



The role of the Lead Member for Children's Services: a summary

Background and aims of the research

- All local authorities (LAs) are required under The Children Act (2004) to appoint a Director of Children's Services and a Lead Member for Children's Services. Briefly, the role of the Lead Member, according to Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (as was) guidance (DfES, 2005), is to have political accountability for Children's Services; to communicate with, and engage partners, communities and end-users in meeting children's needs and the Every Child Matters agenda; and to have particular responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.
- The LGA initially commissioned the NFER to explore: whether Lead Members for Children's Services (LMCS) have sufficient information and support to carry out their role effectively, especially in relation to their corporate parenting role; LMCSs' personal knowledge of the educational attainment of children in public care (CiPC); their awareness of issues affecting CiPC; time spent on the corporate parenting role; and engaging wider membership and support for the corporate parenting role. Further work was then undertaken to explore the overall role of the LMCS in more detail, including the manageability of the role; arrangements for continuity; and support and training issues.



Research Methodology

The research consisted of three phases:

- **Phase 1:** an audit of the role of the Lead Member for Children's Services as corporate parent via the completion of a proforma (March – April 2007). A total of 169 proformas were sent to Lead Members in 151 LAs, and 74 were returned; a response rate of 44 percent of Lead Members and 49 percent of local authorities in England.
- **Phase 2:** telephone interviews with 32 Lead Members for Children's Services to explore the wider remit of the role (May – July 2007).
- **Phase 3:** case studies in five local authorities to explore the LMCS role in greater depth (including a focus on good practice relating to various aspects of the role) (August – October 2007). This involved telephone interviews with LMCS, DCS and a range of other professionals and partners working and interacting with the LMCS. This summary includes three of the case-studies.

The audit of the corporate parenting role: Key findings

Information for the corporate parenting role

- Sixty-eight of the 74 Lead Members noted that they received enough information to fulfill their corporate parenting role effectively.
- There was flexibility and diversity in the ways in which Lead Members received their information, reflecting a combination of procedural and regular information flow, as well as the ability to request and receive information on an ad hoc basis as required.
- Information sources included: strategic level meetings (with DCS and senior officers); meetings with other LA staff and practitioners; corporate parenting panels and other panel meetings; statistical updates; reports and briefings; and LA scrutiny and external reviews.
- Suggested improvements in the information available to LMCS included: the flow and regularity of data regarding the educational results of CiPC (especially at an individual case level); health issues; and clearer information and more guidance regarding the Lead Member's corporate parenting role.

Lead Members' awareness of issues affecting children in public care

- Lead Members were most likely to know about children in public care's attainment levels at GCSE and 'A' level or equivalent and less likely to have an awareness of attainment levels in other qualifications and for younger CiPC.
- The majority of Lead Members had an awareness of CiPC population trends and the actual numbers of CiPC within their LA and they also appeared confident that they knew CiPCs' thoughts on their care.
- Lead Members felt that they had an awareness of other factors affecting CiPC, including their thoughts on their education, their safety and their access to leisure and social activities.
- Lead Members were less confident in their knowledge of how many children in public care had to move school as a result of being looked after. Lead Members also had less knowledge about the numbers of young people moving placements.

Time spent by Lead Members on the corporate parenting role

- There was considerable variation in the amount of time LMCSs' reported spending on their corporate parenting role, ranging from half an hour to sixty-five hours per week. Possible

amalgamation of total time spent on council duties and specific corporate parenting responsibilities may in part explain some of this inconsistency.

Shared responsibility for corporate parenting

- The majority (70) of Lead Members shared their corporate parenting responsibility. Over four-fifths of respondents shared their corporate parenting role with backbenchers, just under two-thirds with the scrutiny chair or vice-chair and just under half of Lead Members shared the corporate parenting role with another cabinet member. In more than a quarter of cases, their corporate parenting responsibilities were shared between LMCS, cabinet members, the scrutiny chair and backbenchers.

Engaging the wider membership in corporate parenting

- Strategies to encourage and support other elected members' involvement in, and responsibility for, corporate parenting were described by all but five Lead Members. These included: corporate parenting panels; training and seminars; scrutiny processes; sharing responsibility for visiting children and children's homes; and sharing the role with a Cabinet Member.
- Barriers and challenges relating to engaging the wider membership in corporate parenting included: low levels of interest displayed by member colleagues; time constraints; and a lack of clarity and information about the agenda for sharing corporate parenting and how the role could be effectively divided into manageable components.

Support for corporate parenting

- The vast majority of respondents (69 out of 74 respondents) felt that the support they received was adequate for them to be able to fulfil their corporate parenting role effectively. Those feeling insufficiently supported, suggested that increased opportunities for meeting with officers to obtain information would be beneficial.
- Despite the overall levels of satisfaction with the support received, more than four-fifths (61) of lead members offered suggestions for improvements. These focused on: greater support; contact and communication with stakeholders; improvements in the nature of the information available; greater contact with care users and carers; additional resources and financial support; more time for the corporate parenting role; more training and development of knowledge of CiPC and the care system; more guidance and good practice information on effective corporate parenting; and better government and public support (such as the need for greater support to raise the profile of CiPC, as well as clarity about the LMCS role).

