

ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

Waltham Forest Corporate Parenting Services



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Introduction

Message from the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board

It has been a great pleasure to serve in my first full year as Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board and such a privilege working with our young people, members and officer colleagues delivering the corporate parenting services. There is no more important responsibility we take in as councillors than that of being a corporate parent, ensuring that every young person in our care is safe and supported to make the best start in their lives. Just like any parent our responsibility does not end at eighteen, and it is also all of our responsibilities to champion care experienced children and to make sure they have the support to realise their ambitions and aspirations.

This annual report provides an overview of activity by the corporate parenting services during 2021/22, outlining the difference this made to our children as we continued to recover from the significant impact that COVID had on all of us.

This report also references the Corporate Parenting Board's role in holding to account the services provided by the Council and our partners for our children in care and care experienced children. Heartfelt thanks go to all of the young people involved with the Corporate Parenting Board this year: Annlucy, Brook, Danielle, Eyuel, Jaime, Madina, Saalihah and Winta. Your contributions have been invaluable and moving.

One of the key highlights for 2021/22 is our Mockingbird Project that aims to extend the support networks of our children. It was touching to attend the launch event for our second network and see quite how dedicated our foster carers were about the difference it would make for them and the children in their care.

There are a number of challenges ahead, including the rise in the cost of living, the increasing number of children under twelve years old requiring residential support and ensuring that children and young people have timely initial and review health assessments. As we moved into 2022, we started to reflect on how we can overcome these challenges through better joined up working and also horizon scanning, including looking to the Independent Review of Social Care and also Ofsted's review framework for care-experienced children to ensure we can lead the way on some of the key emerging themes from lifelong support to better use of foster care and special guardianships.

I continue to be impressed by the resilience, innovation and dedication that exists here in Waltham Forest. A sincere thank you to all of the staff, partners, foster carers, and the adopters that work to keep our children safe and well and enable them to follow their dreams and reach their full potential.



Councillor Alistair Strathern
Lead Member for Children and Young People

Purpose of this report

This report provides an overview of work that took place across the different Corporate Parenting Services from April 2021 – March 2022 to ensure that our children in care and care experienced children were kept safe and well and had every opportunity to flourish.

The report is divided up into the different service areas that Corporate Parenting comprises and summarises the achievements, challenges, and upcoming areas of focus for each. This aims to provide a collective view of how these services worked together to support and make a difference to our children.

This annual report has helped to inform our Corporate Parenting Strategy for 2022-23 and it is recommended that these two documents are read alongside each other.



Role of the Corporate Parenting Board

The Corporate Parenting Board's role is to ensure the council and relevant partner agencies commit to excellent standards of corporate parenting, deliver the pledge to children in care, and develop and carry out the Corporate Parenting Strategy. This year, there has been a particular focus on tackling discrimination and inequality.

Corporate Parenting Meetings – 'what went down'

Six Corporate Parenting Board meetings took place (virtually) in 2021-22 covering a range of key themes (see below). Crucially, a young people's workshop took place ahead of each meeting to gather our children's views and to help direct the focus of discussions and empower them to engage with confidence in discussions during the main meetings.

May 2021	Health and wellbeing
June 2021	Voice & influence
September 2021	Recovery and reflection
November 2021	Home and belonging
January 2022	Education and aspiration
March 2022	Safety and resilience

The Board agreed the continued relevance and importance of the previous year's priority areas based on the Children in Care Pledges and agreed to continue to:

- monitor, measure and hold all partners to account in meeting the commitments of the pledge to children in care and the impact of their work to deliver these.
- ensure the 'Family Firm' demonstrates commitment to the Leaving Care Offer and can evidence the impact of this on our young people's life chances and opportunities

The priority areas for 2021-22 continued to be:



In carrying out its functions in line with the priorities, throughout the year the Board has considered the following:

- Adoption Panel's Annual Report
- Capacity of the workforce to manage/respond to care experienced children
- Leaving Care Service Annual Report
- Fostering Panel's Annual Report
- Health Annual Report (promoting health and wellbeing of looked after children)
- Independent Reviewing Officer's report
- National developments
- Service performance reports
- Virtual School's Annual Report
- Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children's Board's Annual Report

Highlights from Corporate Parenting Services

Corporate Parenting is made up of a range of different services that work together to provide the best possible care and support to our children. This section provides a summary of what work took place in each of those services during the year and what difference this made to our children and young people.

Adoption Services

Waltham Forest works in partnership with Coram, who provides high quality adoption services on their behalf. This partnership extends to a number of other local authorities across London and beyond and is known as the Coram Regional Adoption Agency partnership which is now in its third year of operation.

What difference has the work of the Adoption Service made to our children during 2021 / 22?

Three children have found permanent homes

One sibling group (of two) and one single child found their permanent homes through adoption orders and another sibling group (of two) were placed with prospective adopters during 2021-22 and are awaiting the outcome of the adoption order application.

Children placed between April 2021 and March 2022 waited an average of 526 days between becoming looked after and being placed (the target is 426 days*).

