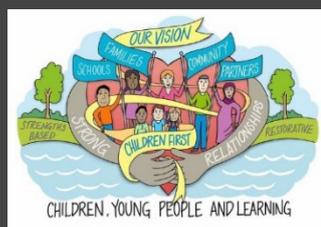




West Sussex Children, Young People & Learning Corporate Parenting Report for the Children we Care for & Care Leavers September 2023



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West Sussex Children, Young People & Learning Corporate Parenting Report for the Children we Care for & Care Leavers September 2023

Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the Corporate Parenting Annual Report, which details the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel and our services provided to our Children we Care for and our Care Leavers.

During the past year our Corporate Parenting Panel has continued to be mindful of the impact of Covid-19 pandemic in addition to the cost-of-living crisis, and the significance this has had on all local authority services and activities nationally. The role of 'Corporate Parent' is a collective responsibility of the council that we all have a duty to deliver. Many of our Children we Care for and Care Leavers have faced unique adversities and trauma that places them amongst the most vulnerable in our communities. We must continue to be bold, aspirant, and ambitious in our plans, ensuring we provide our children and young people with the nurture, love, care, stability, and support they need to help them achieve their ambitions.

Contributions from our children through the work of our Children in Care Council, Care Leavers Advisory board and Voice and Participation Service form an integral part of panel meetings and have significantly influenced West Sussex County Council's improvement journey. Our Children we Care for and Care Leavers voices keep us focussed on our children's real and lived experiences and influence the development of the council's services positively.

As corporate parents we all want the best for our children, we are proud of their achievements and remain focussed on providing them with the opportunities that will enable them to reach their potential and together we celebrate their successes. As a corporate parent I am proud of all our children and young people, and it has been one of my greatest privileges to have worked and to continue to work alongside them.

As a council it's so important that we take the necessary actions to be the best corporate parents we can and provide for our family in the most effective way possible. I am completely committed to doing everything I can to support our children and young people so that they can benefit from the many opportunities our council, communities and partners have to offer as we continue to build on the foundations formed across our improvement journey.

However, we cannot do this in isolation. We must all be united in this endeavour, from local business, District and Borough councils and statutory partners to our voluntary sector colleagues, and the families who can offer a foster home to our children who need one.

This annual report is a summary of the work presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel across 2022-2023, it is a celebration of the success and achievements of both our children and young people and staff. I would like to take this opportunity to thank panel members both past and present for their contributions to our continuing evolutionary journey.



Cllr Jacquie Russell
Co-Chairman of Corporate Parenting Panel and Cabinet Member for
Children and Young People, Learning and Skills, West Sussex County
Council

Directorate Summary

This report draws together the range of activities and impact of the Corporate Parenting Panel over the past year.

It has been an extraordinary period for all of us, particularly our children and young people. The challenges we have all faced during and following the pandemic and more recently due to the additional pressures of the cost-of-living crisis and national industrial action, have provided a sharpened focus for us as we have adapted to the impact of these and how we deliver services to the Children we Care for and our Care Leavers.

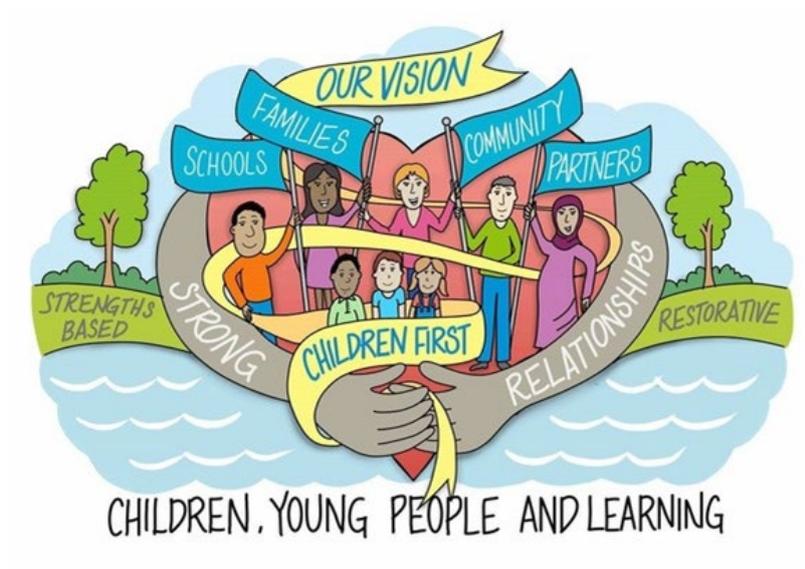
Since joining the council some 3 years ago, the centrality and importance of listening, hearing, and acting on the voices of our children and young people with board members has been one of the areas that has not only developed but is now embedding into all areas of work within our council.

Panel members have welcomed the opportunity to have both informal, formal, and themed discussions to support planned agendas as well as adhoc conversations as they occur in real time. We have ensured that local and national pressures have not prevented the improvement of services, and our leadership team remain committed to the promises and ambitions we have made to our Children we Care for and our Care Leavers.

Daniel Ruaux

Assistant Director, Children's Social Care Corporate Parenting & Commissioning
Children, Young People and Learning

Our Children First Vision & Principles



- To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of our children and young people.
- To encourage our children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings a to challenge each other if their voices are not activity listened to and acted on.
- To listen, hear and do something when our children and young people tell us things.
- To make sure our children and young people know how to access, and make the best use of, services provided by us as a local authority and partners.
- To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for our children and young people.
- For our children and young people to be safe, and have stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and to prepare our children and young people for adulthood and independent living.
- This will make sure that our children and young people are not placed at significant disadvantage when compared with the support any child or young person may receive from their family.



OUR ASPIRATION

FOR CHILDREN WE CARE FOR AND CARE LEAVERS LOOKED AFTER BY WEST SUSSEX

This work is a partnership commitment to support young people in care and care leavers.

It has been written by young people in care, care leavers, professionals who work with them and the West Sussex Corporate Parenting Panel.



INVOLVING YOU OUR ASPIRATION IS...

- to ask your views, listen and act on what you tell us;
- tell you what you need to know;
- to give you information you need at the right time, to help you make the right decisions;
- to be a good friend; and
- to support you to access facilities, organisations and opportunities.



HEALTH AND HAPPINESS OUR ASPIRATION IS...

- that you will have somewhere safe to live;
- to help you stay in touch with people who are important to you; and
- to support you to be happy and healthy.



SUPPORT AND ADVICE OUR ASPIRATION IS...

- to avoid unnecessary changes;
- to make sure you know who will support you and that important people keep in touch with each other to help you;
- to provide access to the relevant services and resources for you;
- You will have a social worker and have access to other professionals you might need; and
- to support you to the best of our abilities, even when times are tough.



EDUCATION, TRAINING AND WORK OUR ASPIRATION IS...

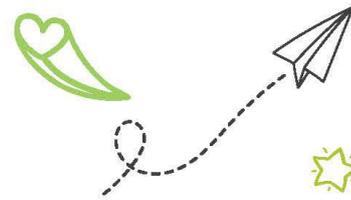
- we will help you develop skills for life and work ;
- to celebrate your successes with you;
- to champion your education; and
- to help you get the qualifications, interview skills, training and opportunities you want.

....



PREPARING YOU FOR LIFE OUR ASPIRATION IS...

- to put in place what you need when you leave care;
- to help you make a clear plan for your life ahead after care;
- to support you with your housing needs and preferences;
- to support you with your education and independence; and
- to support you in becoming a self-sufficient adult.



Corporate Parenting Roles and Functions

The Lead Member of Children's Services has a statutory role that was established in the Children Act 2004. The role has political responsibility for the leadership, strategy, and effectiveness of Children's Services, and is responsible for ensuring that the needs of all our children and young people and their families and carers, are addressed.

The Lead Member is not involved or responsible for operational management of Children's Services and Education, however, the role provides strategic leadership, support, and challenge to both the Director of Children's Services and their Senior Management Team, as appropriate. It is a requirement for the Lead Member to provide an annual update to other elected members on how we are meeting our Corporate Parenting responsibilities.

Corporate Parenting Panel

As of 2022 the council's Corporate Parenting Panel is chaired by not only our Lead Member for Children and Young People, but also by the chair of our Children in Care Council and chair of our Care Leavers Advisory Board. This refresh to the leadership and governance of the panel provides a 360-degree lens through co-production, ensuring robust assurance of the whole corporate parenting system, maintaining that children and young people in West Sussex receive outstanding corporate parenting; and that our Children we Care for and Care Leavers can achieve their potential.

Members of our Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Advisory Board sit on the panel as equal members and have a standing item on the agenda to report on their priorities, challenges, any activities, updates, or issues they would like to bring to the panel's attention. All reports submitted to the Corporate Parenting Panel have a children and young person first approach and methodology, which is considered by the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Advisory Board members prior to the panel meeting so that they can prepare questions and challenges in advance.

The voices, views, wishes and feelings of our Children we Care for and Care Leavers are central to the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel. Over the last 12 months a review of our Corporate Parenting Panel Terms of Reference has been undertaken to ensure it provides appropriate overview and scrutiny of the council's corporate parenting work and priorities.

