



Northumberland  
County Council

# Looked After Children and Care Leavers Strategy

2019 - 2022



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## OUR VISION

Our vision is to be a service where meeting the needs of children, young people and families is the focus, so that they get the best out of life. Our leadership pledge states that we will challenge ourselves relentlessly to keep improving the quality and effectiveness of our services in order to make things safer and better with and for children, young people and their families.

We aim to provide the right service at the right time for the right families recognising that at times families require additional support to help them stay together. Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that we do. If it is not safe for children to stay at home then we will intervene to ensure they are given the care, support and stability that they deserve.

As corporate parents, we aim to provide the best quality care and support to our looked after children and care leavers that we can. We recognise the importance of safe and secure placements to ensure children in our care live happy, healthy lives and achieve the best possible outcomes that they can. This is provided through well supported placements that meet the child's needs. We will place our children in a family setting wherever we can unless their needs are better met in residential or other care.

We offer a range of placements tailored to meet the individual needs of children. This can include special guardianship, foster care, children's homes, adoption or supported accommodation.

We take an active approach to our corporate parenting responsibilities by listening to the voices of our children and care leavers and working closely with our partners.

This strategy outlines our ambitions for the next three years and the actions the council needs to take to promote continuous improvement for looked after children and care leavers. The previous corporate parenting strategy was reviewed and progress analysed with a range of partners and young people to use as a basis for future plans. We have included the relevant requirements of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 as part of our planning. This strategy links with other key strategic children's services work including the self assessment and continuous improvement plan.



**Cath McEvoy-Carr**  
Executive Director of Children's & Adult Services



**Councillor Wayne Daley**  
Cabinet Member for Children's Services

# WHO ARE 'LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN & CARE LEAVERS'?

A child, under 18 years, is legally 'looked after' by a local authority if he or she is: 'Provided with accommodation under section 20 of the Children's Act 1989 from the local authority for a continuous period of more than 24 hours; or is subject to a care order or placement order. This also includes children who have a disability who are provided with accommodation under Section 20. Looked after children can be placed with foster carers, in residential homes, with parents or other relatives (under certain circumstances).

## **A Care Leaver is defined as:**

'A Care Leaver is broadly defined as a person aged between 16 and 25 years who has been looked after by a local authority for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14 years, is either currently in care or has left care and has been looked after for a period of time after their 16th birthday'.





# WHAT DO LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS TELL US?

Children and young people have worked with the Council to produce and agree a pledge to Looked After Children. This is called **Our Promise**. Young People regularly attend Corporate Parenting Advisory Group to engage in discussions about issues relevant to them. Elected members actively welcome this engagement and have agreed a benchmark of **would this be good enough for my child** to underpin their challenge and scrutiny.

## What children and young people told us

Be on time always

Just because we've turned a certain age, doesn't mean we don't still need support.

Consider my feelings as well as my circumstances.

I wouldn't mind there being shorter intervals between seeing my social worker

Make sure we only have 2/3 social workers in a lifetime.

Ask me what I want.



### What's gone/going well..

Happy that I've been allowed to stay put with my carer.

I had a few different placements which all broke down. My carers now are great and I feel like they really care about me and won't give up.

They have supported me and helped me get to university.

### What they want us to do moving forward

- Ensure we communicate effectively with children and young people about their care plans
- Make sure that we are in the right placement with the right support
- Support us to return to our families if this is the right plan
- Keep us informed about any decision being made and what outcome is hoping to be achieved
- Raise and improve access to support our mental health in a timely way and support our carers with this
- Involve us in the recruitment of foster carers
- Support us with work experience opportunities and help us improve our skills to be ready for work



# OUR PROMISE

We have listened to what young people have told us and our promise back is that we will...



**Be honest** with you and only promise things we know we can deliver. We promise to be honest and clear with you and to keep our promise. We will tell you about your rights and what services you are entitled to.

Make sure the right people are there to **support you** and to make sure that only the people who really need to know about you and your situation actually do know about you and your situation. We won't change your social worker or independent reviewing officer (IRO) without good reason.

Support you to **be healthy**, to follow your leisure interests and to keep in touch with your friends. You should be given healthy food, things that you like and that fit with your religion or culture. Make sure you have someone to talk to about your physical and emotional health and make sure you are able to attend appointments.

Help you to **achieve your best**, and support you to learn in and out of school and develop skills. You will have everything you need for school like your uniform, books, PE kit. You will also have access to a computer to help you do your school work. Your carers will talk to you about clothing and help you either buy your clothes or help you to learn to manage a budget to buy your own.

**Listen to you** and build plans around you, not simply build you into our plans, including asking your opinion about where and who you live with and the plans for your care and for the development of services. You can talk to someone independent if you'd like to.

