



Reducing the number of children in need of care Strategy



GATESHEAD COUNCIL

Children Adults and Families (CAF)

Reducing the number of
children in need of care
Strategy

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Foreword by Councillor Haley

We know that over half of people and families in Gateshead are either just managing or just coping, but more than 30% are in need or in vulnerable situations.

We want to change those statistics and aim to make Gateshead a place where there are less people in need of council support and more people are thriving.

Our strategic approach, Making Gateshead a place where everyone thrives, is driving the major policy directions for us, aiming to redress the imbalance of inequality, championing fairness and social justice.

As of January 2022, Gateshead Council had 465 children and young people in need of care outside of their family homes, this is an increase of over 10% from the same period of 2020. This demonstrates that the need for a strategy to reduce the amount of children and young people requiring a placement in care.

We want children and young people residing in Gateshead to receive the opportunity to thrive and in implementing this strategy we aim to achieve this.

Introduction:

We know that children under local authority care can often,

- have experienced several adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which impact negatively on their life chances
- remain long-term looked after when their duration of care lasts longer than a period of six months
- have less favourable outcomes in life than those of their peers, and
- eventually return to live with their families as young adults.

We know there will always be some children who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to live with their parents or within their family network safely. For those children our duties and responsibilities, as corporate parents, are well understood.

Our Commitment

We will ensure that only those children who cannot live with their family become looked after.

We will make every effort to reduce the length of time children need to be in our care.

We will return children to their family where it is safe to do so.

We will only achieve our vision of reducing the numbers of children who need to be looked after through a shared understanding across all Council services and our partners to work together and provide seamless services for children in need of our help and support.

Gateshead Council Policy context:

Gateshead Council's strategic approach commits us to Make Gateshead a Place where Everyone Thrives, with 5 key pledges:

1. Putting people and families at the heart of everything we do
2. Tackling inequality so people have a fair chance
3. Supporting communities to support themselves and each other
4. Investing in our economy to provide opportunities for employment, innovation and growth
5. Working together and fighting for a better future in Gateshead

This strategy is strongly aligned to the Thrive agenda by placing the welfare of the child at the heart of everything Children's Social Care services do. By reducing the number of children in need of our care we will also be improving their life chances and tackling inequality.

Our vision for health and wellbeing in Gateshead is 'Good jobs, homes, health and friends.' We intend to reduce inequalities and improve health and wellbeing for people living in our communities through the 6 aims of our Health and Wellbeing Strategy;

1. Give every child the best start in life, with a focus on conception to age two
2. Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control on their lives
3. Create the conditions for fair employment and good work for all
4. Ensure a healthy standard of living for all, in accordance with international law on economic and social rights
5. Create and develop sustainable places and communities
6. Strengthen the role and impact of all health prevention.

This strategy to reduce the number of children who need our care, will also help us to achieve the vision and aims of the Health and Wellbeing strategy. In particular, by giving every child the best start in life and enabling all our children and young people to achieve their best outcomes.

HOW WE WILL WORK

Our Principles:

The following ways of working will help shape, direct and inform the delivery of our work in children's social care:

1. Families and children of any age must (where it is safe) be proactively supported and helped to remain together by those agencies involved in their situation.
2. Responsibility for meeting the needs of Children and Young People who are Looked After or on the edge of care sits across the whole of the Council and our partners.
3. Early Help services and interventions designed to prevent emerging and escalating needs in children will be offered to families.
4. Decisions to bring a child into our care will be informed by a detailed, proportional and professionally justifiable assessment in all circumstances.
5. Where it is not possible for the family to remain together, options from the extended family network and friendship group will be proactively explored before the child (ren) come into our care.
6. Children's placements should be in Gateshead (or as close as possible) to maintain links with family and friends, and their community, and to enable the child to continue their education or be reintroduced to education if their attendance has lapsed.
7. Returning the child to their family will be actively pursued where this is in the best interest of the child

Our Priorities

1. Families will be supported to stay and thrive together through the provision of a variety of resources and interventions by skilled and knowledgeable professionals from different disciplines and agencies.
2. Children who are Looked After are supported to remain, engage and continue in education.
3. Placements for children in care will be as close to familiar surroundings as possible and of a high standard and quality

4. Contact with family members will be promoted where it is safe to do so and is in the best interests of the child.
5. Children who are looked after will benefit from sustainable plans for their future that include, where appropriate, returning to their family in a timescale compatible with their needs.
6. We will be mindful of the resources we have in order to make the most effective use of them, but we will always put the best interests of the child first in our decision making.