Key messages from the audit:

- Improve the information available to Lead Members regarding CiPC (e.g. mobility and special educational needs of CiPC)
- Develop and disseminate strategies for sharing the corporate parenting role
- Develop the capacity and effectiveness of the corporate parenting role via additional training



The wider picture of the Lead Member role: Key findings

Backgrounds and experience of Lead Members

- Over a third of interviewees had a professional background in working with children and young people through education or social services. The majority of interviewees with no such professional background noted having relevant political experience (e.g. previously chair of social services/education committee).
- Lead Members were also involved in a range of other bodies related to Children's Services, from the school (e.g. school governor), to the national, and regional level (e.g. regional champion for children).

Factors in portfolio allocation

- In the case studies four major factors were identified as underpinning appointment to the LMCS role: The importance, complexity and status of the LMCS portfolio meant that it was appropriate to allocate it to a senior member e.g. deputy leader of a party group. The relevant political experience of portfolio holders was a key reason for appointing, as was the substantive knowledge members possessed (often gained through previous professional experience). In addition, personal attributes, such as an individual's reputation for innovating and being proactive, their capacity to 'engage and communicate', and their credibility amongst colleagues and services users, were also highlighted.

The role of the Lead Member in the integration of Children's Services

- Lead Members described their involvement with integrating Children's Services in terms of greater working with a range of other agencies and services (e.g. the third sector, police, health, the youth service, Youth Offending Teams).
- Lead Members also described their role in integration in terms of the combining of education and social services to form a Children's Services directorate, and improved working across the departments, directorates and districts of a local authority (e.g. housing and planning, regeneration).
- Lead Members reported having a key role in promoting an ethos and culture of partnership working generally through policy, their monitoring capacity, and in identifying opportunities for engaging with partners.
- The nature and level of Lead Member involvement with the integration of Children's Services varied. Most Lead Members were involved in integrating Children's Services at an authority-wide, strategic level (e.g. via the CYP Partnership Board/Children's Trust). However, the extent to which they were involved at the local level (i.e. district, PCT areas) was less consistent (e.g. working directly with partners and representation on local, multi-agency cluster boards).

The manageability of the Lead Member role

- Lead Members frequently described the Children's Services portfolio as 'wide ranging' and 'the largest portfolio of the cabinet', due in particular to the diversity and pervasiveness of children's issues; the high public profile of children's wellbeing and achievement; the responsibility for children's welfare; and the large budget associated with the service.
- The manageability of the role was felt to vary, depending on the foci of work at the time. Pressure points were noted around: elections; budget setting; and specific projects, such as school building programmes. Interviewees also noted the ongoing challenge of balancing the

demands of the Children's Service portfolio with their ward councillor role. Role sharing was seen as a way of increasing manageability. Overall, the main challenge specific to the Lead Member role focused on time and capacity issues.

Formal sharing of the Lead Member role

- Just under two-thirds (20) of Lead Members interviewed in Phase 2 noted that they formally shared their Children's Services portfolio and in just under half of these instances, a 'deputy model' had been adopted. This involved up to three non-cabinet elected members carrying out aspects of the role under the Lead Member's direction. In six authorities, a 'division model' (usually dividing the education and social care aspect of the role between two cabinet members) had been introduced; and in five cases, the role had been divided and deputies assigned. There was some evidence that the tendency to formally share the Lead Member for Children's Services role was increasing.

Informal sharing of the Lead Member role

- Two-thirds of Lead Members shared their role informally either with scrutiny (e.g. asking scrutiny members to focus on particular issues/aspects of the Children's Service) and/or 'unofficially' with other councillors (e.g. sharing responsibility for undertaking Regulation 33 visits to children's homes).

Continuity and succession planning

- Three-quarters of interviewees felt there would be someone within their own party who could take on the LMCS role if they were to leave. Most of these were confident in the level of expertise of their successor, although others felt training and induction would be necessary. The remaining interviewees suggested there was currently no identifiable successor within their own party.
- A third of Lead Members felt succession planning required attention and improvement.
- Only half of the interviewees felt that there were succession arrangements in place if there was a change in party controlling the authority. Reasons for the lack of arrangements included: unlikelihood of a change in party; the successive party would not welcome support/interference; and political disparities.

Training for the Lead Member role

- All but one interviewee mentioned that they had received some form of training for their Lead Member role and more than two-fifths (14) of interviewees detailed more than one source of training. Just under two-thirds (20) of Lead Members stated that they had undertaken IDeA training, most notably in relation to leadership, which was generally well received. Approximately a third (11) of interviewees indicated that they had attended training provided by their authority, which included the induction offered to new members, as well as more specific subject areas, such as issues relating to the care of looked after children in the authority.
- 'Informal training' and skill development accrued whilst operating as LMCS or during their professional and political careers was also seen as effective.
- Nearly half (15) of Lead Members stated that they had attended regional or national IDeA Lead Member Networks. The majority noted that these were valuable opportunities to meet with other members and share information and good practice.
- The need for LMCS to be proactive in seeking out relevant training and networking opportunities was raised.



