of drawing any clear research-based conclusions, looking at what happens elsewhere does provide us with a useful insight into alternative practice. It is also one of the aims of the What Makes the Difference? Project (WMTD). Using Poland, a transnational partner of WMTD, as a case study, this chapter will focus on the practice of social pedagogy, which is widespread in different forms throughout mainland Europe and Scandinavia.

Beyond the UK

The nature and quality of support given to children in and leaving care across the world varies according to international differences in a number of factors, including: the concepts of, and ideological attitudes to childhood; definitions of children in and leaving care; legal and policy frameworks and the nature of welfare provision in general. Differences in culture, religion and economic

and political contexts have an impact.^[4] Despite this, it remains a fact that in many northern industrialised countries, including the UK, USA, Canada and Australia, the outcomes for a sizable number of 'care experienced' children and young people are not good. But in recent years it has been suggested that certain approaches to caring for looked after children in some European countries might reduce the chance of negative outcomes for this vulnerable group.^[5]

One European approach that could potentially help to provide some of the attachment and other emotional needs of children in care is the use of social pedagogues. Social pedagogy is a 'whole person' model of working with children in mainstream and social services in Germanic, Scandinavian and other European countries.

Loosely translated from the Latin, social pedagogy means leading or guiding a child (ped - child; gogy - lead/guide). It has developed in its current form since the 19th century, mainly in Germanic countries, and is otherwise known as 'social education' (loosely translated). In Europe, pedagogues work in a wide range of settings across the children's workforce, although there are subtle differences in the way that pedagogy is practiced from country to country. It is the main qualification required for residential care workers in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

Pedagogues 'share the life spaces' of children and young people and, as 'social educators' their main goal is to empower children during their time in care to become 'free and competent individuals' in the community.^[6]

Pedagogues use their 'personality, professionalism and integrity of character' to form strong positive relationships with the children they care for. The pedagogue style of working is with their 'heart, head and hands' - their 'heart' to form close relationships with the child or young person; their 'head', to apply theory, self knowledge and reflective practice to guide their actions in different situations; and their 'hands' to become fully involved in the practical aspects of a child's life. ^[7]

Pedagogue training has a strong practical element, which equips workers with musical, artistic, sporting and domestic skills (depending on social and cultural influences). Pedagogues bring fun and a sense of belonging and family to the residential settings they work in. They use holidays, arts and crafts, cookery and music as a way to bond and to discuss sensitive issues with children.

Although displaying the attributes and behaviours of good parenting, the pedagogue does not attempt to replace the role of the child's natural parents. The pedagogue - child relationship is based more on partnership and mutual respect.

The values, principles and theories of social pedagogy not only inform its direct practice with children, but also influence the training and education of

children's social care workers. With its focus on integration, pedagogy also offers a framework for child policy - in fact, policy and practice are inseparably linked. Another attraction is that, in the countries in which it is practiced, it links work across the children's sector by similar approaches and methods. This is in stark contrast to the rather disparate nature of children's services in the UK. This, together with the focus on a holistic approach to assessment and support, and the multi-agency coordination required to achieve this, are elements of social pedagogy that have recently been promoted in the UK as a valuable basis for a new unified children's workforce.^[8]

In Poland and Denmark, where social pedagogy is widely practiced in residential care, the state does not think of itself as a parent, corporate or otherwise - instead, it sees its role as providing a safety net for children whose parents can't look after them rather than as a parent substitute. This it does by putting into place structures and processes to meet children's accommodation, care and support needs. This is reflected in national policy, which seeks to facilitate and support the relationships between children and their natural families. Pedagogues simply contribute to the development and well being of children by doing what pedagogues do, while at the same time nurturing and helping to maintain child-family relationships. In Denmark, there is also greater emphasis on preventing children from entering care.^[9]

The irony of this lack of self-labelling by the Polish state is that although the concept of 'corporate parenting' is an alien one and the responsibility to actively 'care' is not explicitly articulated at an administrative level, the practice of good parenting is very much alive in those working directly with children and young people. The system also works in a way that provides many of the things that 'good parents' do to bring up secure and safe young people.

In residential children's homes, social pedagogues, social workers, psychologists, therapists, and carers work together with individual children to meet their unique care and support needs, under the direction of a single leader, the care home manager, who brings a sense of mothering both to the staff and to the children under their care.

