



Northumberland
County Council



Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategy

2023 - 2025



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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 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 children in care 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 settings. 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 until 2025 and the actions the council needs to take to promote continuous improvement for children in care 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.



Graham Reiter
Service Director, Children's Social Care



Guy Renner Thompson
Cabinet Member for Children's Services

WHO ARE CHILDREN IN CARE AND 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. Children in care 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 CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS TELL US?

Children and young people have worked with the Council to produce and promote a pledge to Care Experienced young people, this is called Our Promise. When we have asked young people how we were performing against the Promise themes, this is what they have told us:



95% felt that workers always listened to them



99% felt workers always respected them



96% felt workers were always honest with them



92% felt workers always asked their opinions on plans



89% felt workers always helped them achieve their best



What's gone/going well..

I felt well listened to and also respected as my worker is really confident and that's a key skill to have.

Making sure I'm safe. Listening to me when I felt unsafe and put plans in place to make sure I feel safe again.

Helping me with my mental health and making sure I have a better support network

My worker has supported me right from the beginning in more ways that I ever could imagined. She has been just a phone call away whenever I have needed help,. I could not have gained my degree without the support or financial assistance from the team.

I feel like there is a lot of respect between me and my worker, I feel like I trust her enough with concerns and feelings.



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 Children in Care Council, Voices Making Choices (VMC), is a group of children and young people who have current care experience in Northumberland.



They meet up every two weeks to discuss what improvements are needed within services and work on projects that they feel passionate about. The group are involved in delivering training to social workers and the Academy, as well as producing short information videos that are shared with the Corporate Parenting Advisory Group.

VMC regularly 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 and implementing improvements across services.

Ensuring the group have a voice, members of VMC feedback to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Group, updating on their work plans and the support needed to deliver the outcomes required.

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 services.

CARE LEAVERS FORUM

The Care Leavers Forum is an opportunity for young people aged 17+ who have care experience to ensure their voice is heard. We aim to improve the lives of care leavers by encouraging them to express their views, wishes and feelings and to support them to influence service delivery.

We work together with care experienced young people aged 17+ to discuss barriers that young people may face, and improve these. The young people are supported to share these ideas with the Corporate Parenting Advisory Group and develop young person-initiated projects to improve services.

Young people who choose to be involved, represent the voice of all care leavers in Northumberland and have the opportunity to participate at a regional and national level; which includes supporting young people to be involved with national projects and campaigns.



THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL

Our Virtual School is the champion of good education outcomes for Northumberland’s children in care and previously cared for children. 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 children in care and previously cared for 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 children in care and previously cared for 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 children in care 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 are celebrated by their proud corporate parents.



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 children in care 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
- To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

We acknowledge that we cannot secure the best outcomes for children in care 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 committee has agreed the following priority areas for 2023- 25:

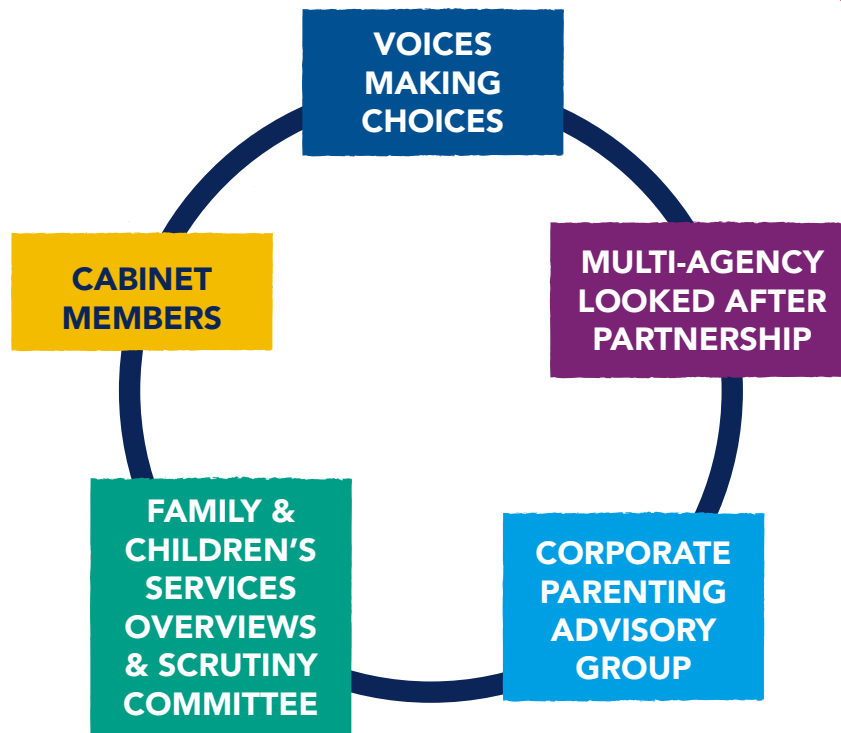
- Sufficiency and commissioning of placements
- Planning for permanence
- Development and timely provision of services
- Strengthen the function of Corporate Parenting Advisory Group
- Further improve services to care leavers
- Further improve the effectiveness of the virtual school
- Ensure that the voices of children in care and care leavers is evident and influential in service and strategy development and individual care planning.
- More broadly, we will ensure that developments arising from the Independent Review of Childrens Social Care relevant for our children and young people will be considered and implemented within the appropriate priorities.



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 children in care 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, Residential and Family Placement Service, Social Work Teams and Leaving Care Services.

CORPORATE PARENTING ADVISORY GROUP (CPAG)

The Council has CPAG to ensure that it can fulfil its legal responsibilities to children in care and care leavers, monitor performance and outcomes and to provide challenge to and scrutiny of the local authority and its partners in meeting its obligation to provide the best services to and for our children in care and care leavers.