The average time between Placement Order and match for these children was 131 days (the target is 121 days*).

Children who had an Adoption Order granted in 2021/22 waited an average of 584 days between placement and the order being granted, which is higher than the national average of 274 days.

There were four children with a change of plan away from adoption where there was an agency decision maker decision.

We had seven children with agency decision maker decisions (which included one sibling group of two).

There were four children waiting with placement orders (including one sibling group of two and one child with likely change of plan following a match disrupted at introductions)

* Note that delays are often outside of our control and usually linked to lengthy court processes and in instances where there are appeals to placements orders or changes of care plans. In some circumstances delays are in the best interests of the children and ensure that any decisions are absolutely the right ones for each individual child.

The adoption process is becoming more effective

A robust tracking system was developed for the early monitoring of children who may have a care plan of adoption all the way through to Adoption Orders being granted. The adoption team have become an integral part of Legal Planning, Permanency Oversight and Care Planning to ensure planning without drift and delay.

The Coram Service Manager is also functioning as the Agency Advisor to the Agency Decision Maker, which further aids in the joined-up planning between the social work teams and the adoption service.

What's next for Adoption Services in 2022 – 23?

- To improve on targets, particularly the time between placement and Adoption Order being granted. We have already begun to adopt a new process to monitor and expedite the planning for Adoption Order applications made by adopters.
- Develop better recording systems for the adoption support functions.

- Increase the number of children placed with Coram adopters as per the service review to four children with Coram adopters and two coram placements. It is likely the number of children adopted in Waltham Forest could be nearer 10 when considering the child level information for children with a parallel plan that includes adoption.
- Further embed Early Permanence (EP) practice within the social work teams with the support from Coram EP Team training and the council's own Early Permanence Champion.

Fostering and Permanence Service

We have been striving to increase the numbers of foster carer approvals to enable children to be closer to their families, friends, and local schools. In 2021-22, fourteen additional foster carers were approved which brought the total number of approved carers to 114. This year also saw more approvals of family & friends carers (twelve more than the previous year).



What difference has the work of the Fostering and Permanence Service made to our children during 2021 / 22?

Carers are appropriately equipped to support our children

Kinship Ready programmes have been commissioned to provide training and advice to Kinship Carers through their assessments and approvals for named children in their care.

Kinship Ready is a series of workshops for special guardians who have had a viability assessment for a Special Guardianship Order but have not yet been granted the order or those who are considering a Special Guardianship Order.

There is stability for our children, and they feel a sense of belonging

The Mockingbird constellation continues and is a vital asset within the Fostering Service, promoting peer support amongst carers, fostering stability for children and young people within the Mockingbird as they have the opportunity to interact with others through community events, activity, and outings. Children and carers also have the opportunity to be offered respite and even in an emergency through the Hub carer which helps to overcome problems before they escalate or lead to placements breaking down.

What is Mockingbird?



Our Mockingbird 'constellation', which has been named 'Alpha' has now reached full capacity and comprises ten carers including the Hub Carer, with a total of 18 young people.

14 of these children benefited through emergency placements, respite arrangements and placement stability moves into and within the constellation, all seen as a testament to Mockingbird in operation.



Feedback received from children within Mockingbird constellations has been very positive, with children expressing a sense of belonging in being part of the Mockingbird family, expanding their network of friends and increasing their self-esteem and in turn good emotional wellbeing.



Six virtual gatherings took place via Zoom and as the pandemic eased, there was a move back to some in person meet ups, with a gathering in Clacton on Sea in September 2021 and a Christmas meal at a local restaurant in Walthamstow. In February 2022 the carers organised a 'meet and greet' coffee morning at Costa.

The social events within the year included an escape room activity, Eid party at The Hub Home, arts and crafts activity designing the young people's "Getting to know you booklet" for professionals to use in obtaining young people's views on transitioning in and out of alternative homes.



Monthly constellation meetings, led by the Hub Carer have continued to run and good attendance has been consistent. These meetings are a useful space for reflection and offer the Satellite carers an opportunity to discuss children in their home, including any transition plans etc. It's also a chance to plan the monthly social gatherings!

Our children are supported with their emotional needs and wellbeing

Service agreements with PAC-UK and IAC (independent adoption support agencies) ensure that post adoption therapeutic support and advice is readily available to children whose care plans have been special guardianship. We are trying to maximise the use of resources available to support children with these types of permanence plans.

Our children's experiences are better understood

Virtual reality resources have been used for some time now by the fostering service, to support prospective carers during recruitment and throughout the assessment stage as well as on approval as foster carers; to help them better understand the children's lived experiences and how this affects their emotional wellbeing later in life.



Our children are receiving better support

The fostering reviewing officer noted that this year 18 good practice alerts have been sent to supervising social workers. This is an increase in comparison to last year, 20/21 whereby 7 good practice alerts were sent. One excellent practice example was detailed as follows:

"The supervising social worker completed a thorough and detailed report that highlighted several good examples of how the foster carers are providing a very good standard of care for the child placed in their care. The supervising social worker also provided excellent observations of the child in care (who is preverbal) using language that cares".

