



North Northamptonshire Council Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report 2023 – 2024

*“Children, Young People and Families at the heart of all we do - in every decision
we make and every action we take.”*

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Introduction

Welcome to the annual report for North Northamptonshire Council's Corporate Parenting Board. The report sets out the activity of the Board for the 2023-24 period, and some of the exciting developments happening within Northamptonshire Children's Trust.

Corporate parenting means giving the same care and support any parent would want for their own child, including helping them successfully transition to independent adulthood. Good parents celebrate their children's achievements and to this end we have continued to hold our large-scale, annual celebration events. As well as celebrating headline achievements such as sporting and academic excellence, we want to highlight the small steps our children make which add up to massive progress. This can mean simply feeling able to sit with foster carers for a meal or having a phone call with a family member. We celebrate these achievements at every Board meeting.

Many far-reaching initiatives, in cooperation with our partners, are helping improve outcomes for Northamptonshire children and young people. New monthly panels, for example, are helping children secure a permanent home at the earliest possible stage, and helping older young people transition to independence. The Valuing Care project, which commenced in February 2023 in partnership with Impower, helps the right resources reach the children who need them most, and is now becoming part of business as usual. A new Access to Resources Panel has replaced several existing panels, streamlining the process by which frontline workers can source vital resources for children and young people, while maximising value for money.

2024 sees the ten-year anniversary of our lauded social worker academy; across those 10 years the academy has seen 285 newly qualified social workers pass through and go onto being excellent social workers.

Young people have made an increasingly important contribution to Board and the Trust over the year, not least our fantastic care-experienced Apprentice Champions. There is more to do, however, to make sure young people have a major say in the operation of the Board and shaping our services. For the purposes of providing employment and training opportunities, both councils and the Trust treat care-experience as a protected characteristic, in line with other protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act. This will help us to achieve our aim that every child and young person has the best possible start in life and fulfils their potential.

Executive Summary

Corporate parenting means promoting the same outcomes that any good parenting wants for their child. The specific legal duties on local authorities and their partners are set out in legislation and statutory guidance. Seven principles of corporate parenting are set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Northamptonshire Children's Trust delivers children's social care on behalf of West and North Northamptonshire Councils, and has its own board of directors. After the creation of the Trust, a

single Corporate Parenting Board operated, covering both councils. As of May 2023, the Board disaggregated into two.

North Northamptonshire's Board met five times during the 2023 – 24 financial year, and was attended by designated councillors, Trust officers and representatives from a wide range of partner organisations.

The Board provides oversight and scrutiny of a number of service annual reports, including from health colleagues, the Virtual School and the Independent Reviewing Officer service. Each meeting includes a performance scorecard specifically relating to North Northamptonshire children. Appendix 1 includes the scorecard in full.

Thematic and ad-hoc topics presented to the Board during the reporting period include the health of children in care, housing for care leavers and youth justice.

A selection of stories about the achievements of children and young people are presented at each Board meeting, but more needs to be done to fully involve young people in Board itself. Many reports presented to Board are designed to be child-friendly, particularly the Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report.

More widely, the Trust has established an annual celebration and awards event for children in care, which is going from strength to strength. It is also important to celebrate our amazing foster carers; the Trust was heavily involved in foster care fortnight, and holds an annual awards event. Ofsted's latest inspection of the Trust's Independent Fostering Agency was very positive.

Appendix 2 sets out the Trust's four priorities for children in care and care leavers, as set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy, and just some of the ways we are working towards achieving these aims.

1. Governance and Statutory Context

What is corporate parenting?

Local authorities and their partners are responsible for ensuring that care-experienced children and young people are as safe and well cared for as any other child. This responsibility is called 'corporate parenting' and applies equally to children who have entered the UK from overseas and are separated from their families. Corporate parenting duty rests not only with social workers and their managers, but also any other agency that provides services and support to children in care such as health services, housing departments, the police and schools. Corporate parents have specific duties for young people leaving care and making the journey to independence.