The panel champions and monitors the corporate parenting strategy and helps to drive its implementation. The panel of children, cross-party members, officers, foster carers, adopters, and senior managers meets at least four times a year, receiving reports, including performance reports, undertaking strategic and thematic enquiry into specific elements of the strategy, and seeking ways of resolving barriers to its success. Collectively and individually, panel members engage regularly with children, young people, staff, and carers

to help to further develop their understanding of issues affecting our Children we Care for and Care Leavers.

Across the past 12 months the panel has met on 6 occasions considering reports on the following themes:

- Education progress and outcomes
- Children access and support to remain in educational employment and training (EET)
- Children Social care performance to improve care planning for our children
- Criminal Exploitation and Missing
- Care Leaver pathway planning and our local offer
- Progress and outcomes for Children we Care for and Children Seeking Asylum
- Permanency & Adoption
- Placement Sufficiency
- Primary and mental health need
- Physical Health and Wellbeing
- Placement Stability for Children we Care for
- Residential children homes development programme and quality assurance reporting
- Fostering service redesign and quality assurance reporting
- Conference and Reviewing Officer Overview

Corporate Parenting Panel Subgroups

Over the past 12 months, we have continued to strengthen our corporate parenting subgroups which sit below the main panel and are responsible for driving the corporate parenting strategy, the subgroups focus on:

- Health and wellbeing
- Children we Care for and Children Seeking Asylum
- Education
- Journey to Independence (Care Leavers)
- Children we Care for with Disabilities

Although only in their second year, the subgroups are developing and gaining momentum. The subgroups are co-chaired by our children and young people, as well as having a nominated special interest elected member and officers as part of the membership; thus, maintaining the 360-degree authenticity to co-production as modelled by the main panel. The subgroups have a key role in reporting on progress as well as identifying and addressing barriers to effective change, making recommendations on how issues can be resolved to improve the lived experiences of our Children we Care for and Care Leavers. There are a variety of tasks and finish groups that focus on the work identified within the strategy and their work reports into the respective subgroup.

An Induction to Corporate Parenting

We are keen to ensure that all elected members across the council exercise their responsibilities as corporate parents to our Children we Care for and our Care Leavers. A corporate parenting induction programme has been developed for all members which is mandatory being held twice yearly following an election. The training has supported our Elected Members in their respective roles on the panel, scrutiny committee and within the constituencies to keep the needs of Children we Care for and our Care Leavers as a priority to and to understand how to practically exercise their role as a corporate parent.

Position Statement for Corporate Parenting (July 2022 – Sept 2023)

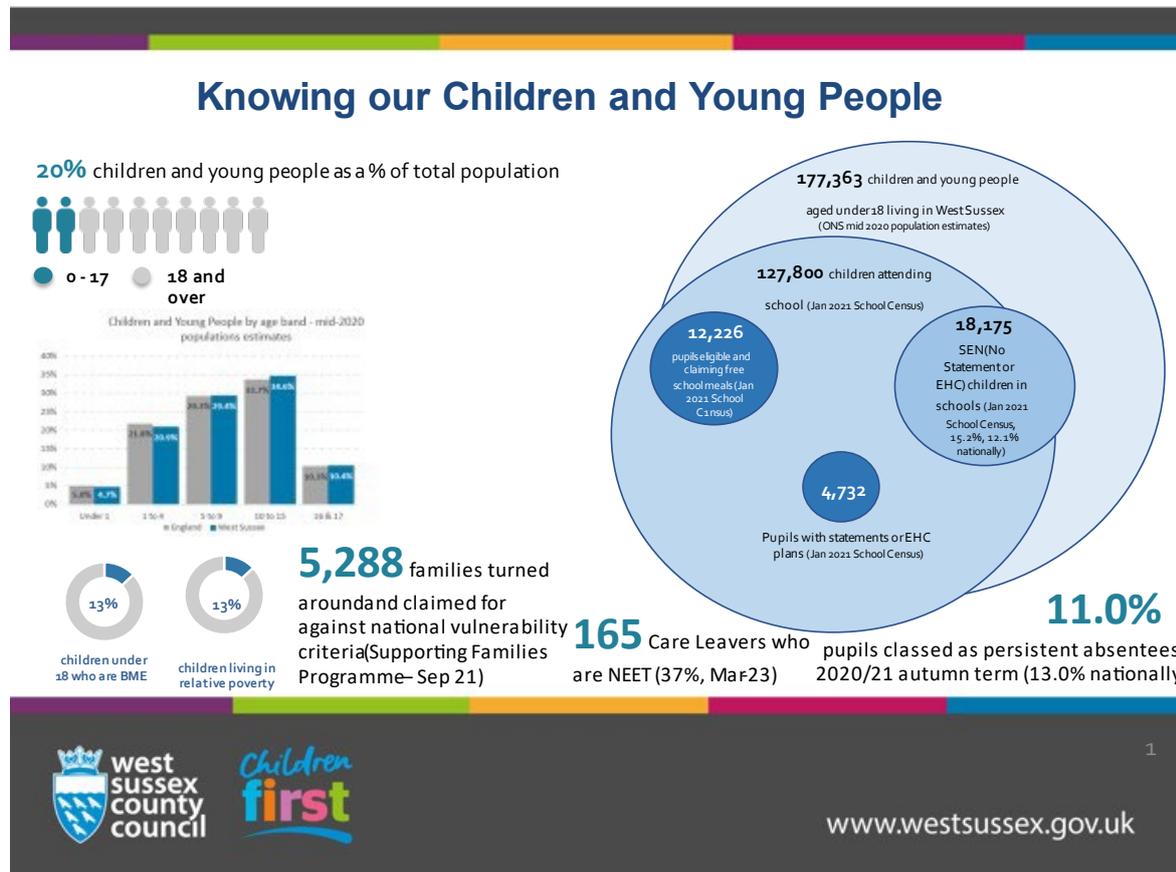
This position statement provides an update as of 31 August 2023, it summarises and evidences the impact and progress of our improvement activity over the past 12 months. The statement highlights practice, performance, and sustained improvements across all key performance indicators within the service:

- As published by Ofsted in May 2023 their judgment is that the **experience of our children in care** in West Sussex is **'GOOD'** the **first time** this judgment has been achieved by the council
- **Sustained improvement;** visiting, reviews, supervision, management oversight and case summaries
- **Sustained improvement;** Review Health assessments (RHA's) Dental Checks and Personal Education plans (PEPs)
- Quality assurance framework is **embedded; compliance and consistency** of audits is much **improved** and audit moderations **show improved practice for children**
- **Service focus is now on quality and sustainability;** sustaining and going beyond good
- **Significant improvement** with our participation with children and their families, Children in Care Council and Care Leaver Advisory Board
- Corporate Parenting Panel: **significant improvement, more inclusive and effective**, with scrutiny providing an increasingly effective mechanism for holding the service improvement programme constructively to account recognising that this is a long-term process
- **Consistent improvement: sustained focus** on improving permanence for children, numbers of children in permanent placements and increase and **significant improvement** in foster for adoption
- Permanence planning meetings held in last 12 months has **more than doubled**
- **Relentless focus on improving** placement sufficiency
- **A wide range of improvements** in the fostering service to improve choice and stability of fostering placements

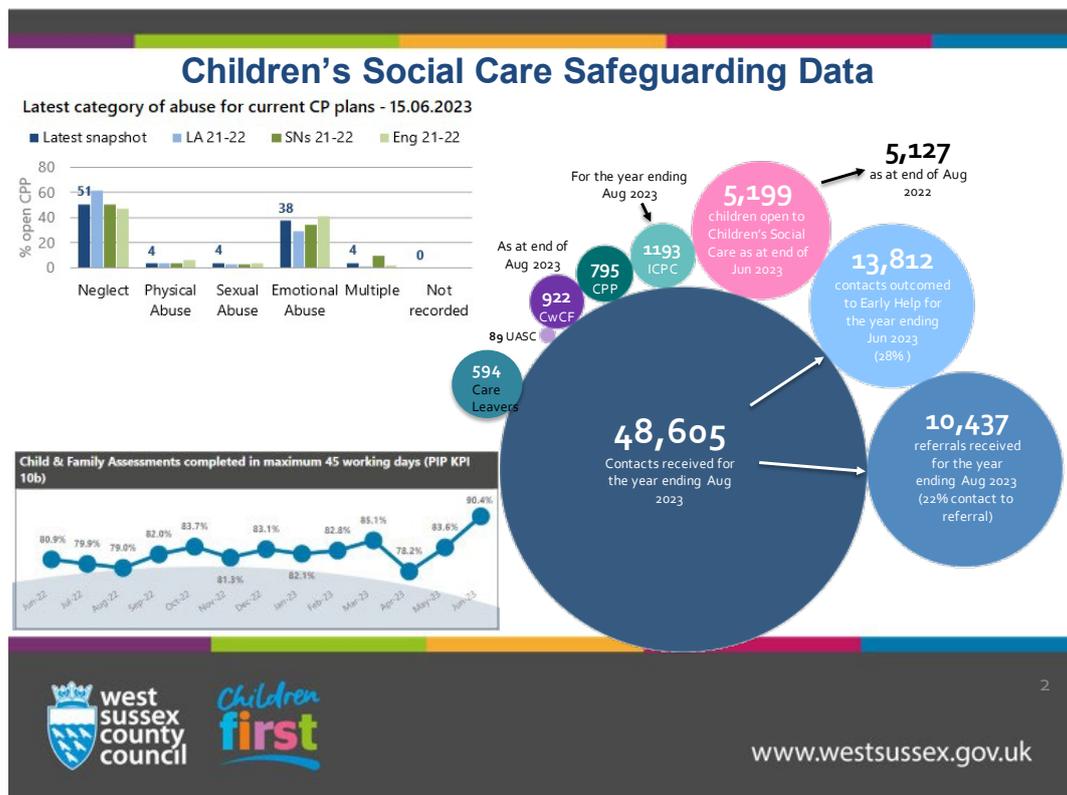
- **Significant investment** in our residential children’s homes so children can live nearer home; all of which are now either ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’
- Delivered **fully co-produced and facilitated** Care Leavers Advisory Board;
- Children co-chair of Corporate Parenting Panel
- **Co-produced Local Offer** and re-designed website supported by Care Leaders
- **Co-produced** Joint Housing Protocol, Return Home Interviews, revised Pathway Plan and Outcome STAR tool
- **Care leavers joining** our Mental Health and Housing Development Plan
- **Ringfenced apprenticeships** for care leavers in our voice and participation service
- Audit moderations show **improved practice** for children and are being completed in a timely way