Workers are able to provide consistency and stability by developing and maintaining trusting relationships with the children and young people - made possible by a relatively low staff turnover. Polish pedagogues are generally trained to degree level, and despite earning around average salaries, experience high job satisfaction, which motivates them to stay in post for longer than UK residential workers.

"It can take a long time to build up a relationship with a child; some children will start to trust you after about two weeks, for others it can take much longer, up to a year or so.

It doesn't feel like coming to work here - it's not an ordinary job, it feels like home. This is a job where you can do so many fun things.

Of course it would be better if there were fewer children in the home so we could provide better care for them, but this works ok.

The thing that I think makes the difference here is the amount of individual contact, meetings and discussions we can have with the children. We also get involved with the children's families and have to build up good relationships with them too." Pedagogue, children's home, Lodz, Poland.

Furthermore, children and young people tend to stay in the care homes in which they are initially placed, giving them the chance to form long and secure attachments to highly skilled professionals throughout their time in care – a far cry from the placement instability experienced by the majority of looked after children in the UK. In Poland, even when children leave care (not before the age of 18), care workers and professionals keep in touch with them – evidence of this is proudly presented by staff showing wedding photographs of ex-care leavers.

Other aspects of the Polish care system may also promote good outcomes. For example, if young people in care begin and continue with their education before and after the age of 18, they are allowed to stay until they have finished their studies. On the other hand, if they give up their education while still in care before reaching 18, they are expected to live and fund their education independently. This acts as an incentive for young people to stay in continuous education for as long as possible before turning 18. This contrasts with the experiences of UK care leavers, who, often at 16, with few if any qualifications, are expected to leave care, set up home, find employment and support themselves with the minimum of financial support, while at the same time trying to make sense of their identity and deal with the loss of carers, social workers and other important others, often without the anchor of family and wider social support.

No system is perfect, however, and there can be a far cry from political will to reality. However, societal attitudes and the political legacy of communism have led to the establishment of very large residential homes (in the past taking up to a hundred children), in which it is unlikely that children are able to benefit from the more individualised pedagogical approach to care taken in smaller units (which the Polish government is currently working towards). The influence of the Catholic Church also presents a barrier to young people's access to birth control, and years of relying on the state as provider has bred a culture of dependency in the families of children in care and in society more

generally. There are also other problems, as described by a manager of a children's home in Lodz:

“There can be an issue with professional boundaries here because we try to be close, a bit like friendly relatives and that can impact on our privacy. But we're aware of it as a possible problem. Some of the children can be quite aggressive which can be a problem.

And whilst we try to make the house as family-like as possible, there are differences because this is a residential home and there are legal requirements about the things we can and can't do. I have to account for the money that's spent and there are inspections. And there is a shortage of money, which means I can't always allow staff to do all the things they want to. For example we want to teach the children about shopping for themselves but they have to ask for receipts for everything, which they find embarrassing.

As in any job, some workers are better than others but the young people here do find it easy to find someone who will take a particular interest in them and who will do things for them. Most of our staff here are relatively young which makes it easier for them to build up good relations with the children.

What's not good is that it's all women working here. There's a real problem that the university courses you have to take also attract mainly women so it's a problem across the profession. All our staff have post-graduate qualifications but of course that doesn't necessarily make you a good person to work with children.”

For young people, another downside of extended periods in children's homes is prolonged institutionalisation, bringing with it all the associated challenges of independent living. In response, the Polish government has had to introduce initiatives to provide young people with budgeting and other practical skills, together with accommodation and financial support to prepare them for leaving care and to protect them from homelessness and unemployment.

A personal 'guide' who knows and is chosen by the young person them self (e.g. their social worker or pedagogue) is allocated to support them to leave care as they approach 18.

The 'guide' and young person agree a 'pathway to independence' (similar to the pathway plan for care leavers in the UK) that covers their relationship with their family and the local community; education and qualifications; health and social insurance benefits, and accommodation and employment. Targets and timeframes are set, and work towards achieving these is co-ordinated by a social worker from the local municipal office.

How all this affects the life chances of Polish children and young people in and after care is difficult to assess without access to national outcome measures – and there are very few. Even then, given the difficulties inherent in trying to attribute children's outcomes to individual aspects of care or other factors (much of which are complex and interacting), and the inadvisability of making comparisons between states that have very different care populations and quality of outcome data, it would be unwise to make any hasty conclusions about the likely effectiveness of social pedagogy in the UK.

