

Gateshead Council Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report

2023-2024

I am delighted to share this annual report of our Corporate Parenting Board, a group we established in 2021 to strengthen the governance, to understand every aspect of the services we deliver for cared for children and care experienced young people, and to drive improvement so that we can answer “Yes” when we challenge ourselves “If this were my child, would it be good enough for them?”; “If I were that child, would it have been good enough for me?”; and “How could I make it even better?”.

Every elected member at Gateshead Council, our directors, our partners and anyone who routinely delivers services for our children is a corporate parent and I encourage everyone to read this report and to consider how our services across the whole system can be continuously improved.

This report sets out our multi agency operational plan which focuses on four key themes through which we seek to directly improve the outcomes for cared for children and care experienced young people. Key to successfully achieving these improvements is through listening to the views of our young people and I am pleased to acknowledge the contribution of our young ambassadors in helping us to do this.

Our first ambassadors, Aisha, Jake and Mariceu, all have care experience and have been hugely helpful to the Board by presenting the findings from their work programmes and letting us know how young people feel about their lives. They have worked with One Voice to conduct a survey, they’ve developed and held focus groups with One Voice Youth Network, Gateshead Youth Assembly and Gateshead Young Inspectors. I’d like to thank them all for their contributions and wish them well as they begin their careers both locally and in more far flung places – they are all exceptional young people who will go far. I’d also like to take this opportunity to welcome Alexandra, Josh and Poppy as our new ambassadors – I’m certain they will also make a huge contribution to our work.

The report also highlights some of the progress of the Board which we also measure against the four themes and I want to acknowledge the work of all of our social work teams; alongside our Edge of Care, IRO, Kinship Care, Pre-birth, SEND, Therapeutic Social Care, Trusting Hands, Youth Justice and Virtual School teams who all deserve a special mention.

We have always sought to innovate in Gateshead so I am delighted that our social workers, kinship care team and two of our long term foster carers were recognised at the national foster care awards held in Birmingham in November 2023. We have also recognised at our own Foster Carer awards the amazing contribution our carers play in keeping our children safe as well as providing them with safe, loving homes and supporting them every day so that they can thrive.

I want to give a very big thank you to all our fabulous foster carers who give our children and young people so much love and care. Every month, our fostering panel hears from, reads about and sees the difference this wonderful group of people makes to the lives of our children and young people.

I also want to make a particular mention of the practitioners and managers working in our children's homes who provide such excellent care to our young people. It is a great source of pride to me that all our children's homes have been judged as good or outstanding across the Borough. We have opened a number of new homes in recent years and, as we continue our strategy of bringing more of our cared for children back to Gateshead, I look forward to further developing these plans.

Finally, as Chair of Gateshead's Board I want to thank every member of our Board for their contributions and in particular what every member of our extensive team does, every day, to improve the lives of our cared for and care experienced young people. I am privileged to have this role and to have had the opportunity to work with such a fantastic group of professionals for the past seven years.

I will continue to use my statutory elected role both here in Gateshead and across the wider region to advocate for children in the care system, on the edge of care or who have experienced care at any time in their lives.

Thank you

Councillor Gary Haley
Lead Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
Chair of the Regional Lead Members Network

My name is Aisha Imran and I was the vice-chair of the Corporate Parenting Board, I am also a care experienced young person. My main role was to advocate for young people within decision making, while providing a unique perspective to ensure all decisions were made in the best interests of children and young people. I ensured young people's voices were heard and acted on by senior leaders.

This report covers the period from 1st April 2023 up to the 31st March 2024 and summarises the work under the remit of Corporate Parenting.

What is a corporate parent?

A corporate parent is when a child is unable to safely live at home and they come into the care of the local authority. The term "corporate parent" means that everyone in the Local Authority has a responsibility to think about the children in our care in everything they do. Being a corporate parent means everyone has a responsibility to think about the work they do and how this can improve and support the children and

young people in care to achieve greater outcomes, be safe, well cared for, loved and access things such as health care, education, opportunities and support to help them achieve their full potential and have the best possible outcomes.