Our monitoring and quality assurance activity evidence significant improvement across the service, and with compliance being sustained, focus is now on quality and sustainability. As anticipated, there is some variability in practice for our children who have recently become cared for due to the inevitable staff disruption caused by the launch of the Family Safeguarding Model in February 2022.

Background & Context



West Sussex County Council is currently caring for 922 children. We have seen an increase over the past 12 months in line with local and national modelling. We did see a sharper increase across the summer of 2023, and this is attributed to an increase in the number of children seeking asylum we are caring for. This is in line with both the local and national picture and following additional support the council provided for the National Transfer Scheme. For our wider children looked after population, we have seen our numbers remain stable in line with the continued focus on proportionate and consistent application of our safeguarding and entry to care thresholds.



Improvement activity & Service Development

In line with our Children, Young People and Learning Business Plan and Corporate Priorities, the service has a detailed service plan which outlines our key areas of improvement and our progression. We have worked comprehensively across all areas of our practice, in conjunction with relevant partners, to improve sustainable outcomes for Children We Care For as follows:

- Voice, Engagement & Participation
- Improving Care Planning
- Improving Health, Wellbeing & Partnership Working
- Management Oversight & Supervision
- Leadership and Governance

- Placement Sufficiency
- Quality Assurance & Audit
- Permanence Planning
- Transitions

Alongside this, we are undertaking work with Hertfordshire County Council to progress reunification work with children and their families using the Family Safeguarding Model and strengthening family approach. The delivery of our new practice model remains on track and is already embedding and evidencing the benefits to our families in practice.

Current Performance

The service has a range of key performance indicators which are closely monitored to ensure that children are having regular updated planning that reflects their needs and wishes and that they are seen regularly. Our current performance (as of August 2023) indicates that our Children We Care For are seen regularly (recording of statutory visits 92%) and recording of care plans are up to date (97%). For the very small number of children with out of time visits for any reason (all visits are completed), these are tracked at performance meetings held by Team and Service Managers and management oversight is recorded on our child's record. These improvements have been maintained and any decreases are minimal, evidencing sustained improvement as outlined in our most recent Ofsted ILACS inspection published in May 2023. The key performance indicators are monitored via regular performance meetings between the Heads of Service and operational teams. We also use our auditing process alongside management oversight on plans to monitor and oversee quality and effectiveness of planning. The evidence from our quality assurance audits is that plans are becoming more effective and improving in quality.

Voice, Engagement & Participation

In keeping with our Children First vision, our children co-chair our Corporate Parenting Panel; informing service planning, delivery, and scrutiny. This has been achieved by the development of our Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Care Leavers advisory board (CLAB), for which there are now appointed chairs, vice chairs and ambassadors.

The CiCC and CLAB have completed a review of our 'new into care pack' following feedback from our children and young people, meaning it is now very much written from a child's and young person's perspective to support children when they first enter care.

We have integrated the Chairs of the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Advisory Board into the chairing roles of the Corporate Parenting Panel, and young people from the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Advisory Board are assisting in the delivery of service reports, ensuring these are delivered in a 'Children First' way. This has been supported by more young people attending the Corporate Parenting Panel meetings. Young people being more active and present in the meetings has ensured that officers and

members are more aware of the language they use, and young people are able to challenge unknown initialisms and other technical terminology. The successful model of these meetings has resulted in the restructure of the Children First Board meeting, which now has a split form of business and workshop format.

Our Youth Charter now forms part of the induction process for Children's Social Care, it clearly outlines our children's and young people's expectations of us as their Corporate Parents and recently refreshed 'Our Aspirations' which can be found on page 5 of this report. This was launched in May 2023 following a review of the promises we make as Corporate Parents to our children and young people, and now forms part of our mandatory induction for all our staff and elected members. We are working closely with our Early Help colleagues to improve the training in voice they receive, both at induction and mandatory annual level.

The Corporate Parenting Panel holds officers and members to account on key issues. The areas of focus to date have been changes of social worker for Children We Care For, family time and addressing wider areas of service provision required for Children Seeking Asylum as this cohort of young people increases. Through these discussions specific challenges and reflection from our children and young people have influenced service delivery. This includes dentist provision; scrutinising the activity and impact of the chairman of the Council's Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee on the access of dentistry for Children we Care for and Care Leavers, Adoption practice (Adopt South East); with regards to letterbox, as well as the refresh of our Care Leavers Pathway Plan and Local Offer.

We have various mechanisms to ensure the voices of our children in care are heard and their concerns are addressed appropriately the main framework for this is our BrightSpots survey regarding children in our care evidenced:

- 96% always felt safe where they lived
- 97% of all our children liked their bedroom
- 95% of our 11–18-year-olds said they trusted their social worker
- 81% of all our children surveyed said life was getting better
- On average more of our 11–18-year-old reported that they liked school compared to other cared for children in other local authorities (93% vs National avg. 78%)
- 98% of our 8–18-year-old reported the adults they lived with showed an interest in their education all or most of the time (this is higher than the general population)
- 97% of our 8-11 and 92% of 11-18 spent time outdoors in the last week (this is higher than the general population)

This survey is undertaken every 24 months and the results of our latest survey will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel in the latter part of 2023 once completed. Our children (CiCC and CLAB) we will be working with CoramVoice to be part of the BrightSpots national survey to gauge subjective wellbeing of young people in care. We have previously participated in this and used the findings to inform service development so it will be helpful to participate again and compare from previous findings and further contribute to service development.

The Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Advisory Board have been working hard on their workplans for the year. We have done extensive work with supporting the voice of our unaccompanied children seeking asylum with action days, especially for those children arriving from Sudan. Young people continue to co-chair our Corporate Parenting Panel subgroups and particular successes from these have seen the development of a joint housing protocol and better planning for independence as part of the Journey to Independence sub-group.

At the beginning of 2023 we recruited to two Apprenticeship roles within the Voice and Participation Service (ring-fenced to our Care Leavers). We are now working with our colleagues in HR to create a package of support that can be offered to care leavers and delivered across the organisation to meet our Corporate Parenting promise, both in relation to apprenticeships and a wider offer for those who may find the academic demands of an apprenticeship difficult. Taking good practice from other local authorities, we are looking at how we can also utilise reasonable adjustments to give care leavers the support they need.

Our most successful Exceptional Young People In Care awards took place in July 2023 and saw over 500 people attend to celebrate the achievements and talents of young people in care, care leavers, and the adults who support them.

Improving Care Planning

At the end of August 2023 98% of children had an up-to-date Care Plan in place, 100% within the Children we Care for Service. The impact of care and permanence planning is also manifested in the statistics around permanence referred to above.

The percentage of children participating in their reviews has increased to 97%. The child's voice remains a key part of the current improvement agenda for our Service. The expectation is that every child must have the right support and preparation in place to attend and participate meaningfully in their review meeting and that children (age appropriate), are supported and encouraged to chair their own reviews. It is also a clear expectation that a child's views will be represented in their review and that it will be child focused. Review reports are written as a letter to the child and work is planned to review and update the routes by which we can capture feedback from our children and families.

The timeliness of statutory reviews has also improved further over this year to 97%. Priority work is continuing to mitigate and resolve identified errors in the completion of performance data, or late notifications to the service, to ensure our service performance on children's reviews being held within timeframes is accurately reflected. The child's next review date is set at their previous review meeting and our Conference and Reviewing Officers are directed to undertake early preparation ahead of a child's subsequent review to ensure that all the right arrangements are in place. This also allows time to change a review within timeframe, for example if a key person in a child's network or the child or a family member cannot attend, and a change of date would benefit the child.

We have now established 2 subgroups of the Corporate Parenting Panel relating to Children we Care for - the Health and Wellbeing and Asylum-Seeking Children subgroups. The Health and Wellbeing subgroup which is chaired by a young person has led to initiatives around language, visiting templates and the ways in which health assessments are convened; the Asylum-Seeking Children subgroup has set in motion work around independence preparation and the creation of a discrete Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children voice and participation group.