In the absence of reliable comparative studies we can only point to differences in approaches and speculate as to what might lead to improved life chances for children in care, using what we already know from research.^[10]

But what will strike anyone who visits the best of Poland's residential children's homes is the feeling of closeness between staff and children, and the impression that care workers, whether they are social pedagogues, psychologists or social workers, really enjoy their jobs, have fun and genuinely care about the children they work with.

And convincingly, recent DfES funded research carried out in Denmark and four other European countries indicates that:

"The Danish pedagogic model is associated with better outcome indicators' for young people in residential care relative to those in England, suggesting that a professional degree level qualification is linked to differences in ways of working, and to benefits beyond the personal and practical skills that individual experience brings. We also concluded that it is helpful for workers to have the pedagogue education as a theoretical and conceptual basis to prepare them for - and enable them to reflect on - what is after all very challenging work with a potentially vulnerable and disadvantaged population of young people."

Dr. Janet Boddy, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London

A new window of opportunity now exists to make a real difference to the lives of children who enter and leave care. But the jury is out as to whether UK policy makers can be convinced of the potential of social pedagogy. However pedagogic practice has already hit UK shores, both in social care and in main-

stream education. In some local authorities, extended schools are developing pedagogy training programmes for their childcare workers and Sure Start is also exploring social pedagogy specifically for early years workers. New work to assess the potential of pedagogy in foster care has been commissioned, and children's residential care standards now require managers to be trained in some aspects of pedagogic theory and practice.

The question is: Is there a greater role for social pedagogy in the UK care system, and what is this? Could all social care workers benefit from pedagogue training? Are British societal attitudes to childhood conducive to such an approach? Is the legacy of a defensive child protectionist culture a potential barrier? What are the other barriers? And most importantly, would applying the policy and practice of social pedagogy be enough to make children and young people in the care system feel more 'cared about' and not just 'looked after'? Would this help to improve their life chances? Or should other factors be prioritised to reduce instability and create 'compensatory attachment' opportunities in the care system, such as correcting other structures and processes that make children feel they don't matter, improving the recruitment and retention of foster carers, and promoting the value and rights of children and the social care workers who are the 'heart, head and hands' of the corporate parent?

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9.

Conclusions: how good a parent does the state want to be?

Jo Coles, Martin Hazlehurst, John Hill, Siobhan Miller

Editorial Board

9.

Conclusions: how good a parent does the state want to be?

Jo Coles, Martin Hazlehurst, John Hill, Siobhan Miller

Editorial Board

This pamphlet invited a number of contributors to look at the concept of the state as parent to children and young people in care and care leavers from a range of different perspectives. All of the ideas expressed are their own and thanks must go to all of the contributors who have clearly illustrated the issues we need to resolve if we are to make a difference for this group.

These final conclusions aim to pull together some of the issues raised in order to highlight the questions policy makers and others should be asking themselves. Whilst there is a huge range of thoughts and views in the different chapters, there are also some emerging themes which we believe are useful to emphasise in our conclusions. Over the coming year, the What Makes the Difference? project (WMTD) and the National Leaving Care Advisory Service (NLCAS) will continue to examine the questions raised throughout this pamphlet and take forward the debate in response to the forthcoming Green Paper on improving outcomes for children in care and care leavers.

Most parents would freely admit that parenting isn't easy. For the state as a huge and complex bureaucracy the task is even harder. Add to this the fact that the experiences that bring children and young people into state care often make the job of parenting even more difficult and we can see that it is unsurprising that the state struggles to perform a parenting role that is usually carried out by one or two parents attached to a child or young person by birth. Is it even realistic to expect the state to be able to parent? Should it even be trying to be a parent to this group – good or otherwise? Are there ways the state can be a 'good enough parent' and areas where it will always struggle? What could and should change?

Relationships

A clear message from many of the chapters was that in order to be a good, or at least a better parent, the quality of relationships between children, professionals and carers within the state system is all too often sadly inadequate. This was a particularly clear message from the young people in Modi Abdoul's chapter and Jo Coles' interviews in Hull and Gloucestershire. At the moment young people are expected to build up relationships with dozens of professionals;

"It's really confusing, to keep on the ball with everyone...you just want two people there. Just a mum and a dad. You don't want everyone else there, butting in, because you just can't get on with trying to live a normal life, and have a family."