Our Approach

Our approach to Social Work, Gateshead CAN, is central to this strategy as Social Work is our greatest asset in achieving a reduction in the numbers of children coming into care and leaving care

We commit to putting the 'social' back into social work. For us, social work is about the relationships we build, the conversations we have, the direct work we do with the children and families who need our services. We put an emphasis on reclaiming *practice* as the central tenet of our social work. We are investing in learning and developing systemic and strengths-based practice skills to enable our social workers to support real sustained change in the lives of vulnerable children and their families.

Our approach to Social Work practice is not limited to one model or 'way to do it'.

Gateshead CAN is an overarching systemic and strengths-based approach, which recognises the interrelationships between **C**ontext, **A**ction and **N**arrative.

Our Social work practice is driven by our aspirant vision that *"Children and families are at the **heart of everything** we do, ensuring all children can **thrive** and reach their **full potential**".* Our ethical driver is rooted in the belief that our responsibility to children and families in need of help should start from the position that families are empowered and supported to make positive changes, enabled to make self-determined choices and seek their own solutions that build on existing strengths and resilience within the family network.

Our firm resolve is to work relentlessly in supporting families to remain together safely and where a child's needs demand alternative living arrangements these will firstly be sought from within the child's own family network.

Professionals involved in delivering statutory Social Work, regardless of which service they belong to, hold a determination to seek the opportunities for change within families, utilising the families own resources, by demonstrating reflective practice and seeking to reach proportional and evidenced based conclusions.

Crucially against the national backdrop of an increasing demand for children to be looked after and the significant upward curve of demand in the NE region Gateshead is investing in wrap around support and relational practice to ensure children can, (wherever possible), remain safely with their parents. Where this is not possible, we will purposefully intervene with families to enable children to transition home.

Linked strategies, policies, and priorities

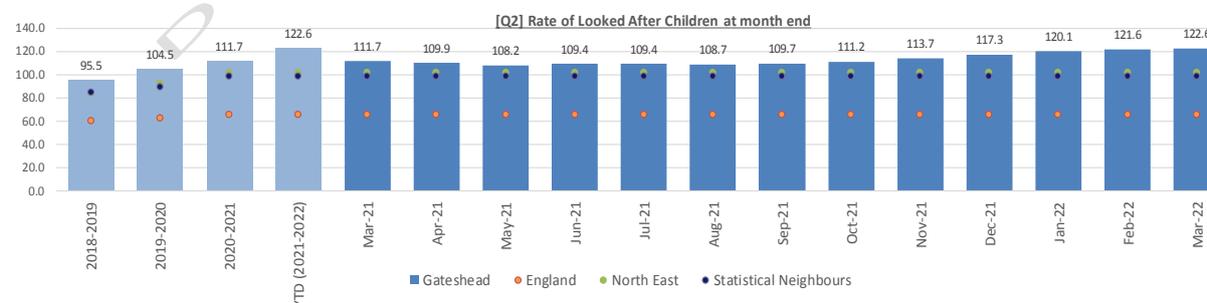
We will deliver the commitments in this strategy using a number of other approved linked strategies, policies and plans which are key to helping us to reduce the number of children who need our care. These include our Early Help strategy for Gateshead, our Education Strategy and our Looked after Children and Care Leaver Strategy.

We will also achieve greater success by working together with our partners to reduce the number of children in Gateshead who become in need of our care. We will do this through the existing strategic partnership arrangements in place via the Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Board and the Gateshead Safeguarding Partnership.