In terms of quality of planning, audit has evidenced that this is an area of improvement where they are now more consistently child focused and up to date, though we still need to drive through the consistency of SMART planning. To this end, we have undertaken a review of documentation to facilitate this within our processes, but importantly including a focus on plans being 'outcome-focused' to ensure congruence across the system.

Our Children's Asylum team provides specialist support to promote the welfare of and safeguard Asylum-Seeking Children who need care and support, as well as working with other unaccompanied minors. The Social Work team is skilled at working with and meeting the needs of a complex cohort of children with varying legal rights to receive support, who have significantly suffered in their recent years, and due to their lived experiences, are highly vulnerable. The complexity of their needs is exacerbated by cultural and language differences. Fortunately, we have a very stable team of permanent workers, who are passionate about their children and young people and aspirational in their vision of what they wish to achieve with them. A long-tenured team manager has developed strong links with neighbouring local authorities, the Home Office, Border Force and community resources and the service has continued to fully support the National Transfer Scheme.

As part of the improvement work post-Ofsted, the service is working on the recommendation to clarify and make more accessible the language, guidance and information in respect of triple planning for asylum-seeking young people approaching independence. This is to help ensure their transitions following receiving an asylum decision are well planned and positive, and a discrete action plan is in place to this effect which will be reviewed via the Improvement Board.

An Entry to Care Panel was initiated in 2022. This Panel ensures there is Assistant Director oversight of the children who enter care as well as requests and reviews of placement changes, to ensure we are seeking and providing the right placements for our children to meet their needs from the earliest point. We have also reviewed our placement planning processes in response to audit and have now made it mandatory that children's placement plans are reviewed and updated for every review so that changing needs are responded to.

Improving Health, Wellbeing & Partnership Working (internal & external)

This is an area that was highlighted in our Ofsted ILACS inspection published in May 2023 as requiring further improvement and we have targeted activity to achieve this. Performance in respect of Initial Health Assessment (IHA) is now an area of improvement. This has resulted in specific, measurable, realistic, and timely actions for both health and children's social care to progress improvements at pace. This is included as part of our service plan and will continue to be monitored to track progress.

We have continued to offer a substance misuse intervention to children identified as requiring one at an increased rate in comparison to our statistical neighbours and nationally. Currently our conversion rate to engage our children is above the regional and national % figures. As reported last year this continues to indicate that either there is more effective identification, treatment and disruption of substance abuse networks, or better educational work with our children and young people.

A bi-monthly operation meeting is held between children's social care and health partners in respect of the health of our Children We Care For and Care Leavers; this has led to improvement in terms of creating new processes for the referral of Initial Health Assessments and Review Health assessments and supported access for a number of children to dentistry services.

Extra business support resource has been provided to the permanence team since February 2022. This support is primarily focused on ensuring we make improvements in the timely completion of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ), which has moved from an area of challenge to one of improvement but remains an area of focus for us.

We have been persistent in our efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of the ongoing partnership with the NHS. Although the initial s75 agreement has expired, an extension has been mutually agreed upon until March 2024. In the realm of governance, the Joint Commissioning Strategy Group, comprising representatives from West Sussex County Council and the Integrated Care Board (ICB), collaboratively shoulders the responsibility of making decisions to ensure that the system of inter-agency cooperation functions effectively. Their shared ownership ensures that decisions are reached with a collective focus on supporting and enhancing the lives of children and young people. The overarching

goal is to achieve common outcomes that positively impact the well-being of the younger population.

In addition to our (WSCC and ICB) Emotional Health and Wellbeing Service and Blended Counselling, uniquely in West Sussex, eight voluntary sector providers are commissioned for Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing (MHEWB) work with 18-25s, LGBTQ+, bereavement, children who have experienced an unwanted sexual contact, and children whose parents have drug or alcohol addictions. These service provided key 'early intervention' to support our families in their community.

We work closely with our colleagues within our assessment and family safeguarding teams to support the timely transition of children to ensure they are in the right part of the service to avoid unnecessary changes of social worker. We continue track the data for changes of social worker for Children we Care For so we can mitigate against changes if possible.

Our Principle Social Worker is leading work to identify children who would benefit from an earlier move to the Children We Care For teams in line with their care planning. Further resources options will be explored for our Children we Care for teams to progress this once completed.

Education

In working together with education, monthly meetings are held between the Virtual School and Children's social care, with the Virtual School providing quality assurance of every Personal Education Plan (PEP). PEP compliance has now been over 95% for the past 3 years year and over 98% for the last year. There is also increased prioritisation of the education of children in care through the inclusion of the Virtual School at the Entry to Care panel held weekly.

Management Oversight & Supervision

This has been an area of significant improvement which is reflected within our data showing 93% of Children We Care For having had supervision recorded within the past 8 weeks and 98% of Children We Care For having had management oversight in the past 8 weeks. This is evidencing that almost all our children's case files have regular management oversight and that the rationale for decisions is clearer. Supervision is taking place to support care planning, and feedback from audits is that the quality is also improving. A focus on more outcome-based planning will continue moving forward across 2023/24.

Leadership & Governance

All members and officers of the County Council hold a shared responsibility as corporate parents, and all our members now receive training for this role as a compulsory part of their induction or continued training.

There is a permanent, stable leadership team in place committed to driving the service forward and motivating the workforce to make this journey with the required communication and support mechanisms in place.

The service joined together as one and is delivered as a Children we Care for and Care Leavers Service; with our updated service name informed and designed by our children and young people via our Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Advisory Board. This has supported our improvement work in transitions and service development.

Placement Sufficiency

The service published a Sufficiency Strategy and market position statement in March 2023, which will be further refined by the end of 2023/24 with a relaunch and publication planned for January 2024, which will incorporate significant investment and development in our fostering, residential, and supported housing pathway. The fostering and residential placements market remains challenging, particularly for our children and young people with complex contextual safeguarding concerns. Immediate actions are underway to address pressing issues like short-term crisis placements. The revised strategy and position statement will tackle current provision shortfalls and aim to establish strong partnerships with existing providers while actively supporting potential new providers to increase capacity in West Sussex.

Consistently, children in our care express a strong preference for staying close to their homes. Our primary goal is to accommodate all children and young people in or near to West Sussex considering specific needs of each child. We strive to ensure that they have access to high quality education, care and support, with the aim of facilitating safe and timely return to their homes or extended family placements. To achieve this, our commissioning team is actively collaborating with selected providers and the voluntary sector to explore block contract arrangements and exclusivity contract arrangements, thereby securing more placements in West Sussex and enabling us to keep our children in close proximity to their homes.

Our ongoing efforts are focused on increasing the number of children placed in family-based care, ensuring it aligns with their needs and best interests in addition to supporting the value base of our family safeguarding model. To achieve this, we aim to enhance the support available to families by offering structured wrap-around services in collaboration with Health and Education colleagues. To advance this mission we are establishing a working group dedicated to driving the initiative forward.

The commissioning team remain committed to placing children in residential care facilities that have received good or outstanding ratings from Ofsted. Moreover, to ensure direct oversight of residential provision, we are currently developing a new rag-rated approach for monitoring and quality assurance of homes. This scheme is scheduled for implementation by January 2024.

Our use of parent and child foster placements has strengthened and remained consistent throughout this year. These placements continue to be predominantly in-house placements, with several carers transferring to West Sussex from other Local Authorities or Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs).

The trend of increased use of external residential care continues, and as a local authority our percentage use per capita is about 4% greater than comparable regional neighbours. Our ability to secure sufficiency of foster placements is driving this, with children unable to be fostered being placed in residential homes. This remains an area of focus with other critical key performance indicators for the commissioning service. Given this, a specific placement and commissioning recovery plan has been implemented in partnership with all areas of management across the Directorate; this is reported into and monitored monthly by the service's leadership team.

To attract and retain further foster carers, the Fostering Allowance scheme has been comprehensively reviewed and the changes implemented. The Fostering team has further development plans aimed at improving recruitment and retention. This has already produced significant interest in carers wishing to transfer from independent agencies. Supported Lodgings was out of scope for the development of fostering, but this area will also now be subject to review with the aim of growing this provision in-house.

Our new 16+ years Framework is now fully implemented, and is:

- Helping to stabilise and increase market capacity to provide more choice for young people.
- Broadening the scope of the Council's offer to meet future demand and changing needs.
- Increasing the efficiency of arrangements by using the Framework to call off new block contracts that will reduce reliance on spot-purchasing and expensive out-of-county placements.
- Ensuring the Council is compliant with all aspects of statutory legislation and strategically aligned to its local partners.

All 16+ years supported accommodation providers are required to register with Ofsted by October 2023. This includes our in-house Supported Lodgings service and our local House Project. A project team has been formed to support providers to apply for registration and this will build on our already strong position in this sector. Indeed, WSCC has been identified as a beacon county by Ofsted to support the national and regional roll-out of the new requirements.