Young person – Chapter 3

Professionals too identified this issue and were well aware of the importance of relationships for the young people in their care. This came out in both the profiles of Hull and Gloucestershire and in Alastair Pettigrew's examination of social work.

"We need to put an additional emphasis on the quality of relationships and on the quality of conversations that take place between professionals and children. Because it is those relationships that will make the difference. Young people say they want consistency, and for them it's the quality of a relationship that matters." Nigel Richardson, Director of Children's Services, Hull

So how does the state develop structures that will present the experience of a caring parental relationship to this group? Nationally, through the development of children's trusts, the Government has tried to encourage a model of support that puts children at the centre of well co-ordinated, multi-disciplinary services. But will such a model, designed essentially around children living with their birth families, really help looked after children and care leavers? The role of social workers and current national policy commit the state to the provision of substitute families as the significant element in parenting for this group, and where we can find appropriate substitute families for children we know this can work. For all too many however we will not find a suitable substitute 'family' – but a series of placements struggling to fill the parenting gap. Do we need to revise our policy and our current thinking on the social work role so that we can better achieve this?

Children and young people may be taken into care suddenly and their lives disrupted. As Modi Abdoul points out, government statistics also indicate that

once in care instability is a common story as children and young people are moved from placement to placement. Regardless of the sheer number of professionals in their lives, this also makes building up any relationships extremely difficult. Do carers, social workers and teachers give children the time to catch up from the experiences that brought them into the care system and the disruption they experienced? We know from our knowledge of good parenting that substitute family care cannot be defined as up to 15 professional adults attempting to coordinate parenting for a child as is all too often the case for those in care. How can we ensure children and young people in care get the chance to build relationships with a few adults who are empowered to make decisions with them about what is in their best interests?

The third key area within this theme concerns the way that professionals develop and sustain relationships with children and young people in care. We have seen the rise of the protection and safeguarding agenda for children in recent years and for very good reason. However, are the measures we have introduced to protect children and people actually doing more to stifle relationships before they've even had a chance to begin? Are professionals now afraid to take the sort of risks that parents take with their own children every day – so much so that they are in danger of alienating those children and young people they are attempting to protect? In the profiles of Hull and Gloucestershire, professionals identified how important it was to build up trust with the children and young people they worked with, but also highlighted how the monitoring process and anxieties about 'professional boundaries' prey on their minds.

Fourthly, in order to build more successful relationships in the future, should local authorities think more about how professionals are matched with the children and young people they will be working so closely with? Children may not be able to choose their parents but at least by injecting an element of choice, looked after children might be more able to choose a social worker they actually like.

The pedagogue model outlined in Siobhan Miller's chapter illustrates how relationships might be developed in a more child-centred way. A 'whole child approach' is adopted by highly trained professionals whose work in spending time to build relationships with children and young people is valued by the rest of society. What would the attitude be to the social worker who when asked to justify what she had been doing on a particular afternoon replied – 'playing in the park with a client'? If we are to fill the parenting gap for these children do we not have to identify how we give professionals the time to play, and recognise this as a valuable element in relationship building and it's link to improving outcomes?

Whilst it is clearly difficult to draw any direct comparisons from systems operating in other countries, one big difference between the UK and many of its European neighbours is the attitude countries have generally towards children

and young people. The UK is known for not being a particularly child-friendly nation and young people in particular have been vilified often just for being young. It is worth considering that young people from care may struggle to have positive relationships as a group while society in general treats them with such disdain. It is certainly noteworthy that this was an issue identified by Frank Dobson in 1997.

Roles

Closely related to the issue of relationships are the roles undertaken by those who are paid to look after the children and young people in their care. While most people would agree with Sir William Utting's statement above, how do we achieve it? In his chapter, Alastair Pettigrew clearly identified workload pressures and the sometimes perverse priorities of social work. Should the state be developing a different role that will fulfil its parenting responsibilities more successfully for this group, and in a way that will empower children and young people in their lives and give them the stability and consistency they say they want? How well do we represent an understanding of 'good parenting' in our training for social workers and other social care professionals? How well do we equip workers with the inter-personal skills to communicate with children and young people? If we agree that the current model for social work is necessary to assess, plan, commission and protect children and young people, do we need a different role that can focus upon filling the parenting gap with children and young people?