Additional support for the Lead Member role

- Nearly a third (ten) of interviewees felt that they did not require any additional support to carry out their role, as their LAs provided everything they needed. Just under a fifth (six) of interviewees suggested that support, in terms of capacity and logistical issues, such as administrative and financial support (for conference attendance), would be beneficial.
- Six interviewees also identified training, guidance and communication as potential areas requiring additional support. National guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Lead Member for Children's Services, as well as training in specific subjects/issues was called for. Mentoring for new Lead Members was suggested, as was the development of an email/virtual network of Lead Members that might overcome the time constraints and financial pressures currently preventing some members from accessing the training available. This was corroborated in case study interviews.

Key messages from the interview phase:

- Consider the manageability and succession of the role
- Recognise the value of ensuring support, information and training for Lead Members
- Promote the qualities and characteristics of successful Lead Members

Concluding comments

- Diversity is evident in the ways the Lead Member for Children's Services role is undertaken in different authorities. Variability existed in the accounts of the amount of time committed to the role; the amount of information, training and support lead members think they receive and their degree of involvement with national and regional networks. Sharing the role is another notable variable across local authorities as is the extent of LMCS's active involvement with end-users and front-line teams.
- The effectiveness of the LMCS role can be seen to involve three core elements: **partnership**; **proactivity** and **proximity**. The relationship between an LMCS and DCS [and other officers] was described in terms of complementary working underpinned by trust, mutual respect and clarity around the two roles. Political skills, experience and substantive knowledge featured prominently in the 'ingredient list' of an effective LMCS. In addition, a LMCS's capacity to 'make things happen', be effective at engaging and communicating and be proactive in seeking out knowledge and information seem key qualities highlighted by officers and partners.

Case study A: Partnership working

Introduction

This case study is based on a medium sized Metropolitan Borough Council in the North West of England. The authority has 66 councillors representing 22 wards and no party has been in overall control since 1986. The Lead Member for Children's Services (LMCS) has been in post for approximately three years.

Partnership structure

Partnership working in the authority was facilitated by a tiered structure of forums: local strategic partnership group; Children and Young People's thematic group (equivalent to Children's Trust); and five Every Child Matters outcomes groups (see diagram). This structure brought together different statutory and non-statutory partners to focus on achieving outcomes for children and young people in the area. The LMCS was involved at each of these levels of partnership, attending and chairing meetings, promoting and supporting a partnership ethos and identifying and reflecting on opportunities to progress partnership working.

The role of the Lead Member for Children's Services

The LMCS's role in partnership working in this authority involved:

- the **identification and development** of pre-existing relationships from the earlier integration of services
- **endorsement and support for the delegation of leadership** responsibilities (and budgets) for major projects/initiatives to other departments within the authority. Here, the LMCS was involved in identifying the partners and agencies best placed to lead on meeting particular service-users' needs
- the **promotion of clear communication** to ensure local authority and partner personnel were aware of the aims and aspirations of the Children's Service
- providing **identifiable leadership**, through chairing meetings, for example. The LMCS was felt to have a key role in providing profile to the children's agenda, given his strategic and policy directional role.

The LMCS was seen to be an active contributor to, and supporter of, partnership working, reflected in his interaction with a wide range of partners and professionals from within and beyond the authority (see diagram for details of partners). The LMCS typically engaged with these partners via presence on a range of boards and panels.

Challenges associated with partnership working

- **Varying remits, parameters and priorities of partners** – Partners' remits and geographical parameters of responsibility did not necessarily map neatly to those of the local authority. Partners may thus have been involved with more than one local authority and could be members of large numbers of partnerships and groups. This raised logistical challenges in terms of the numbers of meetings partners needed to attend, and adapting to varying approaches and priorities that different organisations may assume. Nationally imposed and slightly varying priorities and targets placed on individual agencies could also constrain the potential and autonomy to engage in partnership working.



- **Balance of influence within the partnership** – Perhaps reflecting the national context, possible challenges were identified in relation to potential tensions between statutory and non-statutory agencies involvement in service delivery. Variability was experienced in the extent of influence over, and contribution to, finances and the direction of the partnership.
- **Institutional reorganisations** – Recent reorganisation in partner PCTs was not yet fully stabilised, undermining the progress of partnership working to an extent. The chair of the local PCT had recently taken up a role as the Children’s Champion, providing increased involvement with Children’s Services and a valuable and consistent link between health and Children’s Services as partners.

Developments and improvements in partnership working

Partnership working was felt by most interviewees to be well established and functioning effectively in the LA; ‘very well joined up, backed up by good communications’. As can be seen from the tiered partnership structure diagram, a range of partners were involved at each of the three levels, representing strategic through to more operational functions. All three levels of partnership boards had a monitoring function, monitoring the extent to which the aims and actions agreed in partnership were being met.