Corporate parenting operates at strategic, operational, and individual levels. It has three key elements:

- A statutory duty, detailed in the Children Act 1989 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017, on all parts of a local authority to co-operate in promoting the welfare of children and young people looked after, and a duty on other partners and agencies to co-operate in fulfilling that duty.
- Co-ordinating the activities of the many different professionals and carers who are involved in a child or young person's life and taking a strategic, child centred approach to the delivery of services.
- Shifting the emphasis from "corporate" to "parenting", making sure our moral and statutory responsibilities towards children looked after and care leavers are being fulfilled.

The Seven Needs

Local authorities must have regard to the seven needs identified in the Children and Social Work Act when exercising their functions in relation to children looked after and care leavers as set out in the guidance, these form the Corporate Parenting Principles which are set out below:

- To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing, of those children and young people.
- To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings.
- To consider 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.

Gateshead's Corporate Parenting Board

Driving these principles forward is Gateshead's Corporate Parenting Board (CPB). The CPB is a group that is part of Gateshead Council. It is made up of local councillors as well as council officers and partners of the council and, of course, care experienced young people. Their role is to ensure the voices and experiences of

children and young people are heard and responded to. The CPB is chaired by the Lead Member for Children and Young People and the Vice Chair is a care experienced young person. The role of the board is to consistently challenge and ask:

- If this were my child, would it be good enough for them?
- If I were that child, would it have been good enough for me?
- How could I make it even better?

As part of the 2023-24 Corporate Parenting Operational Plan members of the board focus on four key themes. A copy of the corporate parenting plan can be found in appendix one. The themes are:

Theme 1: How are we supporting children and young people to remain safely at home with families/extended families; what is the evidence; what progress are we making and what are the outcomes?

Theme 2: How are we meeting children's needs and improving outcomes; what is the evidence; what progress are we making and what are the outcomes?

Theme 3: How are we ensuring that there are sufficient homes for our children in care and care experienced young people; what is the evidence; what progress are we making and what are the outcomes?

Theme 4: How are we improving outcomes for care experienced young people; what is the evidence; what progress are we making and what are the outcomes?

Each theme links directly to improving the outcomes for care experienced young people, ensuring those children and families with whom we work remain at home within their family networks where it is safe to do so, thus avoiding an entry into care and ensuring that where a child has entered care, we never give up hope that we will be able to support them to return back to their family in a timely and safe way.

What Young People have told us?

Gateshead's Young Ambassadors worked closely with One Voice (Gateshead's forum for care experienced young people) to develop a survey to ask young people what they thought so that they were able to share the views of a wider group of young people with members of the CPB.

Alongside the survey, they held focus group sessions around renewal of the Care Pledge with the One Voice Youth Network and young people living in Children's Homes. The main areas focused on were relationships and how young people are treated when they are in care. Young people told us:

- They should be supported to have lots of positive relationships as well as being encouraged to have friends in and out of school and that we should stay focused on helping to achieve this for all young people.
- Where possible children and young people should be treated equally to children who are not in care and have the same access to things.
- They told us they feel safe and the things we are doing help.
- They told us that most young people feel listened to by their corporate parents and that their views made a difference.

Corporate Parenting supported members of One Voice Youth Network, Young People from Gateshead Youth Assembly and Gateshead Young Inspectors to deliver activities to other children and young people as part of the 2023 summer programme.

The scheme was a joint project of the Children's Rights and Engagement Team, the Virtual School, and Gateshead Youth Council. The programme offered young people the opportunity to attend a holiday activity programme. Volunteers, including members of One Voice Youth Network, helped facilitate activities and with general logistical arrangements and added in some new sessions which came from feedback gained from young people.