What have been some of the challenges for Fostering and Permanence during 2021-22?

One main challenge in this year has been on the retention of older experienced foster carers who following the pandemic realised that they could no longer continue to undertake the fostering role. Some returned to settle back in their countries of origin.

The resignations received in the Year 21/22 were many older carers whose approvals were for babies. As a result, the Fostering Service is now on a recruitment drive to recruit more baby carers as well as targeted recruitment for parent & child, teenage carers for the vulnerable young people; as well as carers who could care for children with disabilities.

Different recruitment strategies are being engaged and utilised to maximise all communications resources available and to increase the pool of foster carers. Additionally, the lack of adequate housing with available spaces in homes in London has proved a challenge in nurturing and developing more constellations.

What's next for the Fostering and Permanence Service in 2022-23?

The Service will continue to foster close support through relationship building with foster carers to retain them on approval which remains a focus for next Year. We are also looking into several ways of assisting foster carers who would like to offer a Hub home within the Mockingbird project to children. Our ambition is to offer all foster carers the valuable opportunity to be part of the Mockingbird project by increasing the number of Mockingbird constellations.

The Fostering Team is also getting involved with local Businesses to advertise fostering recruitment within their organisations in the next year as part of the Foster Friendly Employers' initiative.



Health

Whilst the country has seen a lift of all Covid-19 restrictions, there still remains a meaningful impact on all health services across NHS. The past year has seen a reduction in restrictions placed on all citizens across the UK, which has allowed NHS services to re-open its doors to the public and support the roll out of mass vaccination centres across the UK. However, the restrictions will continue to have a meaningful impact on the NHS presently and years to come.

The Care Experienced Children health team moved to a blended model of seeing children looked after both virtually and physically at their base in Wood Street. All children seen for their initial health assessment are seen physically and then their subsequent review health assessment is offered virtually or physically. Those children who have additional health needs that require close monitoring have been prioritised by the CEC health team as needed to be seen physically.

What difference has the work of our Corporate Parenting Health Services made to our children during 2021 / 22?

The health status of our children is improving

Some of the resulting work from joined up targeted work that is improving our systems includes a pilot project enabling social care's computer system Mosaic, read only access to the health provider's computer system Rio as well as a bespoke piece of work to improve the immunisation status of children.



Our children's emotional and physical health needs are being met

A new integrated model of working considers our children's physical and emotional health at the same time. This follows two audits looking at the cohort of care experienced children open to the local child and adolescent mental health services. This data fed into a working group looking at strengthening current pathways.

Plans are underway to enable care experienced young people 24 hour access to mental health support via an out of hours telephone service.

The partnership was fortunate to employ an experienced strategic lead for looked after children's mental health that straddles both local authority and health provider which has brought about immediate changes to both agencies to improve access to mental health for care experienced children.

Existing gaps in mental health provision for children who are looked after by Waltham Forest are recognised by the partnership, as well as the challenges in recording children in need of, and receiving a service from, CAMHS. Locally, our care experienced children are under-represented in referrals to CAMHS compared to population estimates of need, and once referred to CAMHS can experience delays in initial assessments and difficulty accessing specialist care, in comparison to children who are not looked after.

To begin to address these gaps, in early 2022 we developed three CAMHS Access clinicians to be Access Champions for care experienced children, meaning they are building specialist skills and experience, in assessing and care planning for looked after children. The role of the

Access Champions should expedite both assessments and transfer to intervention pathways for looked after children referred to CAMHS. Three primary mental health workers form part of the practice support group and in addition, provide individual support and consultation to social workers, leaving care coaches, foster carers, the virtual school and young people. They liaise with CAMHS, accessing additional services as necessary. They have played an active part in making sure that where complex mental health issues exist collaborative consultations have been offered that include views and recommendations from adult services. This has provided a valuable means for professionals being empowered to seek the right support at the right time for our children /young people.

A notable improvement within the health services for our children has been due to the closer working with our psychologists to better record, understand and develop a pathway for working with children who are likely to require support regarding their mental health and wellbeing. Another very useful development has been the coordination of all unaccompanied children's infectious disease screening centralised at University College London Hospital as a one stop process. This has enabled all information to be held and available at a single point of contact

Good multiagency working is a key part of the system that supports the health of our children. Partnership meetings have continued to be well attended by all partners and provide a vehicle for addressing strategic issues affecting care experienced children. Additionally, health partners were invited to a series of away days for social workers where information and ideas about the health and wellbeing of children in care as well as statutory health assessments were exchanged. This enabled a mutual understanding of the importance that health and

social care play together in supporting the mental and physical health of our children.

Waltham Forest is part of a pilot called The Healthy Smiles Project which is a Pan-London scheme for children in care who can be referred to dental clinics that are catered to support their needs.

What have been some of the challenges in health?