Legal background

The collective responsibility for local authorities was first laid out in the Children Act 1989 and the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. The central role of councils as effective corporate parents has been

emphasised by government in the publications *Care Matters: Time for Change* (DCSF 2007), *Care Matters: Time to Deliver* (DCSF 2008), and consolidated in aspects of the Children and Young Persons Act (2008). Other legislation and statutory guidance that determine our duties include:

- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010 Children and Adoption Act 2006
- Children and Families Act 2014
- Children and Social Work Act 2017
- Human Rights Act 1998
- The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 (as amended by the Adoption and Care Planning (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2014
- The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption and Care Planning (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2014
- The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015
- Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018
- Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2000

Principles of corporate parenting

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 provided a welcome distillation of corporate parenting responsibilities through seven principles of corporate parenting. Local authorities and their partners are required:

1. To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people;
2. To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings;
3. To take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people;
4. To help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;
5. To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people;
6. For those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and
7. To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

The Act introduced some new responsibilities relating to children in care and care leavers. These include a requirement to publish a 'Local Offer to Care Leavers,' setting out the services available to young people leaving care, extending the provision of personal adviser support to all care leavers up to the age of 25 and to provide education advice and guidance to young people formerly in care. The Act also introduces a number of requirements to ensure that court processes are focussed on long term plans for and specific needs of the child.

The Care Leavers Charter

The Care Leavers’ Charter is a set of promises to care leavers, published by the Government in 2012. It is “Designed to raise expectation, aspiration and understanding of what care leavers need and what the government and local authorities should do to be good corporate parents.” The Charter will “Remain constant through any changes in legislation, regulation and guidance.”

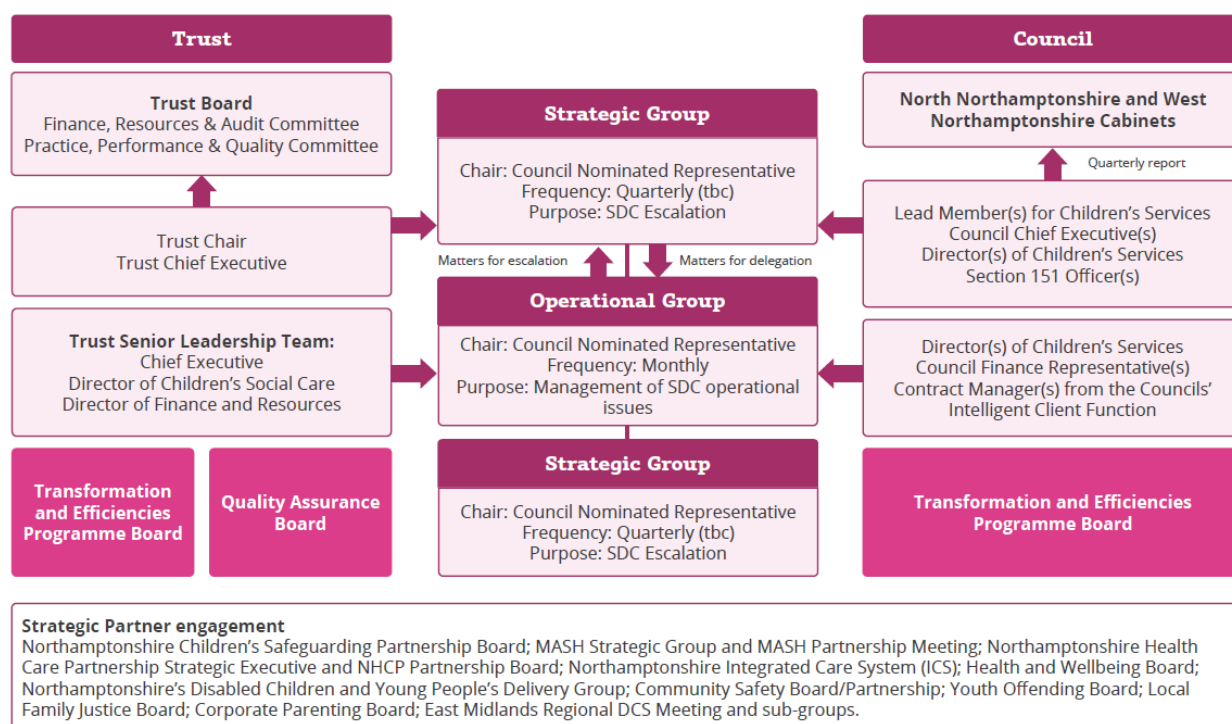
We promise:

- To respect and honour your identity.
- To listen to you.
- To believe in you.
- To inform you.
- To be a lifelong champion.
- To support you.
- To find you a home.