These included: The Dogs Trust - an introduction to dogs and safety; Groundworks – a workshop on reducing, reusing, and recycling waste; and Safety-works – an interactive session at Safety-works in Newcastle. Feedback from young people was positive with some of the young people who attended last summer's activities progressing to becoming volunteers this year. One of these young people said:

“It was good to help out and its was good to see how much work goes into everything”.

This is a great opportunity and gives young people real skills that they can use later in life and when applying for employment.

Corporate Parenting Board members were keen to understand what young people thought about our children's homes and the Young Ambassadors were keen to share with the views of young people following their young persons independent visit. The young ambassador's fed back that on the whole young people like living in the homes, the homes were well decorated and lovely, the teams were kind and young people overall felt safe. Some young people fed back that this wished they could do more activities such as go-karting and boxing like their peers. As a result of this a small task and finish group was set up to review and resolve the barriers which were preventing young people accessing such activities. This resulted in a review of the risk assessments and overall approach which put in place measures to enable these activities to take place. Members of the CPB were instrumental in opening networks across the borough for young people to access and be part of.

The work of the corporate parenting board in partnership with young people has also seen the review of the young peoples pledge which has ensured care experienced young people and care leavers continue to have access to a free leisure pass, access to a free bus pass, driving lessons, access to services which help them develop independence or feel heard, advocacy and other homes to live in where people care and love them when they can't be with their families at that time.

The work of the CPB has helped influence and change the language we use, our understanding of the experiences of young people and how as corporate parents we use our networks to support young people to achieve. The young ambassadors and one voice have been key in sharing, challenging and helping members to see things through their lens. Care Leavers Day was a great example of the way in which young people had the opportunity to celebrate and come together. And we also saw one young person stand up at the foster carers' awards presenting her poem and experiences of coming into care due to the support and empowerment she felt from her carers, corporate parents and her peers.

Progress of the Corporate Parenting Board

For this report the progress of the corporate parenting board has been reported on in line with its themes. By presenting the progress in this way there is a clear link between what the board set out to achieve and what has been achieved alongside the difference it has made for care experienced children and young people.

Theme 1 focused on: How are we supporting children and young people to remain safely at home with families/extended families; what is the evidence; what progress are we making and what are the outcomes? The board set out to make progress in the areas listed below and this is the difference because of that focus:

- Ensuring our Edge of Care offer supports children and young people to remain at home: As a result of this the Edge of Care Strategy was reviewed, the team realigned and further developed, external funding secured to support the teams work and a targeted response was delivered which has supported young people on the edge of care to remain at home as a result of the intensive support offered to young people and their families.
- A wide range of strategies have been developed in the last twelve months across the service, to safely reduce the number of new children entering care, which are beginning to have a positive impact. These include an intensive edge of care offer a refreshed approach to support for new children at risk outside the home; an enhanced FGC offer; the development of a pre-birth service and the embedding of a reunification strategy.
- As a result, the rate of children entering our care has reduced in the last 12 months (54 per 10k), compared to the previous 12 months (60. per 10k). We know that children are more likely to be aged between 10 to 15 when coming into care, with 33% of those entering care during the 12 months up to March 2024 within that age category, hence the intensive work on supporting our adolescents.

