

## NCAS submission to the Call for evidence Supporting care leavers and workforce reform

NCAS believes that it is central that good corporate parenting is embedded into the reform of social work. We are concerned that an overemphasis on safeguarding could lead to inadequate structures for supporting children and young people whilst they are in and moving on from care. Corporate parenting is about more than keeping children safe from harm; it is about ensuring that young people in and from care are given the support and opportunities needed to achieve their aspirations and the tools to lead fulfilling adult lives.

It will be essential that social work reform recognises the specific skills social workers performing the personal adviser function for care leavers need, and that it ensures consistency of the personal adviser role by joining up proposals with the youth workforce reforms proposed by the CWDC, as some personal advisers are not qualified social workers and would be covered by this programme of reform.

### What is corporate parenting?

The National Standards in Leaving Care<sup>1</sup> provide a framework for understanding what makes good corporate parenting, and thus what knowledge and skills social workers need to make good corporate parents supporting young people moving on from care. The standards are a blueprint for enabling young people from care to make a successful transition to a healthy and productive adult life. They are intended to be a useful basis for the assessment, review and improvement of leaving care services.

#### **1. CORPORATE PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES**

**STANDARD:** Structures and processes exist to ensure that the local authority acts in the manner of a good corporate parent.

#### **ACTION CRITERIA**

- 1.1** The local authority has a corporate parenting policy and strategy, including its pledge to young people, and corporate parenting is included

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<sup>1</sup> The National standards in leaving care and the associated self assessment for local authorities and practice database are available free online at:  
[www.leavingcare.org/professionals/national\\_standards\\_in\\_leaving\\_care/](http://www.leavingcare.org/professionals/national_standards_in_leaving_care/)

in the Children and Young People's Plan. This policy lays out a strategy for assessing and meeting young people's accommodation, social, emotional, employment, health and educational support needs and identifies the partner organisations and individuals with whom the plan will be implemented, including young people themselves, paying due regard to the need for confidential information sharing.

- 1.2 The policy identifies and explains the corporate parenting role of elected members, officers and staff at all levels of children's services and partner agencies.
- 1.3 Services that are developed for young people promote continuity and stability in the care and support they receive.
- 1.4 The local authority keeps in touch with all eligible, relevant, former relevant and qualifying young people, providing regular contact and practical and financial support as appropriate to individual needs and preferences.
- 1.5 All young people have a named lead professional to be their principal supporter and advocate and to ensure that the young person has an adequate network of support.
- 1.6 Staff and carers are trained, qualified and supported to undertake their roles as corporate parents, including their responsibilities to prepare young people for adult life.

#### **OUTCOME CRITERIA**

- 1.7 Evidence is available to show that elected members, officers and staff understand and carry out their duties as corporate parents, and that problems and issues identified by young people are used to improve the quality of services.

## **What do social workers need to know to be good corporate parents?<sup>2</sup>**

**Social workers should be trained to undertake their role as corporate parents, including preparing young people for adult life.**

- Social workers need to have an understanding of the specific needs of older children and young adults and they should have training in this (e.g. adolescent development).

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<sup>2</sup> The full guide to corporate parenting produced through the WMTD project is also available online at: [www.leavingcare.org/professionals/products/guide\\_to\\_good\\_corporate\\_parenting](http://www.leavingcare.org/professionals/products/guide_to_good_corporate_parenting)

- Social workers need to have an understanding of, and good joint working protocols with, a range of services including supported housing providers, housing departments, mental health services and adult social care. Any proposals for reform should stress the importance of understanding the framework other services operate in and liaising effectively with them. This may include joint training.
- With the extended role of Independent Reviewing Officer, it will be important that they have additional skills to assess the suitability of the accommodation that young people may be placed in when moving on from regulated placements.