Recognise that your family and other **people are important** to you and make arrangements for you to stay in touch with them safely. You can also ask for an Independent Visitor. This is someone who doesn't work for Northumberland County Council. They are a volunteer who would visit you, get to know you and spend time with you doing the things you like doing.

**Leaving Care** - We will help and support you practically, financially and emotionally to prepare for your future. We will draw up an easy to understand Pathway Plan with you to identify support you will need before you leave care. We will provide you with good careers advice and help to apply for jobs and training. We will support you if you choose to move on to further or higher education. We will help find somewhere suitable to live and support you after you have left care.

Expect every professional to treat you with **respect**, to be reliable and consistent and be prepared to listen to your views.



Young people from Voices Making Choices have designed their own version of Our Promise for a handy postcard.





# VOICES MAKING CHOICES

The Young People's Council, Voices Making Choices (VMC) is a group of children and young people who have care experience in Northumberland.

VMC is divided into two groups, Looked after Children and Care Leavers and meet up every three weeks to discuss what improvements are needed within the service.

Both groups invite the Directors of Children's services, Senior Managers and County Councillors to their meetings to let them know what VMC are doing and to work in partnership in developing new strategies of improvements.

Ensuring the group have a voice, members of VMC regularly attend the Corporate Parenting Advisory Group, during which the children and young people update on their work plans and agree on how they can support each other on delivering their outcomes.

As an extension of participation some of the members of VMC are actively involved in the Regional Children in Care Council, this is where they work with other local authorities and campaign for improvements in service.

Participation sessions for children aged seven years plus have been launched to capture the voice of the child within a play environment. These sessions are taking place during school holidays and will hopefully encourage children to be more involved in other VMC opportunities.



# THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL

Our Virtual School is the champion of good education outcomes for Northumberland's looked after, previously looked after children and care leavers. We are ambitious for our virtual pupils and want them to achieve the very best they can at school so that they have choices at age 16 and can continue their journey into education, training and employment.

The education of looked after children and previously looked after children is everyone's responsibility. The Virtual School Headteacher has an oversight but we expect schools to play their part too and provide a good quality, inclusive, stable education for all of our looked after pupils. Together we encourage pupils to Learn, Achieve and then Celebrate.

There is no Virtual School building but we do share some features of a 'real' school. There is a workforce which includes the Headteacher, the Education Support for Looked-After Children (ESLAC) team, and Designated Teachers for looked-after and previously looked-after children in all our schools and academies.

The Multi-Agency Looked-After Partnership (MALAP) acts as our governing body and critical friend to drive improvement and promote high standards of educational achievement. All looked after children and care leavers are on our Virtual School roll (although pupils are enrolled at and remain the responsibility of real schools) and we have a system in place for tracking and monitoring academic progress and attainment. The Virtual School improvement plan sets out our priorities for each academic year and ensures that we comply with statutory guidance from the Department for Education. Like real schools, the Virtual School is also inspected by Ofsted (as part of the inspection of children's social care).

We provide support to individual children wherever we can and never give up on anyone. We listen to what children and young people want to tell us through the Mind Of My Own app and in discussions with them at meetings and Personal Education Plan (PEP) reviews. We hold schools to account for the impact of their provision on pupils' progress through the education system using Personal Education Plans and monitoring the use of Pupil Premium Plus, and provide interventions when needed and other bespoke education packages.

We like to reward our pupils and have invented many ways of doing so. Those pupils who make good progress all year, behave and attend well and join in extra-curricular activities enjoy receiving an Expert Learner Award. There are also regular rewards for attendance and an enrichment allowance so that everyone can join in positive activities such as horse riding, musical instruments and sports equipment.



# CORPORATE PARENTING PRINCIPLES

When a child becomes looked after, Northumberland County Council becomes the 'corporate parent'.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 sets out seven corporate parenting principles that will enable us to achieve the best possible outcomes for looked after children and care leavers. These are:

- To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people;
- To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings;
- To take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people;
- To help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;
- To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people;
- For those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and
- To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

We acknowledge that we cannot secure the best outcomes for looked after children and care leavers alone. We need the ongoing support and commitment from other agencies to ensure everyone takes responsibility for their corporate parenting role. These agencies include health, education, the police and voluntary agencies.





# CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY

This is the Corporate Parenting Strategy that has been developed in partnership with children and young people. It describes what we will do to meet our corporate parenting responsibilities.