- Positively, we are seeing a reducing trend in children under 1 year old entering care, with 19.5% coming into care between January 2023 and December 2023, compared to 20.5% in the previous 12 months, demonstrating the impact of our Pre-birth interventions. We are positively seeing the impact of our reunification strategy and edge of care strategy with the increase in the number of children exiting our care in the last 12 months, with 206 children and young people leaving (rate of 54 per 10,000), compared to 188 in the previous 12 months (rate of 49 per 10,000). During the last 12 months, the most common reason for a child leaving our care is when they return home (31%) followed by children who turned 18 (24%). 19.8% left our care subject to a special guardianship order and 13% were adopted. 3.9% left our care on a child arrangement order.
- We went live in May 2023 with Gateshead First Therapeutic Social Care based team. As part of this work, we have embedded the trauma informed model across practice to help young people feel better understood. As part of the partnership wide launch days, care experienced young people and adults, alongside corporate parents from across the partnership network spoke about their experiences strengthening peoples understanding of the lived experiences of young people, but also how we embed the trauma informed model across our practice to ensure responses to, and the development of, services ensure we are developing a co-produced offer and response to need.
- Ensure our Reunification strategy supports children and young people to return to their families where it is safe to do so. As a result of this we have reviewed the Reunification Strategy building on and learning from what we have achieved so far and setting out our goals and ambitions for young people moving forward with the development of services which support this to happen.
- We reviewed our Kinship Care offer hearing directly from kinship carers and the children in their care about how we could improve the kinship offer and as a result of this we delivered development sessions which helped carers focus in, ask questions and strengthen their awareness of the things that matter most to them. We have a kinship carer on both the fostering panel and virtual school governing body; we have developed a kinship preparation training course, a young person's board to help us listen to, co-develop and respond to what our young people tell us and we have increased the number of kinship carers attending the support group and being an active support buddy to new carers.
- Taking on board the feedback from young people in relation to how they feel safe, board members were keen to ensure the focused remained on preventing young people from entering the youth justice system supporting the work with Northumbria Police to implement the Do-It Profiler and the delivery of the Serious Violence action plan.

- Our Youth Justice Service have been the most recent service to commission 'Digital Voice for Communities' to create a Digital Me film to capture the experiences of young people working with their case workers. The main themes coming from the video are peer pressure and the impact of young people's involvement with YJS on the whole family. The video has been used in several staff briefings led by the Deputy Strategic Director to ensure that our young people's lived experience is at the heart of everything we do. We are proud of the work our children completed, and the Digital Me film is a finalist at the Social work of the Year awards in November 2023.

Theme 2 focused on: How are we meeting children's needs and improving outcomes; what is the evidence; what progress are we making and what are the outcomes? The board set out to make progress in the areas listed below and this is the difference because of that focus:

- Our Care Experienced young people have led on a number of interactive sessions to support corporate parents widen the message in relation to the experiences of young people. Some of these achievements are captured in the 'What Young People Have Told Us' section earlier in the report. The 'Gateshead's Got Your Back' app has also been developed to support young people with the information they need to support them and tell us what they think of the services they access.
- Members sought to improve the physical, mental health and emotional wellbeing of our young people. The key focus around this was the access to social activities which remained a high priority for young people following the impact of COVID. As a result of the work of the board, care experienced young people and care leavers benefited from a free leisure pass, a bus pass, a summer activity programme and the infamous Big Red Bus as well as numerous One Voice sessions.
- The Independent Reviewing Services were able to share their progress with the board who were able to challenge, support and comment on the progress made. This included hearing about the views of young people and about the quality of the relationship between the Independent Reviewing Officers and the young people.
- A review of the partnership work undertaken to reduce children who are missing from care and support for those who are at risk of exploitation was a focus. During this, a review was undertaken which made recommendations which strengthen the Level 2 Contextual Safeguarding offer and systems which record, track and monitor all young people who are at risk of contextual safeguarding issues. This included the work outlined in the Edge of Care offer.
- As part of our work undertaken to support the health needs of refugee children and young people. This included the launch of the partnership between CNTW and Social Care with the launch of the Trusting Hands team.

- We have a dedicated health team for children in care. Our Care experienced young people receive a Health Passport when they are 18yrs. Our children and young people are encouraged to choose healthy and active lifestyles. They have access to good and accessible information on risks of alcohol, substance misuse and sexual exploitation. Support is offered to those at risk through specialist services. Children with additional needs or a disability also receive specialist health services. This dedicated team is effective in ensuring key health processes are completed to support children's health.
- 96.7% of Children in Our Care had their health assessments completed in 2022/23, and as of March 2024, 91% had been assessed. 90% of children in care had up to date immunisations which continues to ensure good health outcomes.
- Children's health and development is also championed by the council through the free leisure passes provided to all foster carers and children in care to support their regular use of council leisure services.