Gateshead’s context and trend (2021/22)

Within a national context we have seen an increase of children in care rise by 65% in the North East between 2009 and 2019¹ over a 10 year period, in Gateshead the increase in looked after children since March 2018 alone has been significant at 10.4% to the end of June 2020. As of March 2022, the number of children requiring care had further risen to 483.

	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	YTD (2021-2022)	Mar-21	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sep-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21	Jan-22	Feb-22	Mar-22
[Q1] Number of Looked After Children at month end	380	414	440	483	440	433	426	431	431	428	432	438	448	462	473	479	483
[Q2] Rate of Looked After Children at month end	95.5	104.5	111.7	122.6	111.7	109.9	108.2	109.4	109.4	108.7	109.7	111.2	113.7	117.3	120.1	121.6	122.6



What the headline data tells us about Gateshead (2020-21)

Fewer children are entering care than a few years ago and while slightly higher, our rates of admission are now more in line with comparator authorities.

Most children who become looked after do so due to child abuse or neglect.

Children who have 3 plus placement changes whilst being looked after has increased in the latest full year.

Fewer children are leaving care, of those who do around one third return home

Fewer children are repeat admissions into care

Our use of Court led intervention has increased and is now in line with our statistical neighbours.

The vast majority of our looked after children are placed within 20 miles of their home, however our use of independent providers has increased.

WHAT WE KNOW

- Gateshead Children's social care services are rated Good by Ofsted and as such deliver good practice and good value for money services.
- Our thresholds are correct - Ofsted, Audit, and checks and balances by our Independent Reviewing Officers confirm that children are not coming into care unnecessarily. We do not plan to reassess current thresholds – the points at which we believe there is a need for a child to become looked after.
- Our Gatekeeping is good and robust providing appropriate challenge and alternatives when required.

Our knowledge of how we are performing is good. There are strong links between data, information and how we analyse this to make assumptions about what it means for our social work practice.

WHAT WE WILL DO

This strategy identifies three key priority aims and four linked objectives:

<p>1. Wrap around plans for children and their families to ensure they have the optimum opportunities to remain safely together supported in times of challenge or crisis.</p>
<p><u>Objective 1.</u> Keeping families together safely</p>
<p><u>Objective 2.</u> A culture that works with safe uncertainty and supports social workers across the services in their work with 'edge of care' families</p>
<p>2. Where children need to be cared for by the Local Authority, we will endeavour to make the duration of care as short as possible. To do this we will seek to support their families in making the changes required to enable their children's safe return home.</p>
<p><u>Objective 4.</u> Developing enough and affordable high-quality placements options.</p>
<p>3. Where children are unable to return home, we will progress permanency plans without undue delay.</p>
<p><u>Objective 3.</u> Achieving permanency quickly</p>

HOW WE WILL DO THIS

The aims are underpinned by 4 objectives that will form the basis of a high-level action plan (see **Appendix 2**) across council services and partnerships.

REDUCTION CHILDREN WHO ARE LOOKED AFTER - HIGH LEVEL STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

Appendix 2 July 2021

Objective 1: Keeping families together safely:

Action	Lead service / team(s)	Milestone	Delivery date
1. Protect and develop the provision of early help. By offering support at the earliest opportunity, we will reduce the number of children requiring placement in care	GMT	budget	2021/2022
2. Consider what support can be offered from agencies outside of Children's services	Commissioning Service	To be explored by Commissioning	April 2022
3. Continue to commission the PAUSE project. This will enable intervention to take place with parents who have had previous children removed and hopefully this does not happen again.	Commissioning Service	To be explored by commissioning	April 2022
4. Pregnant LAC support	Children's services	Audit and review to ensure that appropriate support is in place.	Ongoing
5. MSET	Children's services	Disruption plans to be effective in supporting YP to remain within their family unit.	Ongoing