Nationally, the Government has been pushing the role of the lead professional, and budget holding powers for such workers have been proposed recently. What is clear from many chapters is that currently social workers are not, and do not feel, that they are doing the kind of work they came into social work to do. Alastair Pettigrew proposes freeing up social workers from some of the obligations that keep them away from frontline work with their caseloads. What other changes to the roles of those working in the frontline might also have a positive effect? Does social pedagogy have something to offer regarding the training and supervision of social care professionals in the UK?

There has been a tendency in the past to try to bring about improvements by introducing more professionals and inspectors, as highlighted by Alastair Pettigrew. Given that outcomes for looked after children have shown little or no improvement, it seems fair to ask whether this approach has dealt with the right problem? When cases of abuse in children's homes came to light in the 1980s, the response was to try to ensure that every child was protected from on high. Has the resultant system reached a position where staff are not allowed to apply sun cream to protect a child from sunburn, or give them a headache pill, or put on a plaster? Making it harder for professionals to take risks as carers hasn't had a positive impact on outcomes – would this have been different if staff had been empowered, valued and better rewarded in-

stead? We know that a significant factor in successful outcomes for children and young people in care is a caring, consistent adult. The professionals interviewed highlighted a common ingredient in their success as being able to take charge of a child's care and not being afraid to take risks. Can we revise our system to include these elements in our corporate parenting role?

How far any alternative role should go needs to be debated. Alastair Pettigrew illustrates the need for some creative thinking and calls for arms-length agencies for social workers. Should social workers, lead professionals and residential workers be separated from the local authority, as Alastair Pettigrew suggests, or could they simply be more empowered within existing structures? Can social workers who assess and commission services within a local authority, with all of its bureaucracy and resource pressures, also be empowered to become the consistent, caring and pushy parent that children and young people in care really need them to be?

Localism

How should services for looked after children and care leavers be delivered? By definition it may be difficult to design a local service structure built around a holistic understanding of each child or young person's needs - not least because every child is different. The profiles of Hull and Gloucestershire illustrate that how services are structured depends on local circumstances. But is there another way? Chapters in this pamphlet set out some of the possible options.

In his chapter, Chris Leslie argues that rather than changing the structures within which support for children and young people in care operates, existing structures should be improved to safeguard democratic accountability. An alternative structure of provision, along the lines of the GP/solicitor model of independent professional partnerships is proposed by Alastair Pettigrew.

When parents need to access services for their child from a local authority they select (as far as possible) the service they want for their child, and then fight to ensure that they receive and maintain what is best for their child. For those in care can the local authority successfully play the role of the parent fighting for the best services against itself? Can local authorities really be advocates for children and young people when services aren't sufficient to meet a child's needs? Could local authorities sufficiently empower lead professionals to independently advocate in a child's best interests against themselves as their employer?

If an alternative system is to be considered, will it make a difference? Will any replacement be better able to assess and meet the needs of children and young people in care? What approach would best address children and young people's concerns? Will it improve the morale of social workers? Will it reduce bureaucracy and concentrate staff on the frontline?

The profiles of Hull and Gloucestershire illustrate the strategic and political choices that are made in service delivery. In both authorities looked after children and care leavers have been made a strategic priority. However as Frank Dobson states in his chapter, and as government statistics continue to confirm, this is not the case elsewhere. Improvements will inevitably depend on the will and attitudes of those in power. Whilst continually trying to improve its parenting might be hard, that's no reason not to keep trying.

Local authorities choose how good a parent they want to be. Despite what some of them may say, as very powerful organisations with heavy responsibilities and large budgets, there is an element of choice in the quality of services they provide. Outcomes are affected by the structures they build locally around their services for children and young people in care, and the budgets they decide to allocate. Budgets have been ring-fenced in the past but since this has ended some local authorities have shown they can set their own budgets and still prioritise groups like looked after children and care leavers. How can national government ensure that all local authorities take their parenting responsibilities seriously? Are there other ways, beyond the current use of performance indicators and inspections that would ensure better parenting for children and young people in care? Should national government use the threat of removal of services from local authorities if they continually fail the children and young people in their care? Is there a middle route that allows local government to keep its corporate parenting responsibility but to have, at arms length a service that can better meet the parenting gap as young people themselves see it?