Theme 3 focused on: How are we ensuring that there are sufficient homes for our children in care and care experienced young people; what is the evidence; what progress are we making and what are the outcomes? The board set out to make progress in the areas listed below and this is the difference because of that focus:

- As part of our commitment to our children to ensure that they can live locally, we plan to open three additional new children's homes. One 3-bedded for young people and one solo occupancy home for young people with complex behaviours who would benefit from some time on their own before living alongside other young people are currently undergoing registration in 2023/24. A third home which is for two to three young people is in the initial stages with plans for this to come on board in 25/26.
- Our three local authority children's homes provide care for 13 of our children and young people. All three homes have an overall Ofsted grading of Good. Our Grove House short break provision support 50 children with a disability and has an overall Ofsted grading of Outstanding. This included visiting one home and hearing firsthand about ensuring children and young people have access to the right accommodation to meet their needs.
- We now have a dedicated registered provider which ensures that all our USAC young people have good quality homes and quality support they need to live independently within communities local to Gateshead.
- We work hard to ensure that all our care leavers live in suitable accommodation and as at March 2024, 96% of 17–18-year-olds and 95% of 19–21-year olds are in suitable accommodation (compared with latest stat neighbour averages of 90% for 17 – 18 and 89% for 19 - 21). Accommodation options include 24hr supported accommodation, 12hr semi-supported, dispersed properties, taster flats and own tenancies, dependent on need.

- Members have worked collaboratively on supporting a review of the supported living offer for young people and worked with partners to register as 16/17 supported living providers under the new regulations.
- Members have supported the work of the regional adoption agency which has ensured children and young people achieve permanency in a timely way.
- Members have supported work which has seen the care leavers offer extend to include a Setting Up Home Allowance increase to bring this to £3000 and payment of their first TV licence among other things.
- Building on this has been the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Board members have met with foster carers to hear first hand about their experience as carers and as carers within the Mockingbird constellations. As part of the work undertaken, Gateshead along with the other 11 local authorities in the region are one of the Department of Education (DfE) pathfinders for a regional fostering hub. Members of the board have also attended various foster carers events such as the fostering awards and the long service event as well as supporting recruitment campaigns.
- Our foster carers and kinship carers both won national awards at the social care awards in 2023 and received mayors' awards for their commitment and excellence.
- We are committed to supporting children to remain in living in their family networks and to high quality support to kinship carers and have positively seen a steady increase in children living in Kinship Care arrangements in the last 12 months. As of December 2023, this was 91 children. The Kinship Team provides on-going support to carers during the assessment period and once the kinship arrangement is in place. There are two dedicated kinship workers who provide kinship carers with facilitated support sessions with other carers, training and development sessions and courses, newsletters which include support and top tips, a children's board, direct 121 work from one of the family advocates, social events such as coffee mornings, a Christmas party and activity day.
- Funding from the DfE continues to support our Staying Close model and this has enabled us to support young people living in residential care to be supported to live in the local community. In 2023 we have worked with 10 young people, 8 are actively being supported and two no longer requiring support having moved in with family members. All young people have made progress in relation to their independence skills, physical care, mental wellbeing, cooking and cleaning and managing health appointments. Young people tell us that they feel more confident knowing there is a person who will 'stick' with them as they transition from residential care into their next home. Members have heard from young people about the things which make a difference to them, and this has influenced the work of the Staying Close team.

