



# Taking it to the Next Level Corporate parents and Children in Care Councils Summary Report 2013-2016



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## Introduction

The Taking it to the Next Level Corporate Parents and Children in Care Councils project, a partnership between the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and A National Voice (ANV) was funded by the Department of Education from 2013-2016.

Between 2013-2016 we ran 24 events and workshops across the country for children in care council members to attend with their corporate parents. These were held in Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham, London and Bristol and were attended by over 800 delegates (corporate parents and young people from 99 different local authorities). A further 12 authorities had shown an interest but were unable to attend on the day. Five authorities sent a delegation to three or more events.

The aims and objectives of these events and workshops were to:

- encourage and support corporate parents and young people to work together and;
- facilitate the sharing of ideas between local authorities in order to strengthen the work of children in care councils and the corporate parents;
- raise the bar in terms of aspirations for children in care and;
- stimulate actions to improve outcomes for children in care.

In the first year of events, each participating local authority was given the opportunity to present their achievements in engaging all professionals and carers in improving outcomes for children in care; engaging all young people in the work of the children in care council and to explore their key challenges.

For the second year, we designed themed events focused on three distinct topics - *Improving Placements, Health and Wellbeing* and *Leaving Care*.

Further funding was granted by the Department for Education which provided the project with a final year of workshops culminating in a National Celebratory event. We ran six workshops across the UK which covered the following topics- *Preparation for Adulthood and Leaving Care, Diversity and Inclusion* and *Raising Achievements*.

In addition, local authorities were given opportunities to get fresh ideas and suggestions from other areas in how to address their local challenges. There was a strong emphasis on taking action and at the end of every event each local authority had to identify three actions they were going to carry out in their own authority.

Evaluation forms were completed at the end of each event by those who attended. Follow up surveys were also conducted three months post event. A project evaluation was carried out by the Research Centre at the National Children's Bureau at the end of the first two years covering 2013-2015 and at the end of the final year of the life of this project 2015-2016. These reports can be downloaded from <http://www.ncb.org.uk/corporate-parenting> .

*"The events successfully functioned as a forum for exploring how corporate parents and CiCCs could work together more effectively. In addition to this, the feedback provided highlights the extent to which the events served to reenergise local authority participants with regards to their role and responsibilities as corporate parents."*

**Reference Gibb, J. Lea, J and Trevelyan,G ( 2015) Corporate Parents and Children in Care Councils An Evaluation of regional events hosted by NCB with A National Voice Final Report. NCB: London**

*"Overall the Taking it to the Next Level workshops appear to have been highly successful. As in previous years, the positive feedback and enthusiasm conveyed by participants on the day was carried forward and translated into improved communication and better working relationships between corporate parents and young people. Encouragingly, the workshops prompted local authority staff to critically reflect on their role as corporate parents, to identify actions that would help them fulfil their responsibilities and to be proactive about putting these into practice."*

**Reference Gibb, J. Lea, J and Trevelyan,G ( 2016) Corporate Parents and Children in Care Councils An Evaluation of regional events hosted by NCB with A National Voice. NCB: London**

## General themes and messages

A clear and consistent theme throughout, evident from the very first event, was that local authorities were at very different places in terms of children in care councils and the relationship with corporate parents, scrutiny and decision making processes.

There appeared to be major differences between local authorities in how their children in care councils were set up, their purpose and function, how corporate parenting was formally structured and thirdly the interface between corporate parents and children in care councils. In some places there was little connection between corporate parents and the children in care council, whereas in others members of the children in care council were regularly in attendance at council meetings, had either a slot in proceedings or set the agenda.

Unsurprisingly, it appears that children in care councils work best when they have a clear purpose, structure, agreed decision making powers and a clear connection and link to key corporate parents – lead member and director of children's services and the authority's decision making bodies i.e. corporate parenting panel/board and full council body.

Recruiting, engaging and maintaining the interest of young people in the work of the children in care council was another major theme brought up across all of the events in the first year.