We continue our dedicated efforts to establish a robust Housing pathway in collaboration with our seven district and borough councils. This pathway aims to facilitate timely and sustainable exit planning from care for young people while proactively preventing future homelessness. A crucial part of this initiative is both developing and implementing The

House Project in West Sussex (a DfE Innovation Programme project), which empowers our care leavers to prepare for independence, take responsibility for their accommodation, and improve their overall outcomes. Launched in January 2023, the first cohort is now concluding, and we are currently accepting referrals for the second cohort. Additionally, we are exploring the possibility of launching a second House Project on the south coast around mid-2024. The lead of the National House Project recently described our House Project as whilst in its fledging days, one of the embedded examples they have seen nationally.

A stand-alone website for [Fostering West Sussex](#) went live in April 2023 and is proving very effective. The website views to date have seen a 72% increase compared with last year, which has resulted in record number of enquires and conversation to assessment, all being equal these will progress to panel for consideration and approval.

Our redefined Fostering Charter has been launched and we are now embedding this charter into key milestones within a carer's journey with a child to ensure they feel respected and heard in the professional group.

We have stabilised our Foster Panel and have embedded our new Foster Panel Chair and we continue to increase Panel diversity. Panel members have attended training on Kinship/Connected Persons Care from Coram BAAF which has helped them to understand the experience of these carers and allowed them to feel more confident in making positive recommendations at Panel.

Our first Mockingbird constellation which launched in October 2022 continues to be strong and effective. Seven families are part of the constellation, including three kinship families. A total of ten children and young people between age 4 and 15 years are supported by the constellation. The hub carers and liaison worker act together to ensure smooth running of the constellation, with regular social events, training and adult time to come together and support each other. We are now searching for our next hub carers and the fostering teams are invested in promoting Mockingbird to support the setup of the next constellation in the South of the county.

We are furthering the development of our Therapeutic Fostering Service, 'Reach' which will work intensively with a small group of children who step down from Residential. The carers will benefit from an enhanced rate of payment and intensive support from a team of support staff and a psychologist. The programme will also provide wrap-around support to other foster families who are struggling. Potential carers to take part in the programme are currently being explored to enable the first step down.

Quality Assurance & Audit

Through increased oversight as evidenced in our data for management oversight and supervision at all management levels, our quality assurance has improved and our work moving forward is to increase the consistency across the service. To support this, we have

been reviewing and updating our practice guidance for Children we Care For and this will continue across 2023/24. Alongside this, quarterly service days and regular group supervision within teams and service areas sharing good practice examples to both celebrate and share the learning.

Audits continue to support our practice in identifying themes and areas for development. This has been key around our transitions work and resulting work included within our service plan. Moving forward, we will be including the voice of the child within audits. This being explored by the Principle Social Worker now that our Review Officers and managers are becoming part of the auditing work, which is assisting the process and service improvements by having first line managers directly involved in the auditing process.

Permanency Planning

This has remained a focus for the service with a monthly Permanence Oversight Board with full cross service representation, including legal contributing to joint permanence plans and improving the pace and consistency of permanence outcomes. A dedicated permanence team is established which is promoting and monitoring all aspects of permanence service wide, including updating procedures and practice guidance which also includes life story work. A focus on an increase in the pace of adoption, including early permanence with foster for adopt placements, has led to an increase in the use of this option for early permanence.

Our permanence practice in respect of adoption is stronger and more consistent as a result of significant change to our process, which is now well embedded as reflected in our recent inspection. Child Permanence Reports are now being completed by the social workers who have enduring relationships with the children and guidance and quality assurance is provided by an experienced Local Authority Agency Advisor. The quality of the Child Permanence Report (CPR) itself has significantly improved, as validated by Adoption South East (ASE) and adoption panel colleagues, with our review officers now engaged with the support offered which is consistently producing comprehensive and analytical views in respect of adoption care planning. Whilst we have faced challenges in respect of timeliness against the adoption scorecard measures, this has primarily been in relation to delays in the court process (a local and national issue) and positively we have seen our numbers continue to improve.

We continue to monitor any children who are residing in unregulated arrangements, understanding the rationale for this position, and acting as needed to rectify this position.

For the small group of children under 12yrs residing in residential placements, there are regular reviews, with Head of Service oversight to ensure planning is robust and exit planning is kept under review to ensure it is in the child's best interest. Further work continues to determine and deliver timely exit planning and permanence for this group of children.

Specialist training for staff at all levels on achieving permanence is supported through Adoption South East and all agency decision makers and panel advisors have completed specialist training through CoramBAAF.

The above work and focus on permanence have been significantly scaffolded by the introduction of the Permanence Service as part of our improvement activity.

Transitions

Transitions for our children as they get older and move into adulthood is key. The move to make Children We Care For and Care Leavers one service has supported improvements in our work on transitions, as set out within our service plan. We have increased resources for our care leavers service to ensure going forward Personal Advisors come on board at 17yrs, and caseloads for personal advisors are reduced to support this area of work. We have embedded a process of joint supervision as children approach their 18th birthday.

Where we have identified an ongoing need for our young people, as they move into adulthood, we have a multi-agency transitions panel to consider this, and progress Care Act assessments as required.

In response to feedback from the Care Leavers Advisory Board we have a number of current initiatives in place. We are currently working with young people and a professional group to devise an independence preparation programme, with the idea that this is then consistently used across supported accommodation providers, residential homes and foster carers. This would mean a consistent approach to the issue for young people and ensure they do not have to 'start again' if they move to a new home.

Work has continued in refining and improving our Local Offer for Care Leavers, and we have added aspects such as a '5 for 5' offer in respect of driving lessons and along with the nationally expected £1,000 uplift to the Setting Up Home Allowance, we have also increased our university bursary offer to £3,000.

The feedback from Ofsted published in May 2023 was generally positive in respect of our work with Care Leavers, with achievable improvements required to get to 'Good' (although we aspire to 'Outstanding'). In terms of specific Ofsted feedback, we have devised a Practice Action Plan around two specific areas, the accessibility and clarity of our work in Triple Planning and transition for asylum-seeking young people; and ensuring consistency, clarity, and universality of our offer to Care Leavers up to 25, with a focus in ensuring young people who are appropriately closed are aware of their entitlements to further service in the future. In respect of the first issue, we are initiating work to start a Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People Voice and Participation group to co-design the language and support around Triple Planning; and for the latter are adding clarity to pathway planning and closure records to ensure all young people closed to the service are aware of their right to future support.

Care Leavers in Employment or Training

The number of our care leavers in employment or training is improving. The care leavers service is recruiting more personal advisors who will soon be able to support Children We Care For at an earlier age and increase our support alongside social workers and the virtual school. The care leavers service is striving hard to build relationships with providers, Department for Work and Pensions, in-house services, and educational establishments to provide greater levels of support for our care leavers, with the aim of creating and promoting a greater level of opportunities.

Nine of our young people received funding this year to attend the Bridging the Gap Course with Chichester University. Two of these young people have successfully secured places on our 2023 Social Work apprenticeship programme and the University is keen to continue this work with our service and provide similar opportunities. We now have a guaranteed interview scheme for care leavers and a working group to increase wrap around support and opportunities for apprenticeships with us.

We are continuing explore how we can use media platforms to notify our care leavers of opportunities that become available, including courses, apprenticeships, internships, and job fairs.

Care Leavers in Higher Education

There continues to be an increase in the number of our care leavers attending university and higher education. We have a rising number over the age 18-25 years being supported at university (31 young people currently in 2023 compared with 25 in 2022). Some of our older care leavers are doing their master's degree and returning for extended duties to support them with their education. Our Local Offer is providing additional financial support, if needed, for those completing their master's degree as well as those undertaking graduate courses. We have also ensured all of our eligible care leavers benefitted from the Department for Education and XMA project funded laptops and iPads via our virtual school.

Local Offer for our Care Leavers

Our care leavers service has been instrumental and supportive in developing the refreshed Care Leavers Local Offer, since we recognised that our previous Offer contained gaps and was not communicated in a way that was easily understandable or accessible. Our young people, particularly via the Care Leavers Advisory Board and Care Leavers Executive Group, have set out priorities for the service and the Offer, and have been instrumental in its completion. This is alongside the development of some significant partnerships with varied agencies including Housing, Health, the Department for Work and Pensions, local Universities, and others.

The Offer is reviewed and added to via the Journey to Independence subgroup, with recent additions including a 'Five by Five' offer in respect of driving lessons, uplifting the University Bursary, and a yearly clothing allowance. Alongside the planned action plan in relation to Ofsted Feedback, we are also going to provide more clarity in respect of our Offer to young parents and young people in custody.

We now have strategic oversight and planning in place to fully understand the whole +16 years pathway across Children's, Adult and Housing services, to ensure all housing issues are identified, and the financial and commissioning implications are known for the next two-to-five years. The aim is to clearly define how we work in partnership: by working together, Children's Services and Housing partners will ensure that as corporate parents, appropriate accommodation, and support are available to our care experienced children and young people. We have revised the revised Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers to present to the Districts and Boroughs; this draft has been co-produced by officers of the local authority and care leavers.