6. Develop and expand the FGC team. To help families to work together and form a support plan which meets their needs.	Family Group Conference Team	Review	Ongoing
7. Keeping children in school: limiting exclusions and increasing attendance.	Children's Services	Ongoing oversight by complex pupils meeting	ongoing
8. Consideration to be given to the timing of children being brought into care to avoid crisis placements	Team Managers	Audit and review	April 2022
9. The contribution of strong involvement of the Domestic Abuse Team is key to working with children and families, this will reduce the amount of children requiring care due to breakdown in parental relationships	Principal Social Worker/ Domestic Abuse Team/Workforce Development	DAT team to continue to offer intervention	ongoing
10. Build on the learning from the national Reducing Parental Conflict Programme with a continued focus on the couple and co-parenting relationship to maintain family stability	Early Help Service	Share/respond to recommendations on regional VRU research into RPC Undertake regional evaluation of the national RPC Programme	April 2022 April 2022
11. Implement Domestic Abuse Behaviour Change Framework	Domestic Abuse Team	Review and evaluate	Ongoing

to deliver directly with those displaying abusive behaviours.			
12. Rationalise and align the Respect Young People Programme (RYPP) programme to better effect	Targeted Family Support	Identify and train further RYPP consultants.	April 2022
13. Ensure that a focus on youth crime prevention features across frontline early help and social care casework	Youth Justice/Targeted Family Support	Implement a Youth Justice Service prevention pilot offer to young people who are not open to other services. Provide workforce development opportunities to support early identification of those at risk of entering the youth justice system.	September 2021- review in 2022 Ongoing – review December 2021
14. Implement AIM3 model for assessment and intervention with children who display sexually harmful behaviour.	Targeted Family Support	Maintain records on AIM trained staff and identify and train more frontline practitioners in the AIM3 model.	Review March 2022
15. Continue to maintain and develop the CCIN /Edge of care team. This will provide	Assessment & Intervention Service Manager/	Maintain sufficient staffing establishment to deliver on	ongoing

interventions to families and reduce amount of children requiring care.	Peer Review	expectations	
Objective 2. A culture that works with safe uncertainty and supports social workers across the services in their work with 'edge of care' families			
16. Safeguarding Partners working together to void late intervention and escalation.	Safeguarding partnership	Ongoing local training and briefing events with stakeholder partners	Ongoing delivery programme throughout the year
17. Work confidently to manage risk in a supportive environment, supported by Senior Management and Leaders.	Principal Social Worker/Workforce Development/ External Professional where appropriate	Design, develop and deliver bespoke workshop to senior leadership team - tier3 and above	August 2021
18. Maintain a focus on recruitment and retention of social workers, and demonstrating consistency of maintaining children and young people having the same allocated Social Worker throughout their involvement	Assistant Strategic Director/Human Resources	Provide an environment to support and enhance the skills of social workers so that they feel valued and want to remain in the LA.	Ongoing

Objective 3. Achieving permanency quickly.

1. Developing plans for reunification, utilising the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer immediately.	Safeguarding Children's Unit/Safeguarding & Care Planning Service/Looked After Children's Service	Establish scope and process Audit and review	Reviewed in line with LAC processes April 2022
2. Therapeutic Social Worker to work within the Looked After Children's Team and in-house Residential Provision.	Looked After Children's Team	Offer bespoke service individual to the needs of the young person.	In post
3. Monitor vigorously and respond to drift in early permanence planning.	Assistant Strategic Director & Service Management	Establish Early permanence panel	On going
4. Use SGO/CAO as an alternative to care orders whenever possible to support children and young people to exit care into safe and secure placements.	Safeguarding & Care Planning Service/Looked After Children's Service	Complete policy and implement Introduce Kinship Care Team	Completed June 2021
5. Generate additional capacity within Supporting Children and Families Team (SCFT) to offer intensive family support interventions to promote LAC prevention and reunification.	Supporting Children & Families Team	Utilise sessional staff and children's centre staff to undertake family time releasing capacity for family support intervention.	On going

Objective 4. Developing enough and affordable high-quality placements options.

1. Increase Residential Provision in house.	Looked After Children's Team	Open Kites Rise Consider and open two further residential properties	September 2021
2. Finding the right placement first time-connected family, foster care, residential. Increase in house foster care.	Fostering Service/ Commissioning Service	Write Recruitment strategy Agree implementation imperatives Implement actions	Completed
3. Provide additional support to foster carers who have challenging placements.	Looked After Children's Team	Recruit advocates	ongoing