Health outcomes have not met the outstanding expectations that we set out in our ambitions for our children and young people and this has been an ongoing challenge set to us by the Corporate Parenting Board. As a result, there has been a concerted effort from all partners to improve the statutory health assessments for children. Following restrictions placed on the NHS as part of COVID-19 lockdown and the move to virtual working, health indicators fell to as low as 20% for initial health assessments (IHA) and 40% for return health assessments (RHA) which was well below expected targets. There is also a backlog of assessments which need to be managed in a timely manner.

Similarly, to other sectors, recruitment, and retention of staff for the health looked after teams continues to be challenging. This is exacerbated by increasing workloads of our nurses, particularly during the pandemic.

Virtual working often made it difficult to establish a rapport between the child /young person and the health professional. This may have contributed to effective clinical assessments and being able to pick up on safeguarding clues.

What's next for health in 2022-23?

From April 2022, CAMHS will employ a part time Highly Specialist Clinical Psychologist to work with children looked after by Waltham Forest and other boroughs. This will increase the provision of specialist therapeutic interventions for our children and their careers. We hope to expand this provision with further resource in 2022, subject to successful recruitment.

Other specific areas of focus for our health services will be:

- addressing the back log of RHA assessments and attendant risks, with a contingency plan to prevent a repeat, should similar circumstances arise
- improving adoption / fostering medicals
- developing a joint database between health and the council identifying the health needs of our children that will influence future commissioning
- using data we have, to better understand the take up of CAMHS Services for all care experienced children.
- exploring membership of the Family Action - National Leaving Care Help line with a view to work in partnership with Local Authorities to supplement the existing Personal Advisor offer to provide independent support for care experienced children / young people, on their onward journey to independence.

Independent Reviewing Service

What difference has the work of the Independent Reviewing Service made to our children during 2021 / 22?

A snapshot of our work and impact:

- Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) chaired 791 reviews
- 98% reviews happened on time
- In 98.6% of reviews, children gave their views
- Our children attended 64% of their reviews
- The majority of all feedback was positive
- 80% of care plans were up to date
- IROs were satisfied with 90% of completed pathway plans
- 91% children had a permanence plan at their 4 month review
- 66% of pathway plans were up to date
- 18 good practice highlights
- 40 alerts were raised – all of which were resolved

IRO work in practice

Through their contributions in care proceedings, an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) realised and understood that one of our children had been moved numerous times and that this was significantly affecting their emotional wellbeing. The IRO advocated for our young person and ensured that their care plan was to remain with their carer instead of the plans that were in progress to move them again.

Children have a say in their planning and understand what's going to happen next

Overall, this year has seen an improvement in most aspects of care planning. Nearly all reviews are held on time, most children participate in their reviews. Care plans are increasingly up to date and where Pathway Plans are completed IRO's are satisfied with 90% of those plans. 91% of children had permanence plans at their second review.

Children and young people tell us that in the main they are receiving the support that they want in education, living arrangements, knowing their rights and keeping safe.

What have been some of the challenges for the Independent Reviewing Service?

Whilst there have been improvements in the timeliness of planning for our children and young people there continues to be room for improvement in keeping care plans, pathway plans up to date and of a high standard. We want to be sure that children know what their care plan is and that they are always supported in contributing to their plans. We want all Pathway Plans to be written alongside young people.

We would like to have more parents contribute to the planning for their children, and for family time to be consistently supported where it is assessed as safe and appropriate to do so. We want our children and young people to be involved in this decision making according to their age and understanding.

More IRO work in practice

For one of our children, H, who is an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child, the IRO advocated for the speedy progress of an application for a travel document after some delay. As a result, H has been able to travel abroad with their foster family and has been able to enjoy having lots of fun with the rest of the family. Had they not got their travel document they would have had to miss out and stay behind, at home with a backup carer.

What's next for the Independent Reviewing Service in 2022-23?

The IRO will routinely challenge when children / young people are not receiving the service they have been assessed as needing. We aim to learn and improve through focussed use of available data, through collaboration with our neighbouring boroughs and reference to research in practice

Our children tell us they would like more support with family time and in becoming an adult. This means that where it is safe children and young people will continue to be in touch with their family and friends. With that in mind a focus next year is on meaningful participation, looking more specifically at how we ensure our children are included in decision making that affects them, however they contribute to their statutory review meetings. We want our children to not only have a voice but to have a safe space to express their views, to a listening audience and to then have influence, where their views are fully considered by those who have the power to effect change.

Leaving Care Service

The number of children leaving care has consistently increased in recent years, up from 335 in March 2021 to 371 in March 2022. This is likely due to the extended duty placed by the Government on local authorities to offer support up until the age of 25 years if a young person requests.

What difference has the work of the Leaving Care Service made to our children during 2021 / 22?

