

Looked after children

I, along with all members of the council together with its chief officers are the corporate parent of hundreds of children in Dudley. This is an awesome responsibility. Parenting is an immensely challenging task and one, as a parent or carer, which is often full of joy but it can be a long hard slog. To be a looked after child with all the emotional wear and tear suffered in a relatively short life must be horrendously difficult for the children and their natural parent, however poor - the child is still theirs. Children come into care for as many reasons as there are children. Whatever, the emotional rollercoaster these children may experience, they do deserve the best that we can offer.

The schools are the hub of all our children's lives. For many of these damaged children it is often school which is the haven and provides the structure and security in their lives. However, it often proves difficult for these children and young people to make sufficient progress and sadly they do not achieve their potential and in some cases feel the system has failed them. They have suffered disruption and however hard they try, those seeking to provide for their needs are met with some rejection, anger and often mistrust. Our Foster carers and those who care for these children do a brilliant job but we need to ensure that we all work to support individually these damaged children and young people.

The recent horrendous revelations about Baby P and other young children who have met their death in circumstances beyond our imaginations are sadly true. Naturally, we must all share the responsibility our social workers undertake to ensure the best outcomes for children at risk. We need to support each other in the care of all children. The concerns and directions about safeguarding from the Laming review have made us review very carefully all the procedures we have in place in Dudley so that we do everything possible not to have any children who are at risk of significant harm. The procedures are only as good as each individual who has any responsibility for children and young people and we must not shirk our duty of care however difficult that may be.

It is in our role as governors that we can ensure that we support our young people. Each governing body should appoint a governor who has specific responsibility for any Looked after Children who are on the schools roll. It is about encouraging the child. Is their progress as good as their peers? Do they have access to all and every aspect of school life? Can they participate in any extended school activity? Are they at risk of exclusion and how can you support them to remain in school? 'Is there support in school?', 'are they at risk of being bullied?' are all legitimate questions for the responsible governor to ask. 'Can you support them in any school activity where they are participating?' Our virtual school headteacher, Pat Finnigan is working with all schools but particularly where our young people are reaching Years 10 and 11 to support them in a purposeful curriculum so that learning is useful and will assist their life chances. It is

vital that some of these troubled young people remain in school and if they are at risk of exclusion, the specific governor should be involved to support the young person.

The good governance of all schools is vital to Dudley and I am very heartened at the positive inspection reports which identify the good support and leadership our governors display. I know that our headteachers value the immense support governors make to the life of a school. As more and more demands are made on governors I recognise that asking you to contribute even more in the light of safeguarding all our young people is difficult but so very important in supporting both the school and the child. I wish to thank every governor for all they do in improving the life chances of every child in Dudley through your active participation in the life of your school.

Liz Walker
Lead Member for Children's Services