Our performance data shows that we see our young people within timescales, and they have timely pathway plans. Whilst notably not all local authorities keep data in respect of their timeliness of visits to care leavers, we know that we outperform our local and statistical neighbours whom we have been able to ask, and this has been in the context of high caseloads. We have good systems to support managers and staff to ensure the oversight of visits and the timeliness and impact of the plans. There has been a significant and sustained improvement since mid-2022 in respect of performance in the areas of case summaries, chronologies, management oversight and supervision, which have moved from 50-60% to 80-90% consistently, with all four of those indicators being over 90% in June 2023. The service operates a monthly high-risk referral meeting where young people of concern over 18 years are reviewed, risks understood, and safety plans put in place. We also have a transitional safeguarding protocol to escalate concerns and attend the local Multi-Agency Child Exploitation meeting to ensure that where appropriate care leavers are considered. We have also reached an agreement to be able to refer to the Child Exploitation Team for advice and guidance in respect of our young people.

The care leavers service is now an integral part of the Children's Services quality assurance system. The service has its own monthly improvement and performance meeting which looks at impact and aligns with the Children's Services Performance Board. The new learning audit model 'closes the loop' on the audit, making a real difference through influencing practice learning and the quality of services provided to our young people. Feedback from recent audit activity and from the last Ofsted inspection has identified that our work is improving, with some good examples of practice. We know we have work to do in respect of the use of aspirational language, clarity of the Triple Planning arrangements for care leavers, and robustness of the clarity of the post-21 offer; however, we are also aware that Ofsted also considered the service to be on the right track in terms of 'getting to good'.

Joint supervision between the service and Children We Care For social workers is now routinely happening and improving the quality of transition at 18 years. We have recently set up a tracking process for some cohorts of young people (initially those 16 ½yrs + residing in children's homes) to ensure early consideration is being given to post 18 yrs planning, since young people have clearly told us they want the 'reality' of independence to be given to them and to be prepared in advance, and they need plans which reflect this. We are also working on a new independence preparation pack which we would want to see used by foster carers, children's homes and supported accommodation providers which would be 'portable' from one setting to the next and ensure clarity on the independence skills learned and required.

Conclusion

We have worked hard to improve the **consistency** and **quality** of our practice for our children, demonstrated by:

- Improved participation and engagement, including feedback and influence in practice from our children and young people
- Stronger and more effective Corporate Parenting Panel, with subgroups in place, responding to 'challenges' set by children
- Feedback from Ofsted that rated the experience of children in care in West Sussex as 'good'
- Sustained performance in visiting, reviews, supervision, management oversight
- Further improvement in permanence arrangements
- Health Assessment performance and Dentistry continue to outperform statistical neighbours and national comparators in respect of health surveillance checks and immunisations
- Improving and strengthening performance in completing Initial Health Assessments and Strength and Difficulties Questionnaires
- Improved performance in Personal Education Plans around quality, and sustained performance in respect of timeliness, at over 95% for 3 years
- The Quality Assurance Framework has become embedded, with Service Managers undertaking audits, with no inadequate audits in Q1 2023
- Compliance and consistency of audits is significantly improved, as is the timely completion of audit actions

- Audit moderations show improved practice for children and are being completed in a timely way.

Our Priorities

Following the positive Ofsted inspection outcome, the service has developed a new Service Plan, based upon the Ofsted ILASC recommendations and the overarching Continuous Practice Improvement Plan, this service plan then informs individual team plans. The aim of the plan includes:

- Voice, Engagement & Participation
- Ensuring high levels of fundamental performance
- Improving the SMART-ness of care and pathway planning
- Improving Health, Wellbeing & Partnership Working
- Management Oversight & Supervision
- Leadership and Governance
- Placement Sufficiency
- Quality Assurance & Audit
- Permanence Planning
- Transitions
- Enhancing our Care Leavers Local Offer
- Embedding consistent high quality life story work

Our Service Plan will continue to be underpinned by the guiding principles we developed in response to our children's views and needs:

- You will know why you are in our care and what people are doing to help you.
- We will support you to be safe, settled, and happy.
- We will continue to support you as you move into adulthood. We will give you the tools to help you thrive and achieve your goals.
- We will listen to the things you are happy with so we can do more. We will take action when things are not going well.

Closing Reflections

As set out within this position statement, there are many areas where we have seen significant improvements for Children We Care For and Care Leavers as a service we are proud of improving the outcomes for our children and retaining a stable workforce. This progress has been evidenced despite the residual impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and more recent cost of living crisis, which demonstrates the level of commitment and tenacity that the service must achieve and deliver higher aspirations for our children and young people.

Our Continuous Improvement activity and Service Plan clearly sets out the areas which require improvement and the actions to deliver these at pace to ensure continuity and consistency for all our children which we care for irrelevant of where they sit in the service. The ownership and aspiration of our leaders, managers and staff will ensure we continue to drive forward the necessary actions and activity to further improve outcomes for the children we care for and care leavers.

Appendix 1 – Membership of Corporate Parenting Panel

The core membership of the Panel is set out below. The Panel can decide to invite representatives from across the Council and partner agencies as required, depending on the agenda items.

Current Core Membership:

Name	Role
Cllr Jacquie Russell	Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Learning and Skills (Co-Chair of CPP)
Cllr Chris Oxlade	Vice Chairman of CPP
A	Chairman of Children in Care Council (Co-Chair of CPP)
J	Chairman of Care Leavers Advisory Board (Co-Chair of CPP)
Cllr Brenda Burgess	County Councillor
Cllr Alison Cooper	County Councillor
Cllr Nigel Jupp	County Councillor
Cllr Paul Linehan	County Councillor
Cllr Kirsty Lord	County Councillor
K	Children in Care Council Ambassador
L	Children in Care Council Ambassador
C	Care Leavers Advisory Board Ambassador
Lucy Butler	Director of Children, Young People and Learning, WSCC
Dan Ruaux	Assistant Director (Corporate Parenting and Commissioning), WSCC
Janine Peach	Designated Nurse – Children and Young People in Care, NHS Sussex
Sarah Roper-Brooks	Designated Nurse and Assistant Heald for Children in Care, NHS Sussex
Angela Putland	Named Nurse for Children and Young People in Care in West Sussex, Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust

Name	Role
Vacancy	District and Borough Officer representative
Sue Hollowell	Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children Foster Carer
Chris Day	Adopter
Melanie Spencer	Service Lead – Voice and Participation, WSCC
Toby Wilson	Team Manager- Voice and Participation Team, WSCC
Claire Tooke	Voice and Participation Team, WSCC
Adrian Dyka	Head of Service – Children We Care for and Care Leavers, WSCC
Sarah Clark	Head of Virtual School, WSCC
Laura Mallinson	Head of Service – Reviewing and Conferencing, WSCC
Kelly Wilkes	Head of Service – Fostering and Kinship, WSCC
Stephen Humphries	Head of Commissioning- Children, Young People and Learning, WSCC
Katherine De La Mora	Senior Advisor - Democratic Services
Ann Little	Assistant Democratic Services Officer (note taker)

Appendix 2: Ofsted Monitoring Visit Report March 2023 (Published May 2023)

(see next page)

Inspection of West Sussex local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 13 to 24 March 2023

Lead inspector: Maire Atherton, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Services for children and families in West Sussex County Council have substantially improved since the inspection in 2019, when they were judged to be inadequate across all areas. Corporate and political systemic weaknesses have been addressed and there is now a strong, determined and cohesive leadership team.

A relentless and incremental approach to improving practice has led to significant progress in some areas, such as the safeguarding and planning for unborn children, achieving permanence for children, and the effectiveness of quality assurance. There remain inconsistencies in children's experiences, particularly in the assessment and intervention teams and family safeguarding service. In part, this is due to turbulence in the system following the implementation of whole-scale service change in 2022, but it is also due to some high social worker caseloads and, until recently, turnover of staff in some teams. This is now stabilising and, following a successful recent recruitment drive, caseloads are beginning to fall.

Leaders have a clear and realistic understanding of the further improvements needed to ensure that all children receive a consistently good service, and they are committed to and focused on continuing to lead the necessary improvements.

What needs to improve?

- The timeliness and quality of strategy discussions and child protection investigations.
- The consistent quality and effectiveness of assessments and plans for children in need and children in need of protection.
- The response to children aged 16 to 17 who present as homeless.
- The timeliness of initial health assessments and access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for specialist assessments and therapeutic support when children are in care.
- The completion of return home interviews and their impact on planning for children when they go missing.
- Sufficiency of placement choice when children come into care.
- The quality of advice and support provided to care leavers aged 21 and over and unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people as they transition their leave to remain.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Early help support makes a positive difference to children's lives. Most families receive the right level of support at the earliest opportunity and their situations improve. Meaningful work with parents helps to provide them with insight and understanding about their children's needs and improve their parenting. Safety plans are routinely completed, with children and their families. Many children have their own age-appropriate understanding of what to do when there are risks and concerns. When concerns increase for children, appropriate action is taken to step up to statutory services.
2. The vast majority of children referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the emergency duty team receive a timely and appropriate response. Managers and social workers demonstrate a clear understanding of risk. Thresholds are applied well. Decisions are informed by partnership-working, with children at the centre. The need for parental consent is understood and well considered.
3. The domestic abuse hub within the MASH ensures a timely and comprehensive response to children and their families where domestic abuse is a concern.
4. When children are referred to the MASH for escalating mental health concerns and suicidality, their needs are triaged by the children's mental and emotional health team, which provides consultation, support and advice to the partnership to help reduce risk and inform sensitive work with children. The breadth of

work offered by the service is impressive and has supported a growing confidence in practitioners supporting children and identifying self-harm as a safeguarding issue.