Suggestions were also made for how partnership working could be further enhanced, with some specific recommendations for the LMCS role:

- Continued work to engage with the different external partner agencies. In particular, the role was felt to be well placed to encourage and promote the importance of external providers in meeting the needs of children and young people in the area, endorsing a growth in a mixed economy of provision.
- Continued efforts were required to ensure that the partnerships were sufficiently robust to withstand positive criticism and were effectively evaluated.
- Work to inspire all contributors to the partnership to fully engage and commit to the joint children’s agenda, rather than maintaining a focus on specific agency/department/service goals, targets and priorities. Restructuring and the creation of a new ‘Children in Need’ post were seen as effective means of driving the agenda forward.
- Work to progress from virtual partnerships to conceptualise and operationalise re-locating professionals from different services and agencies as a means of strengthening the foundations of partnership working. This required joined-up thinking about accommodation and the physical structure of services.

Key elements in the effectiveness of the LMCS role in partnership working

- **High level of personal involvement and commitment** – The LMCS offered a good personal example and was seen as willing to be involved and supportive, demonstrating visible advocacy for partnership working and relationship building (e.g. presence on partnership boards, attendance at events and celebrations and visiting frontline teams and services). The LMCS’s regular contribution to a partner’s newsletter was seen as an effective means of raising the service’s profile amongst staff and service-users, as expressed by a partner representative: ‘endorsement from an elected member gives them back-up in what they’re trying to achieve’.
- **Leadership and governance** – The LMCS represented strong leadership and determination to achieve outcomes for children and young people. This was predominantly expressed via the leadership and governance of the Children’s Trust (equivalent) (e.g. LMCS chair of

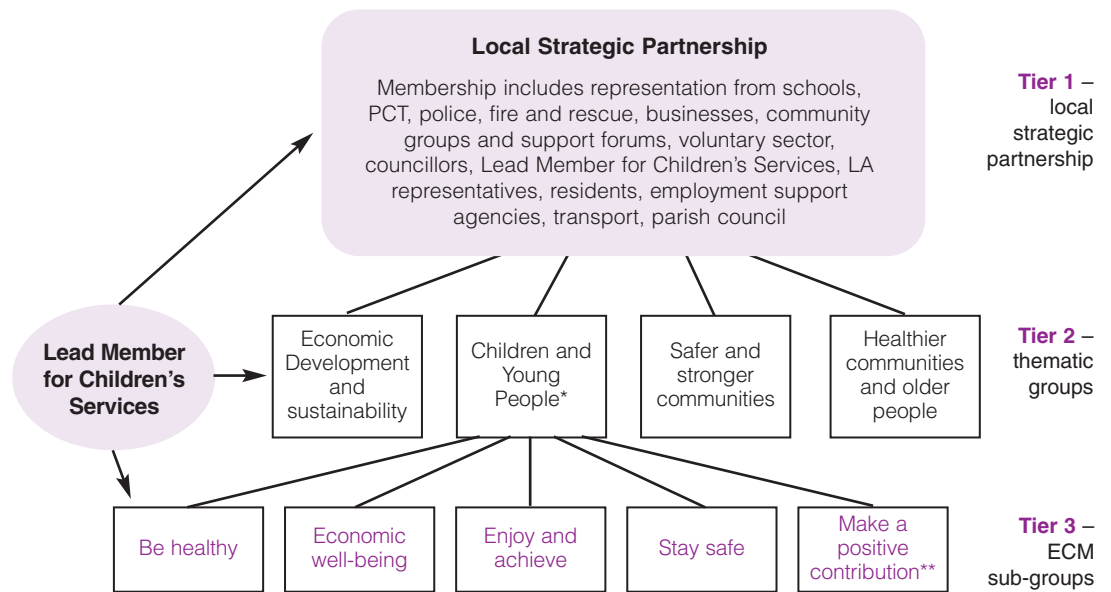
Children and Young People's group, strove for a balanced agenda and attempted to seek contributions from all partners, devoted time, demonstrated awareness and understanding of issues, recognised and endorsed joint PCT and authority appointments as facilitating partnership working). Here the Lead Member was seen to promote a positive ethos throughout the partnership, conveying to partners the aims of the partnership and over-seeing the integration of these aims in policy and strategy development.

- **Direct, hands-on, and high profile public involvement** – The LMCS made an important contribution through informal as well as formal contact with officers, partners and end-users. His presence at numerous meetings and events gave him the opportunity to hear people's thoughts as well as articulate the aspirations and direction of the Children's Service as an effective publicist.
- **Understanding of individual partners' perspectives, priorities and potential contributions** – The LMCS was seen as having been particularly effective in recognising and supporting the contribution of the local Fire and Rescue Service in meeting the Children and Young People's agenda. This partnership was particularly well established, providing expertise and skills from this sector to improve outcomes for young people. Hence, the LMCS had an important role as an enabler and advocate for such partnership working within the wider partnership structures and processes.
- **Monitoring within the partnership** – In terms of commissioning and monitoring the effectiveness of service delivery, the LMCS was seen as making essential contributions to evaluating the success of the partnership in meeting young people's needs. The LMCS was involved in the process of identifying and defining targets and priorities for the partnership that are then set out in strategy documents (e.g. Children and Young People's Plan). The LMCS was then involved in the process of monitoring the extent to which the services commissioned were meeting young people's needs and where alternative services may be necessary (whether provided by statutory or non-statutory services).