Access to suitable accommodation when they are ready. Children / young people leaving care are considered as a priority by housing teams

The Leaving Care Service and housing teams, including housing associations work collaboratively to ensure that Since March 2021, there has been an increase in suitable accommodation for our care experienced young people aged between 19-21 years old (from 91.4% to 93.6%) which is also comparatively good with neighbouring boroughs (85%) and England (88%). Young people are encouraged and supported to make their flats a home where they can thrive and feel safe. Our housing teams take into consideration any care experienced young people who might have had previous involvement with gangs, as part of housing applications. Young people can, with the support from their leaving care coach, highlight the areas where there might be a risk to them, with the relevant evidence and housing will take these matters into consideration when an offer of accommodation is made to them.

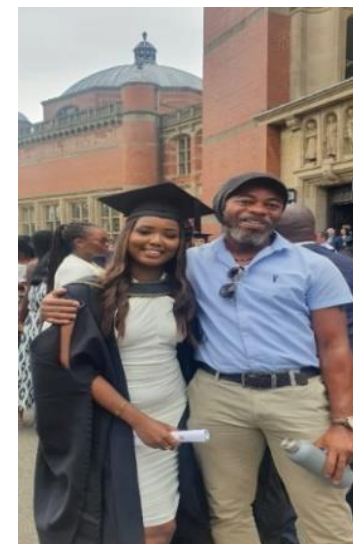
Our children have every opportunity to flourish and can reach their aspirations

Our raising aspirations work starts from year 9, when we offer visits to universities, and hold focus groups to discuss / review the support available to achieve aspirations.

We have close ties with individual universities and can broker support packages for individuals; for example, one young person has a scholarship to study medicine. Where young people experience challenges or setbacks, we keep working with them to create new, diverse opportunities and build steppingstones to help them achieve their aspirations. We ensure that support is tailored according to the young person's needs and where a young person does not want to go to university, we explore apprenticeships or volunteering opportunities with them.

A number of our young people are attending university studying a range of disciplines, including medicine, engineering, nursing and health and social care, psychology, music and art.

We have a dynamic Education, Employment and Training (EET) incentive scheme to match young people's motivations and aspirations. Joined up working with the Employment Opportunities Team ensures that care experienced young people have access to a varied pool of opportunities in the employment market, including volunteering. A driving licence incentive scheme is also on offer.



Linh's story

Linh was recently granted asylum in the UK. With a passion for catering, she is on a full-time hospitality course at college and dreams of one day managing a restaurant. After receiving asylum and completing her first year at college, she was offered a job over the summer holidays at a top restaurant in central London.



Check out Linh's catering skills! We are so proud of you Linh. Well done!

A great opportunity was created by Engie supply chain to assist our young people with developing their skills whilst also maintaining their own homes, with an offer of various workshops in tiling, painting, plumbing and electrics.

Additional opportunities are available through 'Bags of Taste', MY Bank Financial/Money Budgeting, CM2 Construction (training provider for construction skills certification scheme qualifications) and The Princes' Trust 16-30 education/training/employment support programme. Two young people have signed up to the LBWF HGV driving scheme and they are both making positive progress. There are seven other young people who are busy completing driving lessons to secure job opportunities within the transport industry.

Our young people have accessed a number of creative opportunities through Rich Mix, Maximus the Drive Forward Foundation. An ELO Project (arts and crafts) has helped support young people to develop their confidence and art skills.

Robust plans provide a smooth transition into adulthood and avoid a 'cliff edge' at 18 years of age.

We acknowledge the importance of making sure that there exists a collaborative multi-agency approach in supporting our care experienced young people in their journey through and out of care. Our transition panel is well established now and includes the DWP, housing, SEND, Virtual School and placements.

As part of our continued efforts to develop our care experience young people's life skills Preparation for Independence Workshops and Moving on workshop are offered to children and care experienced young people, focused on planning for their future. The workshops include: 'what it means to maintain a home'; 'what do I need to do to apply for my own accommodation'; 'what are benefits'; 'what are my benefit entitlements'; 'how do I access education, training and employment'; and 'what alternatives are available if I am not yet ready to access education, training or employment'. We realise that not all young people will be ready for education, employment, and training at the same time of their developmental stages and work jointly with virtual school colleagues to identify something suitable that meets the needs

A space of their own at the Leaving Care HUB

The leaving Care Hub has been redecorated following COVID-19. As part of this project young people formed a working group and using a virtual reality app (on a PC), redesigned the interior of the hub, for example choosing specific furniture, carpeting, colour schemes and bathroom fittings.



Our young people told us that they would benefit from having a space that they are able to make their own, so they can make friends and meet staff in an informal and engaging space, so this continues to enable them to meet with their leaving care coaches and any other professionals who provide support. A dedicated computer room provides a space for homework, developing CVs and searching for work. They also use this space as a 'chill space', where they can play computer games and cook meals together and there are facilities for them to do emergency laundry.

Support with the cost of living independently

We continue to support care experienced young people with the costs of independent living; for example, we reduce those young people who live within council tax liability to nil (all care experienced young people who are living in the Borough).