5. When social workers in the MASH identify safeguarding concerns for children, a daily multi-agency meeting takes place to consider the social worker recommendation for a strategy discussion. This can lead to an unnecessary delay in decision-making for some children. The rationale for decisions to overturn the initial recommendation are not always clear or recorded. For some children, there are delays in strategy meetings taking place. When strategy meetings are held, they are mostly well attended by professionals, who share appropriate information to inform risk assessments and next steps. Plans recorded at the end of strategy meetings do not always specify short-term safety planning and next steps to inform a subsequent investigation.
6. The quality, timeliness and depth of child protection investigations are inconsistent. For some children where investigations are joint with the police, there is a small delay in them first being seen due to police availability. Some investigations are incident-focused and lack an assessment of wider needs.
7. Assessments and plans are of variable quality and impact. Some assessments provide a comprehensive picture of the child, which subsequently informs plans to address complex needs. However, other assessments do not capture the views of non-resident parents or the impact of interventions that have previously been tried. For a small number of children, child protection planning has not made enough difference in improving their day-to-day lives. For some children, child protection plans are ended prematurely and the subsequent support provided to them as children in need is insufficient. Consequently, some children experience repeated interventions and have a long history of involvement and neglect before they receive the help they need.
8. Most children are seen regularly by their social workers. Inspectors saw many examples of meaningful, creative direct work with children, conveying the child's voice, informing their plans and helping to make a positive difference to their lives. However, some children have experienced too many changes in social worker.
9. Practice within the Children with Disabilities service is also variable. For some children, highly imaginative work and persistence are used to address their needs and ensure the best outcomes. Weaker practice includes some assessments and plans that are too narrowly focused and do not consider the wider needs of other children or adults in the family.
10. The introduction of a pre-birth specialist role is having a positive impact in the early identification of concerns, assessments and interventions for unborn children. Tracking of unborn children, along with advice and support to social workers, ensures that work is progressed at pace. Appropriate support is identified for birth parents and parallel plans considered when required.

11. The oversight and response to children when they go missing have been strengthened since the last inspection. Comprehensive performance information is used effectively to provide managers with oversight of children who go missing and ensure that appropriate actions are taken when situations escalate. The completion of return home interviews to understand risks and inform planning is low. When return home interviews are completed, they are comprehensive and provide a strong sense of the child's experience, and the reason and circumstances leading to the missing episode.
12. Children identified as at risk of harm outside of the family benefit from support and intervention from a specialist team. Assessments provide a clear understanding of risk, including any wider risk to brothers and sisters. Clear, realistic and jargon-free safety plans address immediate safety and are used effectively to inform plans to reduce risk. Visits to children are purposeful, targeted direct work is undertaken and reachable moments or key opportunities are used well to further engage with and support children.
13. Management oversight and the effectiveness of practice for children in pre-proceedings have been significantly strengthened since the last inspection, but there remains some inconsistency. The duration of pre-proceedings is reducing and overall practice is more focused. This has enabled an increasing number of children to remain at home safely and be diverted from care proceedings. The quality of pre-proceedings assessments has improved. Letters before proceedings clearly outline the local authority concerns, the support offered to families and next steps. Some letters are not written in a style that helps parents to clearly understand what is required. A small number of children remain in pre-proceedings for extended periods of time. Long gaps between key meetings taking place and lags in assessments being completed contribute to delay in these cases.
14. Children living in private fostering arrangements benefit from comprehensive assessments and support from social workers.
15. An ever-increasing number of children are electively home-educated in West Sussex. The local authority has good oversight of elective home education. There has also been an increase in children missing education. Sometimes, this is because elective home education has not been successful. The local authority has recently further strengthened how it tracks and responds to children missing education.
16. The management and oversight of allegations against professionals are effective.
17. When children present as homeless, many benefit from a joint housing assessment and are appropriately supported to return to their family home. For some children, their vulnerability and circumstances are not well understood. Children are not routinely or clearly provided with information to inform them of

their rights and entitlements. This means that some children miss out on the benefits of having care-leaver status and support as they move into adulthood.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

18. When children come into care, it is for the right reasons. Over time, their circumstances improve and the vast majority make good progress. For a small number of children, the decision to bring them into care is not taken quickly enough.
19. The quality and timeliness of care proceedings for children are not yet consistently good. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the judiciary report provide a variable but improving picture of practice. The local authority recognises this as a practice area in need of ongoing improvement. Decisions to place children with their parents in care proceedings are well considered and supported. For complex situations, multi-agency working is well coordinated. This is less effective when older children opt to return to their parents' care in an unplanned way.
20. Concerted efforts are made by social workers to support birth parents to look after their children. Effective and intensive support to families by Solutions workers prevents some children from coming into care and enables children to return home from care when it is safe to do so. There is a strong ethos of securing permanence for children within their families and wider network wherever possible. Family members who are willing to provide ongoing care are considered promptly.
21. Many children have benefited from a stronger approach to permanence planning and the creation of a dedicated team to help take this forward. This area of work is becoming increasingly robust and embedded but there remains some variability in the frequency, quality and impact of permanence planning for all children. For example, the number of children living in permanent long-term foster homes and benefiting from the security and stability this brings has increased significantly, but some children are yet to have their permanence agreed and celebrated. Early permanence planning is a strength and well considered. An increasing number of children benefit from living in Fostering for Adoption arrangements. This is having a significant, positive impact on children who are placed at a younger age, enabling them to grow strong attachments to their forever families.
22. While most children in care benefit from stability and are living in homes that meet their long-term needs, a small number of children experience several placements when they first come into care before being matched with long-term carers. For a few of these older children, a lack of suitable emergency placements when they first come into care means that they are spending a short period of time living in hotels or rented accommodation while more appropriate arrangements are sought. In these emergency situations, locality

risk assessments are not always clear or well recorded. Leaders took steps to rectify this during the inspection.

23. A small and reducing number of children live in unapproved kinship arrangements. These arrangements are appropriately considered to be in the children's best interests. Where needed, steps are taken to mitigate vulnerabilities and provide additional support. Senior managers closely oversee and monitor children in these arrangements.
24. Most children benefit from having their care arrangements reviewed regularly. Children's plans are informed by an up-to-date assessment of their needs and focus on the support they require to help them make progress. For a minority of children, their plans are too broad and have long timescales for completion.
25. Many children benefit from having a consistent independent reviewing officer, who knows them well. Children are encouraged to (and do) attend and participate in their reviews. Key professionals are not always in attendance, but reports are provided. For some children, the absence of professionals is at their request. Records of reviews are captured in a letter written directly to the child. Most are child-centred and sensitively written, providing an informative and accessible account so that children can understand the decisions that are made for them. Records of reviews and plans for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are more complex and less accessible due to an extensive and repeated explanation of triple planning.
26. Unaccompanied children seeking asylum receive strong support from the dedicated social work team, which has the breadth of knowledge necessary to support children in the complex area of seeking leave to remain, alongside managing the impact of trauma, learning a new language and coming to terms with a new culture. Social workers have ready access to high-quality and sensitive interpreters who ably assist them in ensuring that children and young peoples' experiences are understood.
27. Children are seen regularly and in line with their changing needs by their social workers, who know them well. Some children continue to experience changes in social worker and, for a minority of children, this impacts on their engagement with the social worker and the progression of their plans. However, this is an improving picture.
28. Records of visits to children are warmly written and capture the child's voice as well as observations of the child's presentation by the social worker. Children and young people are actively engaged in their care planning. The child's voice is strong in their records and well considered at key decision-making points. Social workers use a wide range of purposeful, age-appropriate activities and creative direct work to engage with children.
29. Life-story work is evident, and most children have a clear understanding of why they are in care and what is happening to them. The quality of life-story books

is variable but includes some strong examples that draw on key interests of the child to personalise and engage them with their story.

30. Children's participation and influence in service delivery and practice have improved significantly since the last inspection. Children's voices are heard, and actions progressed via an active and engaged Children in Care Council.
31. While there have been improvements since the last inspection, there continue to be significant shortfalls in the timeliness of assessing children's initial health needs, despite senior management oversight in children's services and health. This means that, when children first come into care, their health needs are not fully understood. Most children benefit from comprehensive annual health assessments of their needs and their physical health needs are well met. An increasing number of children have access to a dentist, but this remains an ongoing area of focus.
32. For many children, there is evidence of strengths and difficulties questionnaires being completed but there is limited consideration of these in subsequent planning. Some children are accessing therapeutic support via an independent fostering agency or residential placement but, for others, there is a very long wait for specialist therapeutic support and assessments of neurodiversity. Leaders are aware of this and are exploring alternatives to address the need. Positively, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive timely support through the specialist CAMHS team to address the trauma they have experienced.
33. Children have opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities and hobbies that reflect their interests and abilities. Careful consideration is given to the arrangements for family time, which is appropriately informed by the child's best interests, and wishes.
34. The virtual school actively monitors children's attendance and academic progress, and mostly intervenes when needed. A minority of children are not accessing appropriate education provision, either because they are awaiting an education, health and care plan or because a suitable provision has not been identified. Provision for post-16 has been strengthened. The virtual school now continues to work with young people until they reach the end of Year 13, regardless of when they turn 18.
35. When children go missing, social workers go the extra mile to support them, and social workers have a good awareness of their children and an understanding of the risks they might be exposed to. However, the completion of timely return home interviews and the subsequent impact on planning are limited.
36. Mothers who have previously had children removed from their care benefit from some exceptional and tenacious interventions and support by practitioners to improve future outcomes for them and their children.