With regards to engaging a cross-section of young people into children in care councils, some authorities were more evolved than others. Some authorities had a forum/group for different ages, different stages. It seemed more effective where there were different groups for different ages to cater for their different needs and abilities e.g. junior in care council, in care council for young people, forum for care leavers, virtual in care council to reach those who might not want to attend meetings, live far away or just want to dip in and out of what's going on. The challenge still remains of how to engage children and young people whose voices are not readily heard, those out of borough, within secure settings for example, or those who might struggle to engage with this type of set up but have an important contribution to make nevertheless.

The purpose of the children in care council has to be clear to its members, to the wider in care population, to corporate parents and to those wishing to seek the views of children in care. Local authorities have to guard against the views of the children in care council being sought on anything and everything; or on

the opposite end of the spectrum their views not being sought at all or being sought then ignored.

Where children in care councils have a work plan, it seems to help to avoid over-consultation and to make it clear what they plan to achieve over the coming year. Clear processes for prioritising and planning are important, for example we know of one authority that seeks the views of its children in care population on an annual basis to identify and agree on the priorities for their children in care council. An agenda set by the young people themselves supported by corporate parents appears to be mutually beneficial to children in care council members and corporate parents.

Fun is vital to sustaining engagement, as well as work; children in care councils need to have fun activities as they are volunteering their time and they are first and foremost young people.

When young people are consulted and have taken the time to participate they need to hear what happened to their views as a result. Whilst there are those children in care councils that receive regular updates, there are still too many children in care councils that never receive any feedback from consultations; it's not difficult to see why young people might not feel so enthusiastic about giving their views the next time.

Some children in care councils do not feel heard. This seemed more apparent where there was little connection between the corporate parents and the young people and particularly where the children in care councils did not feature in the authority's decision making processes.

Where there was a clear process of overlap between the children in care council and corporate parenting bodies/forums/groups, the voices of children in care appeared more evident and more influential. This was being achieved in many ways including children in care council representation at corporate parenting bodies and vice versa. One local authority stated that nothing comes to their corporate panel that hasn't been looked at in a children in care council meeting first.

There were differences across the country in the way children in care councils were funded. Some had their own funding pot ranging from several thousands of pounds to a token amount and others had no funding at all. Where funding was allocated it had been used for funding group activities, paying for refreshments for meetings, for rewards and incentives, to funding travel costs. Some children in care councils were generating income via their commissioned

training. Having a dedicated funding source for supporting children in care councils and their work, especially at a time of budget constraints and cuts was a consistent theme raised throughout the project.

Well-resourced children in care councils appeared to go in tandem with well-resourced participation services. In these particular authorities the children in care councils reported a strong sense of the voices of children in care being embedded in the work of their authority and taken seriously by corporate parents.

Overwhelmingly for young people a by-product of being involved with the children in care council was a reported increase in confidence and skills in negotiation, communication and presentation. It helped to boost young people's self-esteem and build a peer network and sense of belonging.

A key theme for corporate parents, in particular lead members, was the problem of engaging the wider staff, officer, councilor, other departments lead, council and external services, in taking responsibility and playing their part in corporate parenting. To counter this, some local authorities had provided training for their corporate parents. Training where young people are involved and the voices and experiences of children in care appear to have the most significant impact.

Corporate parents recommended having a strategy and plan for embedding the practice of listening to young people in care in improving and developing services, support and practice.

A consistent message over the life of the project was the problem of staff turnover and capacity within local authorities. This was highlighted as a major issue by children in care councils and corporate parents:

- In the overall experience felt by children in care.
- Identified as an obstacle for children in care in building relationships and trust with the continued change and therefore reluctance by young people to invest in someone or services that might only be temporary.
- In being able to deliver vital services and support because of the lack of social workers, time constraints and high caseloads.
- In being able to provide the required resources i.e. having enough quality foster placements available.

## Key messages from the themed events in year 2 of the project

During the second year of the project the events focused on a specific topic: improving placements, health and wellbeing and leaving care.

### Improving placements themed events

During the placement themed events, young people and corporate parents were asked to discuss and identify what a good placement looks like. The key messages have been distilled into an animation film, **Corporate parents: Taking it to the next level - What makes a good placement** aimed at corporate parents and commissioners.

Young people identified 'good placements' as being safe, homely environments that engender and encourage a sense of belonging. The personality, skills and experience of staff and carers were equally important. Good placements were seen as being able to "stay the course" with young people. There was consensus that placement providers (residential or foster care) should be equipped to deal with the challenges and not be so quick to end placements when things get tough.