Theme 4 focused on: How are we improving outcomes for care experienced young people; what is the evidence; what progress are we making and what are the outcomes? The board set out to make progress in the areas listed below and this is the difference because of that focus:

- As part of the Care Leavers Strategy the plans for the care leavers hub were shared which includes how young people will be supported with plans relating to Seeking Education, Employment and Training (SEET) and the wider corporate parenting role across the Local Authority. This sets out the plans for the 2024-25 priorities for care leavers and how our corporate parents will continue to support this in future years.
- The Care Leavers offer continues to be shaped by the work of the board. Members have shaped the offer to date and theme 4 showcases this whilst listening again to what else we need to do as we move into 2024-25. For example, as part of our offer, we support with tenancy bonds if required and are hoping to soon be able to offer free driving lessons to our care leavers as part of our future developments.
- We continue to work towards being a trailblazer organisation with the Care Leavers Covenant which our Young People are benefiting from. As well as the free travel pass, young people living independently have been offered a laptop with free Sky broadband.
- As part of the work, we have had a swift response to our growing population of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people which has seen us establish a team to meet their needs, an offer which supports them to recover, live independently or in a foster family and to establish their social activities in their local community and to access education.
- We are in touch with 98% of our 17–18-year-olds and 76% of our 19–21-year-olds. Those young people who choose and have ongoing support needs, receive more intensive support from PAs. There is open access to all young people whenever they need support from the team. PAs aim to maintain 8 weekly contacts with young people 18+. Young people tell us they prefer to be contacted in a variety of ways, including text, phone, email and through 3rd parties, which we facilitate.
- Members have been ambitious about the educational needs of young people, and, because of their work, a self-evaluation and School Improvement Plan was developed, a Virtual School Governing Board was established, and the completion and quality of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) have improved. The training programme for 23/24 for designated teachers, Designated Safeguarding Leads, SW, IROs and carers has also focused on the importance of attendance and supporting attendance. A new Virtual School Structure to increase capacity to ensure all statutory duties are fulfilled (Autumn 2023); a new Governing Board established September 2023; robust performance and progress data for all cohorts both CIOC and CWSW (CIN/CP) and, a new Pupil Premium Policy for schools.

- The recent SEND inspection highlighted that the Virtual School provides effective support to children and young people with SEND. 54.2% of children in care of statutory school age have identified SEND and 21.5% of children in care (79 children) have an EHCP. These are reviewed annually, in addition to the oversight provided by the IRO.
- The Pathways to Work programme is available to all children in care between years 9-13 and enables them to access work experience during their school/College holidays within a real working environment for periods of one day up to several weeks. The aim of the programme is to help improve opportunities for young people by developing the skills needed for future careers. It also improves their confidence and helps them to learn about a particular career before finalising their plans.
- In 2022, 24 young people attended Pathways to Work programmes for 109 days in total. In 2023 there were 37 young people who attended for 233 days and opportunities included work at Fleet Services, Pre School-Nursery, Blaydon Resource Centre, Council IT department, Gateshead Central Library, Castle View Nursery, MGM Construction. We have seen positive impact though this programme.

Partnership Working – Corporate Parenting Partnership plan

The corporate parenting plan has been developed alongside partners and young people to ensure true collaboration and progress updates have been gathered as part of the quarterly reports into the corporate parenting board.

The Corporate Parenting plan is aligned with the forward plan and incorporates one four themes that have been identified and agreed for the following year.

- **Theme 1** How are we supporting children and young people to remain safely at home with families/extended families?
- **Theme 2** How are we meeting children’s needs and improving outcomes?
- **Theme 3** How are we ensuring that there are sufficient homes for our children in care and care experienced young people?
- **Theme 4** How are we improving outcomes for care experienced young people?

This will enable members to have greater clarity about the work being undertaken across the partnership and in the service to address the four themes. It will also enable robust discussions about partnership interventions and delivery of services and allow opportunities for the board to shape plans in the best interests of children and young people.

Next Steps/conclusion

The Corporate Parenting sub-group which consists of an expansive membership including strategic representation from Housing, Education, Health, Youth Offending, Children Social Care Practice Leads, Learning and Skills who meet on a bi-monthly basis to review progress made and agree next steps for the following quarter and theme.

The Corporate Parenting membership during this period have demonstrated that they are effective in both challenge and flexibility. Overall, as Corporate parents we continue to contribute, scrutinise and function well.