Empowerment

Power in a family environment would generally rest with parents, and to a certain degree, depending on their age, children and young people. But for looked after children and young people, power tends to reside much higher up the bureaucratic tree. As Modi Abdoul's chapter illustrates all too clearly, decisions about young people's lives are too often made without any consultation with them at all. In addition, what young people regard as the important things are the things that get forgotten - birthdays, sports days, awards evenings, support with homework, exam results, job interviews or even just encouraging comments, conversations and phone calls, caring how or where they are. Have these essential criteria for successful parenting been mostly lost in a long list of priorities as corporate parents? How can the state empower children and young people in care and their carers more?

Some local authorities are clearly aware of the need to try and change the power structure. From Chief Executive level downwards, interviewees in Hull and Gloucestershire highlighted the importance of listening and then acting on young people's views. Is it the system, staff, or simply the lack of will that means that it isn't happening more in more places? Are there consequenc-

es to empowering looked after children and young people and their carers more? Or are there simply old ways of working, that if challenged, could easily be swept out of the way? The social pedagogue model outlined in Siobhan Miller's chapter has at its heart the empowerment of children and young people. Are there lessons that could be learnt from this? Recent suggestions put forward for the Green Paper have suggested we should add another role to the list of those involved in our parenting for children in care and care leavers – that of advocates for each child/young person. Yet if we were to suggest that each child in all families across this country needed an advocate would we view this as a sign of failure in the parenting relationship?

Both Frank Dobson's chapter, and the interviews in Hull and Gloucestershire, illustrate the influence that children and young people can have at a senior level. Frank refers to a young woman who'd been through the care system who kept a Ministerial Task Force on track and focussed on the real world. Those working at the most senior levels in both Hull and Gloucestershire were deeply troubled when faced with individual cases. Would the systems themselves improve if children and young people from care were more involved in decisions about services and staffing?

So can the state be a good parent? There are clearly limits to what the state can do. As a young person in chapter 2 on parenting said, "My parents will always be there. Always." Such unconditional devotion may be something the state cannot provide. But how good a parent can the state be? In Poland, as described in Siobhan Miller's chapter, the state is very clear that birth parents retain ultimate responsibility for their children. In the UK have social services tried to take over from parents too much? Could we do better by empowering parents more? The young woman from care interviewed by Jo Coles in Gloucestershire made clear she hadn't wanted to be in care at all and spent a great deal of time running home to see her dad. Others, like some of those in Modi Abdoul's chapter, were grateful for some of the stability and support they'd been given in care. When they leave, many young people from care will often be where they started, back with their families. How should services work with birth parents throughout a child/young person's time in care? Should the state clarify its parenting or corporate parenting role?

Regardless of the name given to the parenting role, the state will have to continue to provide care and support to children and young people who cannot live with their birth parents. As the Government develops new recommendations as to how this role might be better carried out and inspected through the forthcoming Green Paper, parenting or corporate parenting should be at the forefront of its thinking. Unless the state nationally acts like a good corporate parent and acknowledges the emotional as well as physical needs of children and young people in its care, as a parent would, recommendations are likely to continue to tinker round the edges, rather than have a substantial impact.

Rather than saying they are a good parent, most parents would probably say they try to be a good parent. The state should not be afraid to do the same. We know that a good corporate parenting experience can provide the missing link in achieving successful outcomes for children in care and care leavers. Every time a senior manager proposes cutting a budget that will mean young people leave care early; every time any frontline worker is satisfied with having done the bare minimum with a young person; every time anyone makes a decision that wouldn't be good enough for their own child, children and young people in care will continue to be failed by the state. The challenge is to identify those elements of corporate parenting that need to change in order to make the difference, and to revise policies, structures, and roles accordingly.

The debate about the state's parenting skills starts here and the questions outlined here are key to improving those skills. Some possible answers have been suggested in this pamphlet. We are convinced that the answers to all of the current questions we have outlined are out there. Those answers can resolve the issues that currently mean all too often children and young people in care do not succeed as well as they should.

Change is a matter of choice.

How good a parent does the state want to be?

? what makes the difference

Project for children in care and care leavers

