

## 4 Content of the Pledge

From November 2006 to January 2007, WMTD ran four regional consultation events on the green paper Care Matters. During these events, young people participated in focus groups and a digital voting session to establish their views on a number of the proposals. Young people shared their views extensively on the Pledge proposal. Most of the young people in the consultation were care leavers but some were from care. Their ideas on the content of the Pledge cut across both groups.

The details of their views on the content of the Pledge can be found in Appendix II but the following headlines reflect the main areas of concern:

- An equal commitment to all children and young people in care.
- Leisure opportunities.
- Graduated support beyond care into adulthood and accommodation.
- Choice of when to move on.
- Financial support.
- Access to and relationships with professionals.
- Support to maintain relationships with family.
- Being listened to and heard/involvement in decision-making and SUI.
- Choice of placement/accommodation.
- Help with advocacy and complaints.
- Information on services and the teams providing them.
- Care planning and reviews.
- Support for parenting.
- Volunteering opportunities.
- Continuity of care – having one worker.
- Access to health services.

This is what young people said about the process of developing and maintaining a Pledge:

- The Pledge is a good idea in principle, if it is viewed as a contract between the local authority and young people.
- Young people should have a say about what is in the Pledge – this is essential because young people are the beneficiaries.
- The Pledge is a good idea, as long as it is not a token gesture and local authorities stick to it.
- Young people should be consulted in all decisions about their life and have their voices heard.
- Young people should be given real power to enforce the Pledge and should have a direct line of influence to the people who govern the local authority. Individuals must also be held accountable – the Pledge should be linked to job performance.

The White Paper 'Care Matters: Time for Change'<sup>7</sup>, sets out a basic Pledge that includes the following:

- A commitment to involve children in decisions which affect them and to take account of their wishes and expressed feelings about the services they receive.
- Qualified social workers for every child in care, with clear arrangements in place for the child in care to contact his/her social worker as necessary.
- Effective assessment of individual needs and an up-to-date care plan based on those needs.
- A placement with carers who can meet the child's needs.
- Contact with siblings and birth parents in line with children's care plan.
- Regular reviews in which children will be enabled to participate meaningfully (particularly for disabled children with communication difficulties).
- Services which recognise the diverse ethnic and cultural needs of the children.
- Access to advocacy services if children have a complaint.
- An Independent Reviewing Officer to ensure children's rights are upheld.
- Access to high quality free early years provision at age 3 and 4.
- A place at a good school.
- A designated teacher in school to ensure high quality support in school.
- Details of support available to participate in positive leisure time activities.
- Support to reduce absence from school.
- Help to catch up with school work if they fall behind.
- Regular assessments of their health (physical and emotional).
- Details of support available when they move on from care.
- The support young people can expect when entering further and higher education.
- How the local authority will support young people seeking employment, including employment with training.

For the Pledge to function as a tool in an empowered model of corporate parenting, it must be developed by each local authority with its own children and young people. Regional or area Pledges will not empower children and young people or their workers because the Pledge will not be specific enough to the area and the needs of the children and young people within it. Critical to this process is that local authorities have a strong and informed sense of what children and young people in their care need and what can be provided to them from their own resources. When planning the Pledge development process, authorities should draw on evidence that is already available to them through their Children and Young People's Plans, Joint Area Reviews, any recent needs assessments relating to children and young people in and leaving care and also any recent consultation or participation work that can inform the process. Authorities should design their monitoring and review structures with children and young people and with other plans and priorities in mind.

The content of the Pledge should be reviewed annually by all stakeholders. The efficacy of the Pledge can be monitored through care and pathway review processes and this can contribute to the annual Pledge review.

To see this process succeed, local authorities will need to be clear that they have a corporate role as a parent and that the Pledge, its content, purpose and value should be understood across all departments. The successful development of a Pledge in partnership with children and young people should be celebrated as a commitment to good corporate parenting by the authority.

## 5 The 'Children in Care Council'

'Care Matters: Time for Change' suggests that each local authority should have a 'Children in Care Council' (CICC) as the main mechanism by which authorities and children and young people should work together. Some authorities already have active fora for children and young people to meet, discuss issues and give their views to managers, directors and council members. "Care Matters" is clear that the use of a CICC or forum is crucial to the success of the Pledge and will enhance the accountability for the Pledge within the local authority. However councils, fora or groups should not be the only mechanism that local authorities use to interact with children and young people and involve them in the creation of the Pledge. Consideration should be given to providing a range of methods for young people to feed in their views. The WMTD online database ([www.leavingcare.org](http://www.leavingcare.org)) has good practice examples of working fora in a number of local authorities in England and has a range of examples of consultation and participation methods that authorities may find useful.

As many authorities will choose to develop a Children in Care Council as their main link between children and young people and managers or lead members, here are some general points on developing them. The main requirements of a strong working forum or council for children and young people include:

- The group is children- and young people-led, meets regularly, has a clear agenda and purpose and is self-determining in relation to how and when it meets, what format the meetings take and items for discussion. The group should be supported by staff and should ultimately aim to be self-supporting with minimal intervention from staff.
- All children and young people are encouraged to participate with or within the group, ensuring that those that are often under-represented or marginalised have equal access and opportunity to participate.
- The group provides the opportunity for all children and young people to develop the skills needed to enhance their participation within it and their capacity to represent it and other young people.
- The group has clear lines of communication and interaction with appropriate staff, including a worker to support the running of the group, appropriate service managers and in particular the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Looked After Children. The interaction of the group with service managers and directors is fundamental to the success of the Pledge.
- The local authority must take steps to ensure that the whole organisation understands the nature of the group, its purpose, the communication structures that surround it, its role within the development of a local authority-wide corporate parenting model and the value of the children and young people's participation within it.