As a local authority we continue to pay young people's council tax if there is not a similar scheme in the area where they are living. 'My Guide' provides a framework for care-experienced young people to develop their independent life skills; young people work through each task with their carer and Leaving Care Coach as appropriate. Collaborative work between our DWP colleagues provides consultations for staff and young people on claims and entitlements while team managers monitor benefit claims.

Meaningful and lasting relationships

"He has a genuine nature when it comes to working with young people. He truly wants the best for me. Many times, I've called him just for a chat as life can be hard for any young person".

Relationships between care experienced young people and their leaving care coaches continue to improve and this is evident in the number of young people that we have been in touch with us which has improved from 87% in March 2021 to 91.6% in March 2022. Feedback in regard to care experienced young people's view of their relationship with their Leaving Care Coach:

- 94% of respondents report that they have a good or very good relationship with their LCC. This is a significant increase from the 68% reported in the previous year.
- Of the young people who reported their LCC had discussed their Pathway Plan with them, the majority (86%) reported this was within the last 6 months. This is an increase of 6% on the previous year.

Scores have also increased for the area's overall communication & effectiveness, at 92% and 88% respectively

Our children influence what we do

Collaborative working continues to exist between our Leaving Care Champion and the Leaving Care Service. The Leaving Care Champion plays an active role in promoting the rights and voice of care experienced young people. This role plays a vital role in ensuring feedback is provided to the service around issues that might exit. The 'Care Champions' group also play a part in the recruitment of Leaving Care Coaches and facilitates communication between care experienced young people and the leaving care teams. For example, the refurbishment of 'The Hub'. Our Voice and Influence service work with care experienced young people to develop staff scorecards. 75 young people responded to our most recent annual survey, which asked questions about how well young people feel they are supported by

their leaving care coach (LCC). Their responses are used in our annual staff appraisals.

- Young people told us that keeping in touch was a real strength of the service; 74% and 70% of young people said that that face-to-face and phone contact respectively was sufficient.
- Encouragingly, young people said that mostly, the key areas of support that young people wanted help with, were in alignment with the support they felt they actually received. Specifically, support with housing, benefits, finance/budgeting, and independence were all in alignment or exceeded the requested support.

“He’s been really understanding and proactive when it comes to my disability and, ensuring the support I receive is meeting my needs”

Our care experienced children’s rights are advocated and lobbied for at a national level

Our network connections enable us to be strong advocates for the rights of children leaving care, lobbying for policy changes and cooperating across borough boundaries to improve outcomes. We are an instrumental part of the London Local Authority Network for Children Leaving Care and have contributed to the development of the pan London Leaving Care Offer. We also form part of the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, which provides an opportunity to share good practice and expertise, with the aim of offering the best possible outcomes to all young people who are care experienced across London.

We have taken part in the Bedfordshire University research piece, Leaving Care, COVID-19 and Transitions from Care (CCTC) study to understand which models of practice best support young people to negotiate their transition from care to adulthood. You can read more about this via this link:

<https://www.beds.ac.uk/goldbergcentre/research/goldberg-current-research/cctc/>

Findings have been shared with the UK Research and Innovation’s Economic and Social Research Council, the Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, local authorities, and other key stakeholders. As result of our engagement with this research, we are part of the CCTC Networked Learning Community.

What have been some of the challenges for the Leaving Care Service?

The increasing numbers of children coming into care undoubtedly has an impact on the leaving care service, against a backdrop of ever decreasing resources which presents the challenge of high caseloads for workers.

Another challenge has been to make sure that the work to redevelop the Leaving Care Hub is sustainable and leads to an actual leisure / living space that enables our children / young people to continue maintain meaningful relationships with services they need /want and also with each other.

What's next for the Leaving Care Service in 2022-23?

- Focus on decreasing caseloads for Leaving Care Coaches
- Plans are underway to celebrate Leaving Care Week in 2022 with a series of fun activities, including a Masterchef style cooking session, bowling, 'How clean is your house' masterclass, CV Building / EET opportunities workshop, County Lines workshop, fitness session and go karting
- The Leaving Care Hub is going to be taken to the next level by co-creating with our young people an even more bespoke premises which could house test flats on site where young people will be able to practice their life skills development before transitioning into their own accommodation. Leaving Care HUB: To develop collaboratively with our young people and staff a bespoke place where young people can meet up and socialise but also take ownership as part of the design and development process.
- Tighten up our systems through redesigned pathway planning, incorporated into the reviewing process which also aligns with Preparing for Adulthood Outcomes.
- Review and further develop the Leaving Care Offer, in line with the pan London Leaving Care Offer.
- Explore and establish more cost saving opportunities for our young people such as free prescriptions and free travel
- Mental Health support: Develop 24 hours out of hours support line that care experience young people can access.

- Draw on the conclusions of the two research projects by Universities of York and Bath
- Explore mentoring scheme in collaboration with Family Action to increase mentorship capacity within the service.
- Build on the range of opportunities we have available for our young people through continued collaborative working partners to further improve our education, training, and employment offer to young people.