During the market place activity, local authorities shared what they had been doing and here is just a sample:

- *Some children in care councils reported involvement in the recruitment and training of foster carers.*
- *One local authority has made a DVD which identifies what makes a good carer which is used in prospective foster carer training.*
- *Some young people had been involved in inspecting residential care and had an agreed framework for inspection which included seeking the views of young people about their placement.*
- *In one area they provide training for the biological children of foster carers as part of the foster carer training package.*
- *Making sure that no child leaves placement with their belongings in a plastic bag - that they have proper luggage.*
- *Profiles of foster carers – that young people can see before they move to the placement.*
- *Booklets for young people explaining what it is like to live in foster care.*

Suggestions to improve the placement experience for young people include: children being able to visit before being placed, being able to see a DVD of the placement, an interactive walk around or see a picture book with photos of the carers and placements before moving into residential or foster homes.

### Health and wellbeing themed events

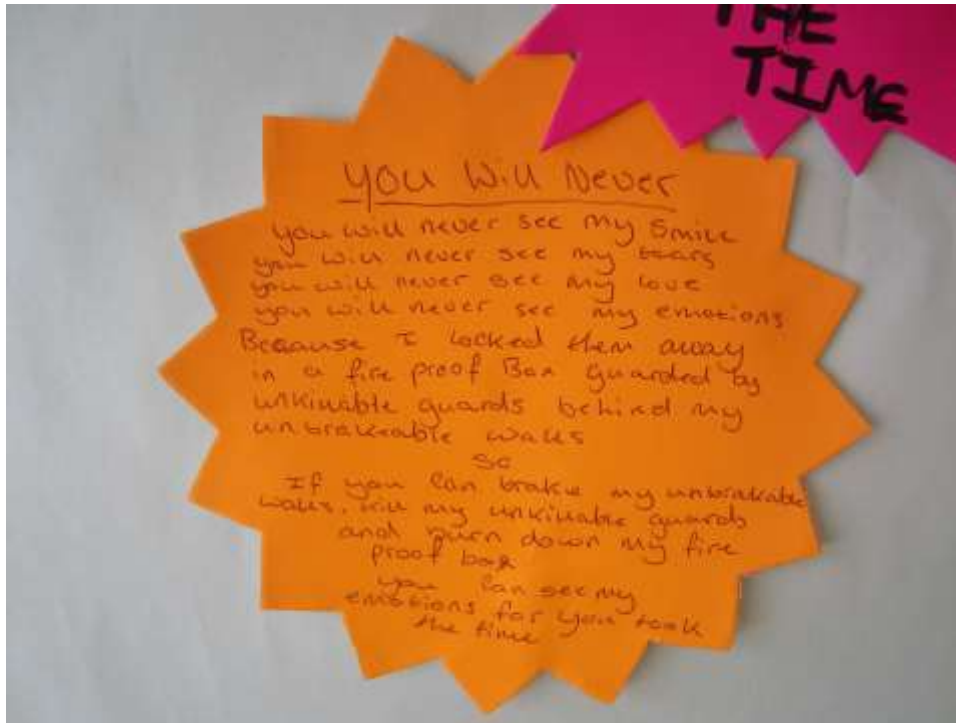


Figure 1. Poem by a CiCC member at a health themed event.

During the health and wellbeing themed events, young people and corporate parents were asked to consider what a child in care-friendly health service would look like, if they were tasked with inspecting services from their perspective. The key messages have been distilled into an animation film aimed at corporate parents entitled **Corporate parents: Taking it to the next level: Getting Health Services Right for Young People in Care**, available at <http://youtu.be/nKmdJgXKiBM>.

Services need to understand and be responsive and flexible to the needs and experiences of children in care, some of whom may find it initially difficult to engage with services.

One of the recurring themes from the discussion was young people's access to health information and advice. Local authorities shared ideas on how to make information and advice more accessible to young people. These ranged from: issuing individual health passports for every care leaver; to online resources



(websites, forums, social media). Suggestions around creating a peer support or mentoring scheme and setting up a free helpline for young people were popular suggestions.