Impacts of the LMCS role

- **Young people and other end-users** – The LMCS's role was felt to be increasing young people's access to a wider spectrum of resources, activities and opportunities, and better enabling the meeting of a range of needs.
- **Partners and service providers** – In one instance, the result of the LMCS support and advocacy had encouraged a partner organisation's increased focus on youth engagement activities. This service was then able to develop a role in disseminating its good practice to other services in the region.
- **Local Authority:**
 - Through the inclusion of a range of partners, ECM objectives in the LA were increasingly being met. The LMCS was regarded as having played a key role in supporting the inclusion of one service in particular in the partnership, with this involvement receiving positive feedback during the Beacon Team's inspection process. '[The LMCS's] personal advocacy [for our involvement in meeting children's needs] is very important. That's a lead to the rest of the authority and officers that this is something important that should be supported and embraced'.
 - The LMCS role was valued for the profile it provided to children's issues, as one officer commented, the Lead Member is 'fighting Children's Services' corner in terms of resources, especially when resources are under pressure'. The role of supporting officers in the political contexts in which they were operating was also appreciated.

Case Study 1 – Tiered partnership structure diagram



* Children and Young People

Membership: **Statutory partners** – Lead Member for Children's Services (chair), Director of Children's Services, PCT, Children's Trust Director, Police, Youth Offending Team, Connexions, LSC, Probation service, Partnership Development Manager. **Non-statutory partners** – community groups, voluntary services, Assistant Director for Schools, Assistant Director for Young People, Assistant Director for Social Care, community empowerment, business partnership, fire and rescue, further education college, school headteacher, school governor.

**ECM sub-groups

To work with partners to meet targets and performance indicators for the respective ECM outcomes and to coordinate and manage actions required to meet the outcomes. Example membership 'make a positive contribution': Children's Services officers, Connexions, Youth Offending Team, leisure services, Chief Executive, business centre and business partnerships, regeneration, Assistant Director for Schools, PCT, police, youth inclusion, private providers, voluntary services, Children's Fund, assessment and family support service, schools fire service, jobcentreplus. Lead Member for Children's Services participation in sub-groups (not necessarily membership).

Case study B: Engaging with end-users

Introduction

This case study is based on a County authority which has 48 county councillors representing five districts. The Lead Member for Children's Services (LMCS) has been in post for approximately three years.

Engaging with end users

Structures and methods have been developed to ensure that the views of end users, particularly young people, were canvassed. It was suggested that 'the council is very forward thinking and keen to consult with young people'. Most recently, this involved the creation of the Participation Team, consisting of four young people employed to work with partners of the Children's Trust. The team's role involved arranging consultation events and activities for young people and others, including parents and carers, relating to issues and priorities identified by the partners. The consultation outcomes were reported back to the partners and the council through the team's management structure and also back to the young people themselves in a 'young person friendly' format. In addition, the Speak Out Group, (meeting on a monthly basis and attended by the Young People's Champion – YPC), was used widely by the LA as a consultation and feedback mechanism. This group made annual presentations to the council. Young people's views were also represented through the two elected Members of the Youth Parliament, (and their deputies), and a student representative attended Children's Trust meetings. Alongside these structures, the LMCS (as well as the YPC), took an active role in meeting with young people in a range of settings.

The role of the Lead Member for Children's Services

Two members supported the LMCS role in this authority, including one who acted to promote and further the engagement of young people as the Young People's Champion. This particular role provided a key link between the Participation Team, (and their consultation with young people as end-users), and the LMCS. The YPC had a regular strategy group meeting, (every two months), with the Assistant Director for Youth Division, who also met with the LMCS. Hence, the LMCS had a central role to play in liaising with other members and officers working with young people. Alongside formalised and scheduled meetings, frequent ad hoc interaction between the LMCS and the YPC took place.

It is not an individual effort that we're making. It is related to other members of the Children and Young People Programme. We all feed into a mechanism throughout the Directorate and also beyond the directorate. We also engage young people in other areas, especially transport, so we make sure their views are represented there.

The LMCS's role was one of monitoring and overseeing, ensuring that the systems were in place, and working effectively to support children and young people.

The Lead Member for Children's Services contact with end users

The LMCS attended a variety of events in a range of settings to meet with young people. This included: attending award ceremonies, such as the authority's Pride Celebration for children in care, (at which the LMCS and DCS awarded prizes to young people); visits to residential homes, schools, Children's Centres, breakfast clubs and youth centres. In addition, the LMCS met with the Participation Team, the Speak Out Group, and members of the Youth Parliament,



generally on an informal basis. Attendance at events and activities where members of these groups were present, such as local democracy week events that brought elected members and young people together, provided the LMCS with opportunities to 'see young people in action and interface with them'.

Challenges associated with engaging with end users

- **Ensuring representation** – Some concerns were expressed that despite the comprehensive range of consultation activities and opportunities available, 'hard to reach groups' may still not have been fully involved. To counter this, the LA, via the Speak Out group, endeavoured to target young people from specific groups for engagement and involvement in consultation. A young homeless person, a young person living in care and a representative of minority ethnic communities, for example, had been specifically included in consultation events.
- **Maintaining realistic expectations amongst young people** – In terms of consultation, it was suggested that it was necessary to encourage young people's engagement and involvement despite the fact that their desired outcomes may not have always been achievable. Hence, it was important to secure an understanding that just because their views have been canvassed and reported to council, immediate change, policy implementation, or problem resolution could not be guaranteed. However, it remained necessary to continue young people's engagement and involvement within this context.