The Corporate Parenting Advisory Group (CPAG) has agreed the following priorities for 2019 - 2021:

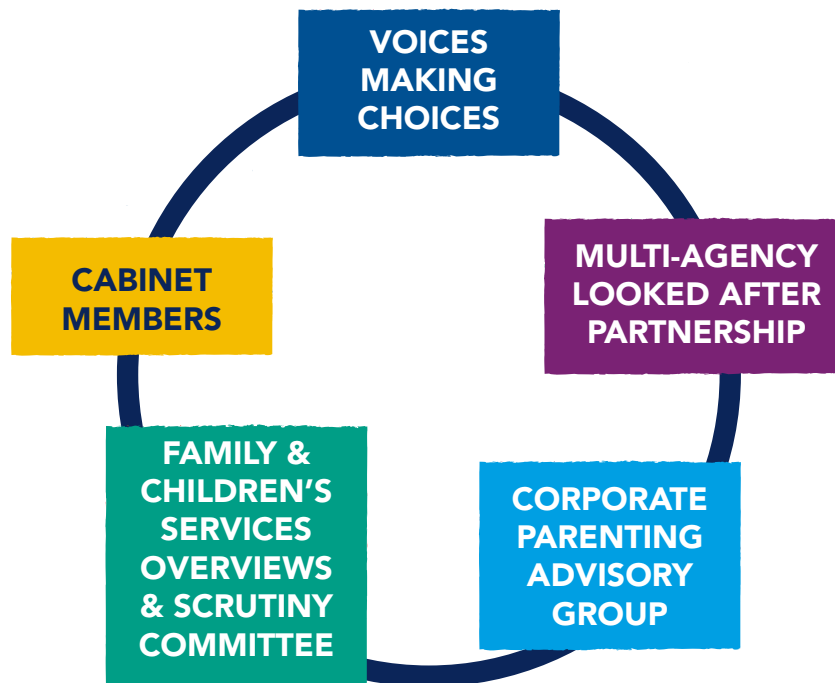
- Sufficiency and commissioning of placements
- Planning for permanence
- Development and timely provision of services
- Strengthen the function of the CPAG
- Further improve services to care leavers
- Further improve the effectiveness and impact of the Virtual School
- Ensure the voice and views of looked after children and care leavers is evident and influential in service and strategy development and individual case planning



# GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

## HOW WILL WE OVERSEE IT?

Our governance arrangements ensure that the voice of care experienced children and young people is transparent and reflects the vision we have for our children in care and our care leavers.



## MULTI-AGENCY LOOKED AFTER PARTNERSHIP (MALAP)

The Council and key partners have a Multi-Agency Looked After Partnership (MALAP) Strategic Group and a Corporate Parenting Advisory Group (CPAG).

MALAP is a multi-agency partnership. Its primary function is to set the strategic direction for the development of services for looked after children and care leavers and to monitor progress in service development and performance. The MALAP also functions as the Governing Body for the Virtual School.

The Partnership meets four times a year, has an agreed work plan which is informed by this strategy and informs the work plan of the CPAG.

All key agencies are represented including the Virtual School Head, Designated Doctor and Nurse, Mental Health Services, Youth Offending Team, Family Placement Service, Social Work Teams and Leaving Care Services.

# CORPORATE PARENTING ADVISORY GROUP (CPAG)

The Council has a Corporate Parenting Advisory Group (CPAG) to ensure that it can fulfil its legal responsibilities to looked after children and care leavers, monitor performance and outcomes and to provide challenge to the local authority and its partners in meeting its obligation to provide outstanding services to looked after children.

We are confident that the decisions made by MALAP and CPAG are compliant to our corporate parenting principles.

## WHAT CPAG SAID

### WHAT HAS WORKED WELL

- Officers cared passionately
- Bringing young people to the meetings
- Good feedback from young people attending the meetings
- Celebration events
- Rota visits to the homes by councillors

### WHAT COULD WE DO BETTER

- Mandatory training for all councillors to raise the profile of corporate parenting responsibilities
- Raise the profile of the good work that is being achieved
- Develop awareness of risk and the reality for some young people
- Exploring shared chairing of the panel with young people
- Observe social work practice in the different teams to get a greater understanding of the children and families receiving a service
- Increase visits to Voices Making Choices meetings





# HOW WE WILL DELIVER AGAINST OUR CORPORATE PARENTING PRIORITIES

## SUFFICIENCY AND COMMISSIONING OF PLACEMENTS

To ensure the provision of sufficient high quality placements that meet the needs of our looked after children and care leavers we will:

- Aim to increase the number and percentage of children who are placed in a family setting.
- Develop more flexible use and commissioning of residential care to support children to return to a family setting wherever possible.
- Develop and embed joint commissioning with health and education colleagues.
- Increase the availability and timely accessibility of placements for teenagers with complex needs.
- Monitor the effectiveness of Adopt North East (ANE) to continue to support the timely achievement of permanence for children with an adoption plan.