Local authorities seemed to be engaged in a range of creative and innovative activities to improve and enhance the health and wellbeing of children in care including:

- *Lead member running cooking groups with young people.*
- *CICC blog on health and wellbeing – to pass information on to young people.*
- *Art project to explore dreams and wellbeing.*
- *LAC Nurse attends the Children in Care Council meeting.*
- *You Matter survey which includes what young people say about health and the support they receive.*
- *CiCC interviewed the Director of Public Health.*
- *CiCC involved in the commissioning of the addiction (drug and alcohol service).*

The issues identified by children in care councils and corporate parents as barriers to addressing the needs of children in care and improving health and wellbeing were varied. However there was a recurring message relating to CAMHS (Child and adolescent mental health services).

*“One of the good things is that we have good health assessments, but one of the bad things is access to mental health which is CAMHS....it needs improving.”*

*“We need to make access to CAMHS easier and more responsive to needs.”*



**Figure 2. Drawing from a health themed event**



*"I want acceptance not just empty words and of course understanding."*

*"I would like to see people more sensitive to CIC and CL feelings" Majority of people act like they understand"*

**Figure 3. Drawn by a CICC member at a health themed event**

### **Leaving Care themed events**

During the leaving care events, young people and corporate parents were asked to raise the bar and think outside the box to identify what gold standard support for care leavers would look like. The key messages have been distilled into an animation film aimed at corporate parents, carers, and those working in leaving care services.

Interestingly corporate parents and children in care councils alike often cited things that should already be happening and that are already expected legally.

This emphasised a clear need for vigorous and relentless focus on ensuring that the existing regulations, guidance and legislation is understood and implemented.

A recurring theme of the leaving care events was that consistently across the country many young people did not seem aware of their full rights and entitlements.

During the market place activity local authorities shared what they had been doing. One local authority spoke of providing a package of driving lessons to every care leaver and here are some other examples:

- *Getting guaranteed apprenticeship with the council, as if it were a family business.*
- *'Teenagers to work' scheme where they work with the council to offer apprenticeships and local businesses to offer jobs. The authority found that there were problems with young people having the basic skills, confidence etc. and so set up a pilot mentor scheme which is working well.*
- *Winter fuel allowance for care leavers.*
- *Christmas hampers for care leavers.*
- *Providing an independent living skills programme that is accredited.*
- *Having a one stop shop drop-in for care leavers.*
- *Access to a taster flat for 1 or 2 weeks as part of preparation for independence which also helps to identify if a young person is really ready to take the step into independence or should remain in a more supported placement i.e. with foster carer or semi-independence.*
- *Fortnightly cooking group to learn how to cook nutritious meals from scratch.*
- *Mentoring schemes for care leavers and also opportunities to learn skills to become a mentor for younger children in care.*
- *Money management training for care leavers.*
- *A fund to develop hobbies and interests.*

Across the country, young people asked about why young people (care leavers) who are not in education couldn't be supported until they were 25 years old. The young people described this support as having access to a social worker and to leaving care services providing advice and emotional support.

Another issue raised across the country, particularly by corporate parents, was questions on how to implement the "Staying Put" policy particularly in relation to

having enough foster carers to meet a growing demand for placements and the financial implication with budget cuts and constraints. Young people who had lived in residential care were concerned about young people having to leave residential care at a point when their peers (placed in foster care) were able to remain in care into adulthood; pointing out that those young people deserved an equal service.

## **Key messages final year**

**2015-2016**

In this final year of the project there were six workshops held across the country covering one of three themes:

- Preparation for adulthood and leaving care
- Diversity and Inclusion (hearing the voices of all children in care)
- Raising achievements.

### **Preparation for adulthood and leaving care**

The 'Staying Put' policy continued to be a discussion point this year, particularly the concerns around having the resources to implement the policy (such as having enough placements and the finances to fund additional placements). Questions were raised as to whether there should be a regional approach to 'Staying Put' as a way to ensure a consistent approach. The young people raised issues relating to what they saw as discrepancies between those leaving care from foster care and those from residential care in the fact that "staying put" only referred to those in the fostering cohort.