Developments and improvements in engaging with end users

- **Increased opportunities for engaging young people** – Although said to be effective in terms of the flexibility and ability to meet with young people in a whole range of settings and contexts, (from schools, to youth clubs, to meeting in public places), the Participation Team's opportunities for direct engagement with young people could be increased.
- **Increased opportunities for including a wider range of young people in engagement with the LA** – It was suggested that, although working well in practice, those young people presenting to the full council or to scrutiny on particular issues, had no mandate to speak for other young people in the LA. Hence, mechanisms for reporting and presenting issues, as well as feeding back the council's responses required broadening out to include more young people. The authority was developing a mechanism to facilitate a formal process of communication and feedback involving representative groups of consulted young people.
- **Ensuring that other directorates take account of 'Young People' issues** – There was a need to ensure that young people's voices were heard in relation to issues other than those associated with the Children and Young People directorate.

Key elements in the effectiveness of the LMCS role in engaging with end users

- **Communication and involvement of the LMCS** – Meeting with the Young People's Champion to discuss issues raised as part of his/her remit was seen as a key element of the LMCS's role. There was a frequent flow of information which the LMCS could use. There was a shared responsibility for engaging with young people and the LMCS took on an important link role, supporting and facilitating engagement and communication between end users, other members (especially the YPC) and the wider council and LA officers. A vital

element of the LMCS role revolved around alerting other members to their corporate parenting responsibility. Hence, approachability was seen as a key factor.

- **Enthusiasm and commitment** – The enthusiasm and commitment displayed by the LMCS was a key element of effectiveness in terms of engaging with end users. This was said to have been underpinned by the LMCS's understanding of the value of going out 'into the frontline' and listening to people as end users. This had a motivating effect on staff within the directorate as well as having a positive impact on the young people themselves. The LMCS's 'knowledge and willingness to engage gives everybody a lift when s/he has been out to meet them'.
- **Visible, active and appropriate involvement and engagement** – The LMCS was present at many of the activities that young people attend, including the consultation events facilitated by the Participation Team, playing a 'supportive role'. She/he attends the activities that we put on but steps back as well. She/he has a very good way of engaging with young people – she/he is more active with young people, and is dynamic. That's why they like her/him, because she/he doesn't ramble on all the time. She/he gets straight to the point. She/he's what the young people want to hear.
- **LMCS has the overall responsibility for engaging with young people** – The LMCS had a knowledge of, and involvement in, everything that concerns young people in the authority. In this way, the LMCS was able to support the YPC in his/her work. It was suggested that the key role of the LMCS was to ensure that the systems were in place to support the young people rather than in focussing on face-to-face meetings with them.
- **Borough and district councils' involvement in engagement and consultation** – Borough and district councils were all involved in Hear By Right. Each had its own Youth Champion and there was increasing activity in terms of accessing young people's views. A forum existed where these champions could share the information derived from consultation. Contributing to strengthening local democracy. Champions from the Districts and Boroughs feed information back to the YPC for his/her regular strategy meeting.

Impacts

- **Young people and other end-users** – Young people in the authority had opportunities to be engaged and involved in the decisions that impacted upon them through the availability of various processes and structures for participation. Consultation took place in a variety of arenas and contexts including; schools, youth groups, faith groups, and through structures and events such as Local Democracy Week, Speak Out group and the Youth Parliament. The flexibility associated with the Participation team was seen as being particularly valuable: 'We can work with and consult young people anywhere – streets, youth centres, schools, church groups – anywhere'.
- The Speak Out group fulfilled a moderating role in terms of considering the decisions made regarding the distribution of YOF money in the LA. Hence, young people were actively engaged in the decision making process. It is a very sound process.
- **Local Authority** – In the longer term, the LA will have benefitted from having consulted and engaged with young people so that the services on offer have been effectively planned and developed on the basis of assessments of their users' needs and requirements. The Participation Team was seen as particularly effective as a means of engaging end users because its members (aged between 16 and 19) were able to effectively and appropriately engage with young people in the LA. 'We all have a good understanding of how young



people want to engage: they don't want to engage with a questionnaire, they want to do an activity'.

- One particular area of success focussed on concerns about young people's alcohol mis-use. Via consultation events and activities, the Participation Team reported that young people considered that the LA could be doing more to promote issues of personal safety associated with binge drinking. 'That is the power of using young people – they get others to look at it from a young person's perspective.' Consequently, these findings informed drug and alcohol policy and practice. The potential dangers faced by young people under the influence of alcohol, (such as the risk of being assaulted and robbed, for example) now form a central strand of the LA's message, alongside the long-term health implications associated with such behaviour. Via consultation, the LA promotes a balanced message about the dangers and health implications and has adapted this message to focus on the health issues that are more relevant to young people. In addition, the consultation and engagement of young people revealed a relatively un-developed concept of safe drinking; their view focussing on an 'all or nothing' approach. As such, these findings informed the LA's education programme promoting the safety issues associated with drinking.
- Bullying became one of the three key elements of the Youth Parliament's manifesto and was being taken on board by the Children's Trust for further development. The LA also re-considered its library services in the light of findings of 'mystery shopper' activities undertaken by young people as a means of gathering views on the nature of services required by young people visiting these amenities.
- **Partners and service providers** – The partners of the Children's Trust benefited from consultation, especially through the work of the Participation Team as this structure provided them with a means of gathering young people's perspectives on particular priorities.