**Case study from Corporate parenting guide of ‘transition to independence’ training within one local authority.**

Training on transition to independence was given to all those involved in providing support to care leavers, including Leaving Care personal advisers (PAs), social workers, Connexions PAs, housing officers, supported lodgings workers, residential social workers and foster carers. Training content included how to help young people develop practical independent living skills, as well as emotional preparation and what financial support is available. Care leavers were involved in providing this training. Opportunities for inter-agency work and shadowing were also arranged to allow workers from different local authority departments and other agencies to spend the day learning more about each other’s services and roles, to help increase awareness and understanding.<sup>3</sup>

- Many leaving care services have found that they can be especially effective with specialist worker conducting group work, dealing with accommodation needs or getting young people into employment. Any workforce restructuring should allow for such specialisation.
- The WMTD baseline survey, conducted with 43 leaving care services in 2007, found that in some areas there was a gaps in the number of skilled staff with time and availability to facilitate group work to carry out targeted work for specific groups e.g. young parents, young males and young gay people. Social workers should understand the specific needs of disabled young people, unaccompanied asylum seekers, young parents, young people from black and minority ethnic groups, gay and lesbian young people, young offenders and other disadvantaged groups of young people (e.g. training on preparation and planning to support disabled young people’s transition to adulthood).

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<sup>3</sup> Making the difference ... Putting the care back into corporate parenting: A practical guide for local authorities as corporate parents  
[www.leavingcare.org/professionals/products/guide\\_to\\_good\\_corporate\\_parenting](http://www.leavingcare.org/professionals/products/guide_to_good_corporate_parenting)

## Reforming the system - recognising the specific role of the leaving care personal adviser function

For care leavers over the age of 18, the most important support may not come from a qualified social worker. The personal adviser function, which was introduced with the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, has been crucial to improve the support offered to care leavers. Different services organise themselves differently, and in some teams this function is fulfilled by qualified social workers, in others it is performed by unqualified staff or staff with different professional backgrounds.

- Both the Youth workforce reform programme, coordinated by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CDWC) and the work to reform social work through the Social Work Taskforce will therefore be relevant to leaving care services, and the role of the personal adviser in particular.
- There is a danger that the specific function performed by leaving care personal advisers is not considered in either reform programme, as they constitute a very specialised minority group both in social work and in the unqualified youth workforce. Many of the gains that have been achieved since the introduction of the Children (Leaving Care) Act.
- It will be important that all workers supporting care leavers, independently of their qualifications, are given adequate training and support to understand the needs of and work with young people leaving care (e.g. training in child and adolescent development and therapeutic child care for Personal Advisers, and specific knowledge in areas such as accommodation, adult social care and benefits).

## What young people say

The What Makes the Difference? (WMTD) Project's peer research study with 265 young people found that young people saw *Social workers* as helping them in both practical ways and providing valuable guidance, advice, direction and emotional support, but that their approach was not always supportive.

Many young people felt what was essential overall was the availability of flexible, responsive advice and knowing that at least one key person was there for them, or perhaps even checking on them regularly.

However, greater degrees of disappointment were also expressed about social workers than other groups supporting young people. This may be due to higher expectations of them as the primary frontline professionals. Criticisms mostly concerned instability, lack of continuity and perceived lack of personal interest in the young person.

*[The leaving care agency] listen to what I have to say, but social services at the Town Hall never let me have a say*

*My local authority is a place, not a person. They cannot hug me...*

## Putting caring back into care

Building good relationships with young people is key to ensuring that they feel supported. Roughly a quarter of young people in the WMTD peer research expressed negative views about workers. Some felt that workers only showed care if they had to, and some reported very bad experiences and feeling ignored and abandoned.

*Because they are only there nine to five: there should be someone 24 hours.*

*I feel like another case or number, that's the impression I have got.*

*It was like an artificial care: they wanted you to believe they cared for you.*

## Key messages on what makes the difference for young people

Eight key messages were identified through the WMTD project:

1. We cannot lose sight of the importance of feeling cared for
2. Relationships count
3. Good parents take risks
4. Good parents empower their children in family life, corporate parents have to learn to do the same
5. Additional support in education and training for children in care and care leavers does make a positive difference to outcomes
6. Planning and preparation for adult life must start early, but exactly when this process starts depends upon the age, ability and vulnerability of the young person.
7. Too few corporate parents properly consider the employability of young people in and from care
8. Care professionals need to have skills and knowledge in child development and parenting.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.leavingcare.org/data/tmp/4610-9178.pdf>