There appeared to be differences in the way authorities prepare young people for independence and some reported that the quality of work and provision did not seem to be adequate. The standard of semi-independent and independent living was questioned and seen as a key area to be tackled for some authorities whilst in others they had a wide range of provision available. Training flats combined with skills training and confidence building, appealed to many authorities and in particular young people, who expressed the importance of being able to practice skills within a safe environment.

A number of young people identified scenarios of care leavers being left with little or no support soon after moving into independent accommodation. Many confirmed the importance of a staged, tailored approach to local authority support, more intense in the beginning, reducing as and when the time was right for the young person. Young people reiterated the need for support and work on contact issues with their families and in helping repair and manage

relationships in the longer term that are likely to be a source of support when other services are no longer involved.

A recurring theme was whether young people were getting access to information about their rights and entitlements and what they could expect from the local authorities. The best examples of practice were seen in authorities who had invested in comprehensive materials explaining a range of subjects including rights and entitlements and support in education. In a few authorities specific packs had been developed to assist young people considering going into higher education.

In families where they own a business it is not uncommon for the children within the family to progress into working in the family firm, for example having a Saturday job whilst at school or college, or as an adult working full time after education has finished. The notion of the “Family Firm” was referred to on numerous occasions by corporate parents and young people alike. Local authorities are large scale, local and diverse employers providing a range of services and contracting some works and services to voluntary or private providers. It was recognised that corporate parents could do more to offer apprenticeships; there were suggestions that local authorities could include with any tender or contract, questions as to what those organisations or traders could offer for care leavers.

Those authorities that have developed an apprenticeship scheme have learnt however that just offering the placement is not enough. They strongly suggested that it needs to be backed up with proper support and an understanding of the needs of the young people being offered work placements. Some young people might struggle initially with rules, boundaries and the structures imposed by a work environment, however with the right support and guidance there is no reason why young people cannot flourish within their placement and as a consequence add concrete experience to their CVs. Whilst apprenticeships were seen as an important step, it was also noted that local authorities should provide paid job opportunities within the family firm. This could help care leavers with the means to support themselves.

In a number of authorities across the country the participation teams supporting children in care councils have also provided employment for care leavers. They have supported young people to acquire confidence and the skills for employment. Some young people have gone on to work in participation and advocacy whilst others have embarked on social work training.

The transition from education to work was debated. There was agreement over the need for support in the transition period into work. Whilst the financial framework and offerings for those going on to further and higher education appeared more straightforward and comprehensive, those starting out in work were seen to lose out. Where a young person living with their family starting work might continue to have financial support from the family, care leavers are expected to be fully responsible for the full cost of independence on low wages (which would be the case at the start of working life). Young people and corporate parents expressed the view that it was understandable that young people might find it easier to be on benefits rather than working and there was little incentive to work given the problems they might have with meeting basic living costs. At one workshop a local authority suggested that in the same way there are personal education plans (PEPs), all young people should have a POP (Personal Occupation Plan) which details support to help young people. This could include additional financial support or mentoring for example.

At a time of budget restrictions and cuts, funding leisure and hobbies might seem like a luxury item, however from the conversations it was clear how vital continued funding in these areas were for young people in terms of:

- building coping mechanisms and resilience;
- helping to improve physical, mental and emotional wellbeing;
- providing opportunities for socialising and building a support community network;
- preventing isolation.

Included in this was accessibility such as finance for transport. In one local authority a batch of driving lessons were funded and actively seen as a positive scheme for promoting independence.

## **Diversity and inclusion**

The aim of these workshops was to help children in care councils and corporate parents consider and identify if there were any groups of young people that were not involved or harder to reach and how this might be addressed.

Whilst it was recognised that not every young person would be able to participate directly in children in care council meetings because of their age, or where they were living or for other reasons such as health, circumstances etc, opportunities could be provided to try and seek the views and thoughts of harder to reach young people. Surveys, newsletter, safe virtual forums and visits by children in care council members to see young people directly (for example

visiting a residential home), were methods cited as being helpful. Some local authorities had developed initiatives for being more inclusive and reaching the widest audience such as through the 'big vote' where all young people in care get to vote on the priorities for the children in care council for that year.