Case study C: Corporate parenting

Introduction

This case study is based on a large county council in the West Midlands of England. The authority has 62 councillors representing 59 divisions. The Lead Member for Children's Services (LMCS) has been in post for approximately two years.

Corporate parenting structure and practices

Corporate parenting in the authority was supported by an active corporate parenting panel. The panel was set up by the LMCS, in response to inspection criticism of councillor involvement with children in public care, to simulate the notion of elected members as 'pushy parents' for children and young people in care and fulfil some of the roles that a reasonable, caring parent would fulfil. The corporate parenting panel comprised 12 elected members, representing the range of parties and was further supported by an additional 11 councillors who were active corporate parents. The panel met on a monthly basis and was led and chaired by the LMCS.

On a rota basis, the team of corporate parents visited children in care in local authority and independently-run residential homes and also those in foster care, three times a year. During these visits, young people's views were canvassed and then reported back to officers and the DCS. This formed a major component of the scrutiny and monitoring of the authority's care of looked after children through democratic procedures. In addition, the panel was responsible for reviewing the educational (and other) performance of looked after children, requesting reports on individual children and questioning the reasons underpinning any problems identified. The panel met with the directorate management team and the Local Safeguarding Children Board to discuss the information collated via these visits and monitoring activities and to identify necessary actions.

Corporate parenting visits

Corporate parents were accompanied by officers in their visits to residential homes and conducted regulation 33 inspections unannounced. The daily running of the home, records, catering arrangements, building quality and standard of living, unauthorised absences, children missing, staff/carers and young people's perspectives and adequate meeting of the five Every Child Matters outcomes were all inspected as part of the visit. The findings and outcomes from each visit were presented at the corporate parenting panel for discussion. This process enabled the corporate parents to systematically review progress in addressing any issues identified.

Officer support

Officers were required to provide regular updates to the corporate parenting panel and were thus allocated time to prepare data and information on policies so that they were able to answer questions from the panel. With this function, the panel was a forum for challenging and exploring the authority's service to looked after children, providing a constructive and critical eye to ensure the best possible service was delivered to young people.



The role of the Lead Member for Children's Services

The Lead Member for Children's Services championed, promoted and led fellow members in their shared responsibility as corporate parents. A number of key features were identified as supporting the LMCS in achieving wider member involvement in, and responsibility for, corporate parenting:

- **Identification of good practice** – The LMCS initially identified the need for more active councillor involvement in corporate parenting and sought to explore the acquisition of good practice from other authorities. An example of effective corporate parenting was identified through the LMCS's involvement in the IDeA Lead Member networks. The LMCS and a selection of interested fellow councillors visited the identified authority to speak to councillors and officers about effective corporate parenting. The model of an effective corporate parenting panel was subsequently replicated within this case study authority, underpinned by the observed features of good practice, and introduced with the status of a trialled and tested approach.
- **Endorsement from senior colleagues** – The LMCS initially sought buy-in and support for an improved impetus on member involvement in corporate parenting by addressing cabinet and the leaders of the different parties with ideas and plans. It was through this process that the LMCS raised the initial profile of corporate parenting and called for member colleagues' interest. The LMCS endeavoured to promote the notion that the role of corporate parent transcended party political groups and ideologies, calling for 'councillors who cared' from across the parties of the council to be involved.
- **Training** – The LMCS arranged training sessions (with support from the IDeA) for corporate parents in order to equip members with the necessary skills in terms of the questions to ask of the authority's services for LAC, as well as key issues around ECM. The profile of training for members was increased, underpinned by an expectation that members would undertake ongoing training. Financial support was available to reinforce the LMCS's view that training and knowledge/skill development were essential factors in a member's ability to effectively represent the community.
- **The promotion of member ownership of corporate parenting** – Member ownership of corporate parenting was felt to have 'given it a greater impetus, if it had been something the officers had thought up and designed and asked members to do it, I don't think it would have had quite the same impact'. Corporate parenting was clearly promoted as the responsibility of all councillors and the LMCS promoted a collective approach to the corporate parenting responsibility, leading with and alongside fellow members, rather than leading them.
- **Sharing the LMCS role** – The LMCS had three deputy members, each taking responsibility for particular aspects of the role, with the LMCS retaining strategic responsibility.
- **Engagement of district councillors** – District councillors were also effectively engaged in the shared responsibility for corporate parenting. There was a district council member on each of the District Trust Boards, forming the main forum for their engagement. A workshop on the role of district councillors in children's services, delivered by the IDeA, supported this.
- **Working parties** – Wider member involvement in corporate parenting was also facilitated by a monthly programme of working parties, usually identified as a result of the children and young people's scrutiny process. Councillors were invited to become involved and could increase their knowledge and experience of specific issues relating

to children, and develop a more 'hands-on' involvement in achieving effective services for looked after children.