VOICES MAKING CHOICES

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CABINET MEMBERS

The cabinet members are elected councillors who lead on particular areas. The lead member for children and young people is Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson. All Councillors are corporate parents and have a responsibility to safeguard and provide the best possible care for children in the care of Northumberland County Council.

FAMILY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (FACS)

The FACS committee has a broader responsibility to children and families in Northumberland to ensure services are delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible to meet need. This will include children who are in care or care experienced.

WHAT COMMITMENT HAVE THE COUNCIL AND ELECTED MEMBERS MADE TO CARE FOR CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS?

Establish the long term foundation for a whole council approach to corporate parenting by introducing a policy that all children in care and care leavers are prioritised for opportunities for training and employment across the council

Ensure that all councillors are trained as good corporate parents by monitoring the completion of the corporate parenting training module on Learning Together

Participate in the planning, organisation and delivery of an annual corporate family event.



HOW WE WILL DELIVER AGAINST OUR CORPORATE PARENTING PRIORITIES GOING FORWARD

SUFFICIENCY AND COMMISSIONING OF PLACEMENTS

- Support disabled children with complex needs to continue living with their families and where appropriate support them to transition into supported living arrangements suitable for their needs
- Ensure that children who are in care are offered permanence and stability at the earliest opportunity
- Expand in-house residential capacity by increasing our provision of placements
- Implement the Mockingbird Model for foster carers <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Children/Looked-after/Fostering/mockingbird.aspx>
- Ensure that there is sufficiency within the supported accommodation framework to meet the needs of young people open to services
- Target foster care recruitment and retention activity to support placement stability and outcomes for children in care
- Engage with the Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) market to monitor impact that Tyne Tees IFA framework has on placement availability
- Develop relationships with key children's home providers to influence range of choice available
- Consider effectiveness of regional strategies to address sufficiency issues in children's home market

PLANNING FOR PERMANENCE

- Embed the processes for the long-term matching of children in foster care
- Further develop the permanence dashboard performance management information
- Improve and ensure that permanence plans for all children in care are clearly articulated at statutory reviews and in the looked after plans (ILAC)
- Develop and implement a rolling program of permanence training for all staff including Independent Reviewing Officers.
- Critically review decision-making options and quality of paperwork in decision making meetings.

DEVELOPMENT AND TIMELY PROVISION OF SERVICES

- Create a plan to describe how the Kinship Assessment & Support Team (KAST) will provide support to special guardians and children.
- Continue to develop the offer for children at risk of being accommodated/placement breaking down using the Northumberland Emotional Wellbeing Support Team (NEWST) and Northumberland Families First (NFF) teams and the checklist for identification of risk of placement breakdown
- Consider the provision of out-of-hours support services (separate from those provided for carers) for children in care and young people to help resolve urgent problems, and tell children in care and young people about these options
- Develop a clear process to follow when children are returning home. Including monitoring, authorisation to ensure assessments are completed and robust support plans are developed
- Enhance processes for consideration of staying put plans at children in care reviews prior to 18th birthday.

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

- Develop the elected member champion role for children in care
- Members and lead officers to attend by invite VMC/Care leavers events and meetings
- Ensure that there is induction, regular training and development sessions for all elected members including training by care experienced young people
- Review and align CPAG links with other scrutiny bodies
- Ensure engagement and participation of relevant multi agency partners in corporate parenting group oversight of strategic priorities
- Review MALAP Terms of Reference, membership and links with CPAG.

FURTHER IMPROVE SERVICES TO CARE LEAVERS

- Implement plan to ringfence 10 apprenticeship places for care leavers within the council apprenticeship offer
- All care leaver apprentices who want one, to be provided with a mentor
- Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure pathway plans are completed in a timely way with all young people to allow planning for independence.

FURTHER IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACT OF VIRTUAL SCHOOL

We will champion good educational outcomes by:

- Engaging the private sector with commitments to provide education, employment and training opportunities
- Improving school placement stability, by reducing suspensions, persistent absences and midyear school placement moves
- Introducing an electronic PEP (Personal Education Plan) for 16+ cared for young people and care leavers that supports engagement with education, employment and training.

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

- Ensure that we effectively consider the work and views of Voices Making Choices and Care Leavers
- Further increase the participation of young people in their own Looked After reviews
- Embed the refreshed promise into Looked After reviews to consider how this is being met with and for our children.

HOW WELL ARE WE DOING?

As corporate parents, we are committed to improving the lives of children in our care and will work with our partners to achieve this.

We know how we are doing by looking at a range of things such as:

A recent Ofsted-focused inspection visit told us that:

- Social workers know their young people, understand their histories, and use creative ways of engaging with and supporting them.
- That children in our care were helped to find the security of a permanent home without delay.
- Children and young people's plans were carefully matched to meet their needs
- The right children are brought into care at the right time
- Children who have plans for adoption are supported to understand their journey with sensitive life story work and later life letters.
- For older young people, the transition to the adolescent team is well planned and the young people benefit from the range of services the team offers.

The facts and figures:

- More than 80 % of children in our care live in a family setting
- 75% of children are living within 20 miles of their family home
- 41% of children living with foster carers are placed in long-term homes
- More children are adopted (19%) and live with family on SGO plan (19%) than the national average
- The number of care orders discharged when children are living on care orders with their own parents have increased to reduce the overall number from 64 to 44.
- No children in our care have been permanently excluded from school over the last 13 years
- 75% of children who are in care attend good or outstanding schools
- 80% of children who are in care progress into further education
- We are in touch with almost all of our care leavers and the vast majority live in suitable accommodation.



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