37. Foster carers benefit from a varied training offer to support them in meeting children's needs. However, sometimes there is a delay in being able to access the relevant mandatory courses. Not all connected carers are clear in their understanding about what this arrangement means for them and the children they care for.
38. The local authority has a strong and effective relationship with the regional adoption agency (Adoption South East). The quality of assessments presented to the adoption panel is of a high standard, ensuring the best possible matches for children. Adoption support plans for some younger children are too generic. Careful consideration is given to matching and the support required to enable children to move into their adoptive families. Plans for children are reviewed and amended in line with their changing presentation and needs.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

39. For many young people, the period of handover between children's social workers and personal advisers is too short. Despite an aim for personal advisers to be allocated to young people at 17.5 years of age, too many young people are allocated a personal adviser close to their 18th birthday. This means that young people have a limited opportunity to build a trusting relationship with their personal adviser. For some young people, this limits joint planning and does not support their move towards adulthood effectively.
40. Most young people have access to their key documents as they turn 18 but, for a small number of young people, this is not timely.
41. Pathway plans are completed collaboratively with the young person and many capture the young person's words and views. Some pathway plans are updated every six months but the updating of young people's plans when circumstances change is less evident. Elements of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers' pathway plans are generic and not written in accessible language. This is a particular concern as English is not their first language and the plans include detailed information to explain entitlements depending on the outcome of their pending asylum claim. While not yet live, the pathway plan template has very recently been refreshed and co-produced with young people. The revised template asks more specific questions and is outcome- and goal-focused in approach.
42. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are well supported through their asylum claim, including attendance at substantive interviews and appointments for biometrics. However, when they are given leave to remain, those who are living in block contract accommodation are given three months' notice to move. This is a vulnerable time for young people and, for a small number, their progress is hampered by this change in circumstance, environment and support provided, as they are moved away from the networks they have already developed.

43. Personal advisers can access a range of housing for young people. Most care leavers are living in accommodation suitable for their needs, where they feel safe. Young people are encouraged to stay put with their foster carers where appropriate and inspectors saw evidence of lifelong links between young people and carers as they moved further into adulthood. One young person described themselves as staying there long into the future, 'until I am an old man'. Links with housing are being further strengthened. A joint housing protocol is under development to promote a consistent approach from district councils to all young people in the county.
44. Young people's views are actively sought using a variety of different communication methods. Personal advisers are committed to ensuring that young people's needs are met. In times of need or crisis, personal advisers are highly responsive and available, ensuring that young people are appropriately supported. Workload pressures mean that some personal advisers do not always see young people when things are going well, and this restricts a more consistent and proactive level of support.
45. Many young people, including those in custody, are participating in education, employment or training. Young people are well supported to move from education to work and vice versa when requested. Some young people who are not in education, employment or training are actively supported to return by their personal adviser. For example, a personal adviser strongly advocated for and supported a young person when their university place was under threat. However, other young people do not have a clear support pathway to achieve their ambitions. While the virtual school has extended some support for care leavers post-Year 13, it is underdeveloped. A bridging course run jointly with the University of Chichester has supported some young people into apprenticeships and further education courses where no prior education attainment is needed.
46. Young people know how to contact their personal advisers and there is a well-publicised and used duty system.
47. Too few care leavers aged over 21 are actively supported by the local authority. The local authority website for care leavers is clear that support is available until the age of 25 years. However, only a small number of young people aged over 21 are actively open to and supported by the local authority. Leaders are aware of this and currently contacting the 300 young people closed to the service to ensure that they are aware of the offer available to them.
48. Young people are actively involved in the development of council initiatives. Care leavers have a strong, committed and effective participation group and they told inspectors of the direct influence they have had in shaping and developing the service. For example, they have co-produced the revised pathway plan template, been involved in the recruitment of staff, facilitated training across a number of key professionals, and are active participants in and co-chair the Corporate Parenting Panel and subgroups.

49. The local offer has recently been refreshed and developed, in co-production with the Care Leavers Advisory Board. There is a vibrant and comprehensive website which provides lots of useful information. However, some areas of the local offer are discretionary, and not open to all as they are dependent on a young person's current circumstances and where they live, for example regarding access to leisure services and Wi-Fi. This is compounded by different approaches of individual districts within the county. Care leavers told inspectors that the cost-of-living crisis is a big worry for them. Personal advisers know how to access various charitable funds to support young people and the local authority has just introduced an annual clothing allowance to support young people.
50. Most young people have access to their health histories and are registered with universal health services. The effectiveness of mental health support for care leavers as they transition from child to adult services is inconsistent. Some young people have good access to specialist mental health services when needed, but others are closed to CAMHS at age 18 and signposted to other services, which hinders their access to therapeutic support or diagnostic assessments.
51. Responses to young people at risk of exploitation or harm are mostly well considered and proportionate. Young people are supported by their personal advisers to work through issues that are causing them distress, drawing on other specialists within the team when needed, such as in relation to housing support.
52. Care leavers who are parents receive sensitive work to address their own needs as well as their children's needs.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

53. A cohesive and effective senior leadership team, supported by corporate and political leaders and united by a shared vision, has made significant improvements to practice since the last inspection in 2019.
54. A root and branch review of the whole service began with a clear determination to shift the organisational culture to ensure that children are kept at the very centre of everything. A co-produced logo, 'Children First', encapsulates this. This change has been felt by children and care leavers and was a strong feature of inspector conversations with practitioners. Leaders recognised that the wholesale change could not be achieved all at once and have incrementally and successfully built the foundations for improvement.
55. The introduction of a service-wide practice model has been carefully considered and phase one successfully implemented. Phase two is now underway and includes increasing the number of specialist adult practitioners to support families. The implementation of and training in the model have provided a

service-wide platform for a common strengths-based language and a consistent way of working with families. Leaders are aware that expectations for recording have been challenging to implement, and they have a plan to review and streamline children's records.

56. Governance arrangements are strong, multi-layered and informed by the widespread use of accurate performance information. Operational boards interact meaningfully to deliver a consistent approach.
57. Significant financial investment has supported several key improvements and transformational change but there remains variability in the quality of service children and their families receive. Leaders know the service well and are committed to persistently progressing realistic improvement plans.
58. The local authority works well with improvement partners and has been open to external scrutiny and support to strengthen practice. Well-established, comprehensive and effective quality assurance processes give leaders a clear line of sight to practice. The collaborative involvement of social workers in the process provides an opportunity for reflection and a sound understanding of 'even better if' to further improve practice.
59. The local authority acts as a committed corporate parent. Political and corporate leaders ensure that outcomes for children in West Sussex improve. Since the last inspection, leaders have prioritised the active involvement of children in care and care leavers in the decision-making and development of the service. A notable achievement is the meaningful roles and participation of children and care leavers in the Children First Board and Corporate Parenting Panel. Children and young people co-chair corporate parenting meetings and are actively involved in setting the agenda. Children told inspectors that their opinions are actively sought and heard, and are making a difference.
60. Strategic partnership-working is improving, with senior leaders meeting and seeking solutions to issues together, but the impact remains variable. A strategic partnership response (led by children's services) to the prevention of, and support following, teenage suicides was creatively and thoughtfully developed, and implemented effectively. Conversely, too many initial health assessments are delayed, there are long waiting lists for some CAMHS provision, and a lack of police capacity is impacting on the timeliness of some strategy discussions and child protection investigations.
61. In common with a number of other local authorities, the sufficiency of suitable homes for children is a real challenge. Leaders have actively responded to the challenge. Since the last inspection, a comprehensive fostering service review substantially improved the support and training available to foster carers. Subsequently, West Sussex has seen a significant increase in fostering enquiries and newly approved households. This, alongside significant financial investment in high-quality residential provision, has enabled more children to live closer to

home. Despite this, there remains a shortage of foster carers to meet children's needs.

62. Leaders actively seek feedback from practitioners and adopt a solution-focused approach when there are areas of concern or barriers to practice. This has contributed to a palpable improvement in staff morale and enabled them to put children first, as they share this vision with each other and the leadership team.
63. Social workers find supervision to be reflective and helpful. Records of individual supervision are of variable quality and the subsequent impact is sometimes limited in progressing children's plans. Records of group supervision provide a greater depth of hypothesis, reflection and, therefore, value in understanding the child's experience and progressing their plans.
64. Senior leaders recognise that some children have experienced too many changes in social worker and that caseloads have been too high in some teams. The recruitment and retention of staff have been a strong and clear priority and a whole-service endeavour. This has improved retention and recruitment in the past six months.
65. Social workers, managers and other practitioners within the service benefit from a wide range of training and development opportunities. Career progression is actively encouraged and supported. A management assessment programme has provided managers with an understanding of their strengths and areas of practice that they would like to develop. Equally, there is a clear staff development programme, known to staff so that they know what they need to do to achieve career progression. Practitioners feel well supported and valued by managers and leaders in West Sussex.



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