Members' engagement with Children in Public Care

Corporate parents had a key role in actively engaging with end users. There were formal processes for gathering the views of young people in care, including a survey carried out three times a year which explored their experiences and wellbeing. The corporate parenting panel received both qualitative and quantitative data from this exercise. In addition, the panel members met with representative groups of young people in care, the children's commissioner who represented groups of young people in care; and a young person who had left care who was commissioned to work with the children's commissioner to coordinate thinking around the issues faced by young people in care and those leaving care. Members also engaged with children in care at celebration events and in carrying out visits to children's homes.

Challenges associated with corporate parenting

- **New ways of working** – The increased and more active involvement of members in the authority's service to looked after children was felt to be a relatively new way of working. Although this was seen as potentially challenging, the process was facilitated by identification of procedures and protocols around the operation of the corporate parenting panel. The remit of the panel was also carefully cast as providing added value as a critical, constructive and objective perspective. The leadership provided by the LMCS was highlighted as being of importance in this process, stressing qualities such as enthusiasm, passion, motivation, dedication and ensuring things happen.

Developments and improvements in corporate parenting

- **Replication of the corporate parenting panel in adult services** – Plans were in place in the authority for a similar panel to the corporate parenting panel to be established in adult services. It was anticipated that this would replicate some of the features of the existing panel, notably the rota-based system of visits to residential homes. In addition, there would be a similar impetus on member ownership of, and involvement in, scrutinising the care services provided.
- **Ongoing development and specific projects/foci** – The corporate parenting panel was subject to continual review to identify possible improvements in its function and focus and to ensure it remained responsive to the needs of the communities its members served. Refreshing of skills was also deemed to be necessary, in order that the panel does not become static and continues to be able to engage new interest and participation.

Key elements in the effectiveness of the LMCS role in corporate parenting and engaging wider membership in corporate parenting

- Members were confident that the LMCS would listen seriously to their concerns and try to **get something done** about them (the panel was not just a formality, it had a real function)
- The LMCS was **determined** to be as well informed as possible in terms of the issues of ECM; he was **proactive** in visiting young people, services and identifying good practice; was actively involved through the IDeA; and was engaged at a regional level in the chil-

dren's agenda. The LMCS was committed to acquiring this level of information and knowledge in order to provide effective and valuable challenge to the children's service.

- The LMCS was noted for appearing **passionate** about children's issues and with a strong moral sense of the need to support children in public care.
- The LMCS's **leadership and political competence** were highlighted; the LMCS had a senior role in the cabinet, was well regarded by fellow senior members and was felt to be adept and proactive.
- The LMCS and DCS have together promoted a **positive ethos around member involvement** within the directorate, (based on information and trust), which was felt to have aided the wider uptake and effectiveness of the corporate parenting panel.
- The LMCS carried out his role as corporate parent in an **exemplary** manner, modelling a caring and 'pushy' parent for other members to follow.

Impacts of the LMCS role

- **Young people and end users:**

- The corporate parenting panel had facilitated the monitoring of looked after children's educational progress and underpinned additional support to improve their attainment. This increased level of monitoring had contributed to a dramatic increase in educational performance of young people in care in 2007 (tripled the proportion of 5 GCSEs A*–C).
- Through gathering young people's views on their care and support the corporate parenting panel identified an unsuccessful secure residential unit and decided to recommend its closure and preferable care based on young people's views.
- The corporate parenting panel had impacted on the way the family support units were designed to provide outreach services, based on service users' views about the most effective ways of maintaining contact between children in care and their families and earlier and preventative interventions.
- A specific improvement made to the authority's care provision as a result of the corporate parents' role in engaging with young people was the introduction of personalising short-term placement environments in order to enhance the young person's experience of belonging and homeliness.
- As a result of the regular corporate parenting visits, the young people in care felt that there was a more consistent interest in their care and experiences. Furthermore, they felt that they had a 'voice' through to the authority via corporate parents.

- **Officers** – The corporate parenting panel functioned as a key source of information for the running of the Children's Service; carrying out visits to gather intelligence about the quality of service being provided and young people's feedback and providing an objective, constructively critical and questioning perspective on the service. The corporate parenting panel, chaired by the LMCS, enabled the corporate parents to, crucially, feedback to the LMCS who was then in a position to follow up any issues with the DCS and heads of service in weekly children's services management meetings. The LMCS was felt to have 'developed the corporate parenting panel to the point where it is providing a good and valued support to the children and life long learning section of the authority'.

- **The Children's Service** – Member's increasing role in the leading of the Children's Service has resulted in changes and improvements to the service provided.

- **Members** – The council as a whole felt that corporate parenting and care of looked after children was a cross-party concern. Members benefited from having an active role in sharing the responsibility for looked after children, undertaking visits and building regular contact with care users, and getting more involved in, and knowledgeable about, the workings of the children’s service. Members were actively involved in ‘examining, challenging and leading, where necessary, in order to get the best service’ for children.

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