## PLANNING FOR PERMANENCE

To improve the quality and timeliness of planning for permanence for looked after children we will:

- Improve our work to support the timeliness of the care proceedings.
- Further improve the timeliness and process for matching all children in foster care who require long term placement.
- Ensure all statutory reviews at four months clearly detail the plan for permanence.
- Further improve the quality of written plans to support the timely achievement of permanence.
- Ensure that there are clear assessments and support plans in place for all children where there is a plan to return home.
- Improve the planning and timely discharge for children who return home on care orders.

## DEVELOPMENT AND TIMELY PROVISION OF SERVICES

To continue to develop our provision of services for looked after children we will:

- Reconfigure the family placement service to maximise the support to all carers.
- Develop a dedicated support service for children subject to Special Guardianship Orders (SGO).
- Further develop the flexibility and use of the range of edge of care services to support children to remain and/or to return to the care of their family.
- Ensure that pathways to services for children with mental health support needs are effective and timely for children looked after.
- Ensure services offered are effective and meet the needs of the child.

**STRENGTHEN THE  
FUNCTION OF  
THE CORPORATE  
PARENTING  
ADVISORY GROUP  
(CPAG)**

**We will:**

- Ensure the voice of children and young people is heard at CPAG.
- Have regular development sessions, including training by young people.
- Provide the corporate parent handbook and training to all members of the group.
- Ensure all members understand and meet the requirements of their responsibility.
- Develop an elected member champion role for Children and Young People.

**FURTHER  
IMPROVE  
SERVICES TO  
CARE LEAVERS**

**To strengthen the support to care leavers transitioning into adulthood we will:**

- Deliver the action plan developed in response to the peer challenge.
- Identify more apprenticeships and mentors for care leavers, including the development and delivery of the council's care leavers covenant.
- Embed the positive improvements in the voice of care leavers in service development, delivery and individual case planning.
- Ensure the local offer for care leavers is as clear and accessible as possible and the support requirements for care leavers up to the age of 25 continue to be met.
- Ensure young people leaving care are equipped, leave when they are ready and have a varied choice of where and who they choose to live with.

**FURTHER  
IMPROVE THE  
EFFECTIVENESS  
AND IMPACT OF  
VIRTUAL SCHOOL**

**We will champion good educational outcomes by:**

- Working with education providers to ensure that they have high expectations of their looked after pupils and actively support each child to do the very best they can at school.
- Providing training for Designated Teachers so that they understand the impact of adverse childhood experiences on learning.
- Listening to what our pupils say about their experience at school and acting on what they say to ensure they all enjoy their education and feel safe to learn.
- Making sure that every child has a complete, good quality PEP and that the Pupil Premium Plus gets to the pupils who need it the most.

**ENSURING THE VOICE  
AND VIEWS OF LOOKED  
AFTER CHILDREN AND  
CARE LEAVERS ARE  
EVIDENT AND INFLUENTIAL  
IN SERVICE AND STRATEGY  
DEVELOPMENT AND  
INDIVIDUAL CASE  
PLANNING**

**We will encourage children and young people to be involved in service developments by:**

- Ensuring that a wider range of looked after children and care leavers contribute effectively to service development and activity including the voice of hard to reach young people.
- Ensuring that we effectively consider the work and views of Voices Making Choices and care leavers.
- Further increasing the participation of children and young people at LAC reviews.
- Further embedding the use of Mind Of My Own with children and young people <https://mindofmyown.org.uk/>
- Reviewing of The Promise with and by Voices Making Choices.

# HOW WELL ARE WE SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN OUR CARE?

As corporate parents we are dedicated to improving outcomes for children in our care. We are committed to working in partnership with other agencies to achieve this.

Measures of success in supporting improved outcomes include that:

- We have ensured that only children who need to be looked after do come into care.
- 74% of our children in care are placed within a 20 mile radius of the family home. This enables family and friend connections to be maintained that in turn supports placement stability.
- This is further supported by the fact that 84% of our foster children are placed with in-house carers.
- All of our in-house residential provision is rated good or outstanding by Ofsted.
- The proportion of the looked after children population that had three or more placements in the previous 12 months remains better than the national average at 9%.
- Of the 184 children who left care in the year ending March 2019, 37 were adopted – equating to 24%, which is better than regional and national averages.
- A further 34 looked after children (22%) were also made subject to special guardianship orders in the year – a higher proportion than the national and regional figures of 12% and 15% respectively.
- 44 looked after children left care to return home – equating to 28%. We have also reduced the number of children who return to care for a second or subsequent time.
- No looked after child has been permanently excluded from school and the stability of school placements for our looked after children is good.
- The proportion of school aged children in our care attending schools rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted has increased to 64% and our children achieve consistently in early years and key stages 2 and 4.
- We are in touch with almost all of our care leavers with the vast majority living in suitable accommodation.
- We have increased the number of young people in Staying Put arrangements.
- All care leavers are exempt from paying council tax if they reside in Northumberland.



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