Virtual School

What difference has the work of Virtual School made to our children during 2021/22?

Children are architects of their education planning

We have designed and implemented our Curious PEP, a question-based Personal Education Plan format which stimulates discussion and places the child at the centre of the discussion. Children hold the people around them to account, and their views are central to their planning

We create spaces to come together

The 3.30 club is a space available after school every week at Leyton Orient football ground. There is an educational focus, with tutors to help with schoolwork as well as a focus on physical health with sporting activities taking place each week. Children make friends with each other and connect with adults in a safe space.

We hold extra-curricular arts-focused activities; most notably our Sacred Stories project, in which young people worked with an artist to produce wallpaper and cushions which were exhibited at the William Morris gallery and nominated for the national Surface Design Awards.

We hold the highest ambitions for our children

Most of our children achieve or surpass their predicted grades at Key Stages 2 and 4 assessments. We make sure that staff work across the normal transition points between Key Stages, meaning that children and young people experience continuity of Virtual School support with their education at a crucial time, particularly when they move schools or colleges.

Stability is prioritised in education and care planning

We make sure that children experience fewer school moves than home moves, working with partners in social care to ensure that a change of home does not mean a change of school. We recognise the difference that relationships make, and work with schools to resolve and repair situations which might otherwise result in a permanent exclusion.

We know our children's starting points

The duty for the Virtual School to support children with a Social Worker means that we hold better educational information for children who come into care after being known to social services. The Virtual School Insights team works in partnership with the children in care workers to ensure a smooth educational transition if they come into care. Families are better supported with their children's education when they are reunified.

What have been some of the challenges for Virtual School?

Too many children experience an exclusion from school

Post-Covid, schools have faced many challenges, and professional anxiety appears to be at a high level. For too many children in care, this has resulted in a 'zero tolerance' approach which has led to an exclusion. We continue to work with schools, particularly with headteachers to explore alternatives to exclusion which are more effective for our children.

Assessment of SEND Needs

The increase nationally in requests for statutory assessment & diagnoses (particularly Autism) has resulted in delays for our children in accessing assessments for SEND needs. We use Pupil Premium funding to commission Educational Psychology assessments where possible, and we have seen the cost and frequency of this increase during 2021/22.

There are too few specialist school places available nationally, and children in care with an EHC Plan do not receive priority for admission under the SEND Code of Practice. This means that some children with complex needs can face periods where they are out of school. We make sure that tuition is in place where this happens.

What's next for Virtual School in 2022-23?

Our upcoming priorities include:

- A consultation with young people about their agency within the PEP process
- Embed new initiatives such as the Curious PEP and 3.30 club
- Work with colleagues across the council to ensure that care-experienced young people are prioritised for Apprenticeships.
- Re-designing the Virtual School offer for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children
- Raising children's aspirations in partnership with universities, including Russell Group Universities.



Voice and Influence Service

What difference has the work of the Voice & Influence Service made to our children during 2021 / 22?

Getting involved is more accessible

In January 2022 we finally got back to regular face-to-face sessions with young people. This helped to increase their interaction with the Voice & Influence service and the groups continue to grow steadily. We have tried to offer a mixed media approach in order to engage those young people who live out of borough or in harder to reach areas and those who struggle to be around groups of people. To further support this we are also trialling 'meeting young people where they are' which so far has been received well. It is hoped that this will help to increase the amount of young people engaging with the service and with getting their voices heard.

Our children's voices are heard at all levels

The Children in Care Council has been working on updating the pledge in their last few meeting sessions. We are currently looking into whether the pledge document needs to be tailored to suit different age groups, for example:

Some of our young people suggested that 'helping you to become independent' can be understood in different ways depending on where you are on your journey. Independence could be getting your first door key or travelling to school by yourself or cooking meals or getting a job. This has led to an idea to have two versions of the pledge, one of which is aimed at those aged 16 years and over, that has specific points around independent living skills and readiness for leaving care.

This year we have made changes to the way that young people interact with the board. By empowering young people to present their own reports to the board, we ensure that they are learning new skills and creating meaningful conversations with members. Young people are better able to contextualise their reports and share personal experiences to back up their views.

What have been some of the challenges for the Voice and Influence Service?

Our challenge this year, apart from working in the limiting COVID landscape, was staffing levels. The team was down to one member for several months which meant that the service was running on essential functions only. The recovery from this and the changes that necessitated as a result of the pandemic have meant that we have had to be more creative and innovative in how we engage with young people.

What's next for the Voice & Influence Service in 2022-23?

Our focus for 2022/23, is service recovery with renewed efforts to grow our membership to the Children in Care Council. We also want to retrain our young people as 'In My Shoes' trainers and we will continue to work on the Children in Care Pledge to make it more relevant but also so that it becomes more of a working agreement document which falls in line with an idea from a young person about the Outstanding Outcomes for Children framework as a means of accountability. We will also find different ways to work so that we are able to hear from the widest range of young people possible.