Children in care councils identified that understanding how to empower and encourage other young people to participate was also seen as an area for development. Young people spoke of needing support to manage the potential dynamics of a diverse group. Participation workers were seen as vital to help manage those complexities.

A key group that corporate parents identified that they needed to be more proactive in reaching and hearing from were those young people in residential care in the private sector and those placed out of authority.

There was a diverse response to groups that young people felt they might not be hearing from and who had not tended to participate in the work of children in care councils. In some children in care councils there was more representation of their looked after population within the council than in others. Young people such as those in prison or on remand, those with mental health difficulties, very young children and young people with differences in communication whether by language or through a disability, presented the young people and corporate parents alike with challenges in terms of consultation and participation. It was clear that these workshops were providing 'food for thought' and that the challenges and solutions were not easy to articulate; as was the case for other themes within the workshops such as the preparation for adulthood which had a strong practical element to it and was easier to define.

Some authorities had examples of how they worked with specific groups such as; one authority had a designated day for asylum seekers and refugee young people and another local authority worked with a children's centre to ascertain the views of younger children in care. There were a number of authorities that encouraged young people's participation and involvement by holding activity or sporting days, residential trips, picnics and meals.

## **Raising Achievements**

The third theme covered in this year's workshops focused on achievements in its broadest sense, to include any aspect of life and not just academic achievements.

In this workshop we asked corporate parents and children in care councils to consider the following and come up with ideas:

- You have to think about what CiCC's/ corporate parents could do to give all young people opportunities to achieve, succeed, and have positive experiences.
- It could be any activity/intervention/ uses local services.
- No matter where you start - everyone can achieve or learn the skills to achieve/succeed.
- Make sure it is realistic - a chance of becoming reality.

It was stated that certain things were a given for this exercise that help young people in life i.e. stable warm home, people who care, access to decent education and that we wanted corporate parents and children in care councils to think beyond that and be creative. This was a challenging exercise.

Local authorities found it difficult during the workshops to identify opportunities that would allow all young people the opportunity to succeed and achieve. However they found it easier to identify a more targeted approach where a few would benefit i.e. for a particular group or working on a particular example such as helping high achievers to get to university.

Other examples included:

- Care leaver mentoring young children in care;
- Having further and higher education taster days;
- Awards and celebration events;
- Supporting young people through exams;
- Develop skills to deliver training;
- Contributing views to or developing new materials and guides for staff such as “ *My social worker is Mint.*”

## Outputs from the project

In the first year of the project, NCB and ANV produced a short animation film from some of the key messages that originated from the first eight events. The film highlights the factors that help children in care councils to be more effective and the support they require from corporate parents. This film is available to view at <http://youtu.be/KBQTQoyBYvo>



Also during the first year of events, children in care councils and corporate parents were asked to identify challenges they had been facing. Solutions to some of those challenges were explored at the time. As there were recurring themes we decided to produce prompts sheets with some of the challenges and with a summary of some of the solutions that were raised across the different events.

We have produced **Prompt Sheets** covering the following challenges:

- Recruiting children and young people to join the children in care council and keeping everybody interested when they are involved.
- Demands made upon the children in care council - the risk of over consultation.
- How do we ensure that councillors understand their role as corporate parents and understand the needs of looked after children and care leavers?
- Children in care councils - Engaging young children.
- What can Corporate parents do to support CiCC? Messages from the Taking it to the next level events 2013-2014.

Following on from the success of the first animation film, a further three films were commissioned. These films highlight the key messages from corporate parents and children in care council members on the three themes covered in the second year. They cover health, leaving care and placements:

- *Getting health services right for children in care*
- *Gold standard support for care leavers*
- *What a good placement looks like*

In this final year we have created some new products to add to the legacy. Fifteen local authorities contributed case study material for the guide to children in care councils and we collated examples from across the three years since the project started; to complement those case studies and to add additional materials for local authorities to draw upon. We have brought together some of the exercises, tools and templates we created and used at different workshops and events across the three years into a single document which local authorities

can use and adapt for local and regional use. The document also contains instructions to the exercises and can be used by single groups of corporate parents and CICC's or for mixed groups.

Along with this report, all the materials form part of the legacy for the project and inspiration for local authorities to draw upon.

All these are available at <http://www.ncb.org.uk/corporate-parenting>