Looking ahead to 2022 – 23

In addition to the focuses outlined in each of the service areas, there are a number of changes and challenges ahead that we are using as opportunities to reflect on and to seek ways to improve how we work:

Health

As outlined earlier in this report, improving health outcomes for our children remains a prime area of focus in order to improve statutory health assessments, which includes tackling the backlog and addressing the arising risks. This is being addressed through additional oversight and monitoring which is taking place via a joint Health and Social Care working group to specifically targets the timeliness and quality of the health assessments. As a result agency staff are now employed to specifically clear the backlog and the Children looked after health team have successfully recruited to the vacant post which will support with the diminished capacity.

Voice and influence

Our children and young people have played and active role in the Corporate Parenting Board for some years now. We are planning to review the chairing arrangements to provide opportunities for our young people to co-chair the meetings and we are exploring a young person's charter as part of this.

Rising cost of living

This will undoubtedly have an impact on our services and is likely to adversely affect those in the most need. It will also affect our carers and their ability to be able to offer the levels of care we need. Over the next few years covering costs will become even more challenging

however we will be innovative and creative in finding solutions to ensure that the best and most effective services possible for our children.

We will also be focusing our attention on the increasing number of under 12 year olds coming into residential care.

Sufficiency

We will be reviewing and refreshing our 3 year Sufficiency Strategy to ensure that we have enough of the right accommodation and services, in the right places, to effectively support our children and young people. One of the challenges is the increasing cost of specialist placements. Key to this will be our collaborative approaches with partners and housing providers to achieve a balance of the best quality homes with value for money.

Tackling discrimination and inequality

This will remain an underpinning feature of all the work we do, using our data to inform practice, tackle racial disparity and improve equity across all our services. For instance, in the work in education and mental wellbeing where we know that Black boys are more likely to be excluded and have difficulty accessing appropriate local services. As part of our recruitment, we'll focus on ensuring the demography of our carers is reflective of our children in care population.

Ofsted's framework for focused inspection looking at children leaving care

We will use the Ofsted inspection results of a neighbouring local authority's arrangements for care leavers to self-asses our own practice and find ways to improve how we support and empower our care experienced young people.

The Independent Review into Social Care

This review sets out the need for a radical whole system reset and recognises that it is loving relationships that hold the solutions for children and families overcoming adversity. The report highlights the rigid nature of children's social care which is often at odds with drawing on and supporting family and community. It calls for a system that provides intensive help to families in crisis, unlocks the potential of wider family networks to raise children, puts lifelong loving relationships at the heart of the care system and lays the foundations for a good life for those who have been in care. This has huge implications for our Corporate Parenting Services with recommendations that include

- replacing independent reviewing officers with advocates
- the creation of regional care cooperatives to commission foster care, residential children's homes, secure estate
- greater involvement and support of wider family – legal advice and financial support for kinship carers
- making care experience a protected characteristic
- requirements for registered social workers to spend 100 hours each year in direct practice

We want to unblock barriers to people taking on the role of special guardianship orders (SGOs) so we can increase their use where appropriate. We also to ensure that young people under them are not adversely disadvantaged. So, we are already looking at the financial support for special guardianship which is in line with the Car Review recommendations by considering:

- removal of the means testing assessment
- deduction of child tax credits and child benefit
- taking away the financial annual review

Additionally, we will be reviewing the payment of foster carers to ensure this is line with the national benchmark.

For children leaving care via special guardianship, we will be reviewing their post leaving care support offer to ensure those young people are not disadvantaged.

We will continue to use the findings and recommendations from the review to help inform the planning and development of our services and we await further direction from central government regarding the potential additional funding to deliver the proposals.

National review into children with disabilities and complex health needs placed in residential settings

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel is undertaking a national review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings and Directors of Children Services (DCS) are required to take action to carry out reviews into all children in their care who meet the criteria, liaising with other boroughs where children may be placed. Although we have no settings that meet these criteria in borough, we will also be looking through this lens at our in-house provision at Leyton Green Road. This is accommodation that provides residential and short breaks for our children with learning disabilities and our long stay, 3 bedded unit has been at full occupancy since March 2021. The findings from these reviews will be shared in our report next year.

Some final thoughts from our young people

On their workers:

“He has the ability to build a rapport with someone instantly. Bearing in mind, with young people this can sometimes be harder. I should add, he became my PA during lockdown so he wasn’t able to visit me but still did everything he could to make sure I had support”

“She has always tried to maintain a good relationship between the two of us and honestly, that makes me really happy because I do really like having her as my social worker.”

On their role at Corporate Parenting Board:

“I Get to meet like-minded young people who want to change the service for the better.”

“It gives me a good insight into how decisions are made.”

On their carers:

“I like living with my foster family. They look after me, make me feel special and like a member of the family. My foster carers help me understand my feelings. They make me laugh and help me see things aren’t as bad as I thought”

“They (foster carers) are a nice friendly family who make you feel comfortable as if it’s your own family. They take care of you as if you’re their own blood child”