NCT and the move to unitary authorities

From April 2021 Northamptonshire County Council and seven district and borough councils were replaced by two new councils, North Northamptonshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council. Northamptonshire Children’s Trust was established on the 1st of November 2020 to deliver children’s social care across the county. It is owned by West and North Northamptonshire councils, but has operational independence through its own board of directors which sets strategic aims, oversees its management and holds the executive team to account.

Northamptonshire Children's Trust governance arrangements



The disaggregation of the Corporate Parenting Board, 2023

Following the inception of the Trust a single Corporate Parenting Board remained in effect, covering both councils, with shared chairing duties. However, since May 2023, each council has held its own Corporate Parenting Board. This decision was geared to allowing each council greater scrutiny and accountability, and ultimately better outcomes for children and young people under their remit. The decision to disaggregate also reflects Ofsted's requirement for disaggregated data for the two councils. Administration of the Board was passed from the Trust to NNC Democratic Services.

2. Board Activity, 2023-24

Membership and meeting arrangements

The Board formerly met five times during the reporting period, in July, October and December 2023, and February and March 2024. An informal training and discussion session was also held in July 2023.

Elected Board members:

Councillors Scott Edwards (Chair), Dez Dell, Gill Mercer, Jean Addison, Lora Lawman, Macauley Nichol, Mark Rowley, and Wendy Brackenbury.

Northamptonshire Children's Trust officers:

- Chief Executive
- Director of Social Care
- Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting
- Strategic Manager for Corporate Parenting
- Strategic Manager, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance
- NCT Board member
- Participation Team officers
- Principal Social Worker
- Independent Reviewing Officer Service Manager

North Northamptonshire Council officers:

- Head of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Service
- Director for Children's Services
- Assistant Director, Strategic Housing
- Assistant Director, Housing and Communities
- Assistant Director, Education and Skills
- Assistant Director, Commissioning and Partnerships (Children's)
- Deputy Director of Public Health
- Head of Commissioning and Brokerage
- Head of the Virtual School (covers North and West Northants)

Partner organisations:

- Designated Nurse for Looked After Children, Integrated Care Board

- Director of Nursing, Integrated Care Board
- Head of Safeguarding, Integrated Care Board
- Director of Right Resolutions (representing the voluntary sector)
- Northamptonshire Foster Carers Association
- Proactive Crime and Intelligence Representative, Northants Police

Other NCT officers and representatives of partner agencies attended as required, on invitation.

Annual reports

While Board is not a statutory body per se, legislation requires that an appropriate oversight body has sight of certain statutory annual and more frequent reports. Our Board fulfils this function, providing scrutiny and oversight to Trust services.

The following reports were scrutinised by Board during 2023-24. Note that the annual reports related to the year 2022-23 unless otherwise stated.

- The Independent Reviewing Officer Service
- Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report
- The NCT Fostering Agency Annual Report and Action Plan updates
- The NCT Adoption Agency
- The Virtual School
- Regulation 35 reports
- Bi-monthly reports on Trust children's homes
- The Integrated Care Board and the Health of Looked After Children.

Performance scorecard

The Board reviews a North Northamptonshire-specific performance scorecard at each meeting, providing an opportunity for dialogue, scrutiny and challenge between officers, partner agencies and elected members. Measures include some of those that local authorities must report to the Department for Education. The figures are grouped under the following headings:

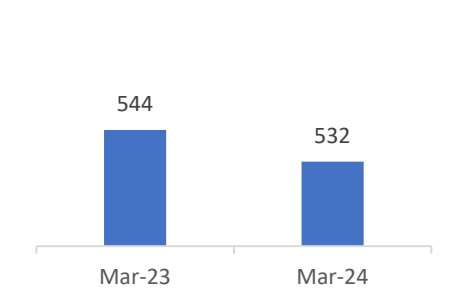
- Children in Care: population and performance data for children looked after by the local authority. Includes health and education data.
- Placements: proportions of children living in different placement types including out of county, stability of placements.
- Adoption: numbers of adoption orders granted by the court, timeliness of adoption matching.
- Care Leavers: population data around young people entitled to a service from the Leaving Care Service, proportion of those in education, employment and training, numbers of children from overseas separated from their family.

The scorecard highlights for members any performance shortfalls, and allows officers the opportunity to share any underlying challenges and the responses to them. For example, a national shortage of paediatricians has impacted our capacity to make sure children coming into care have an initial health assessment on time. As part of its response, the Integrated Care Board commenced a review of paediatric services across the county. The scorecard also helps Trust officers highlight

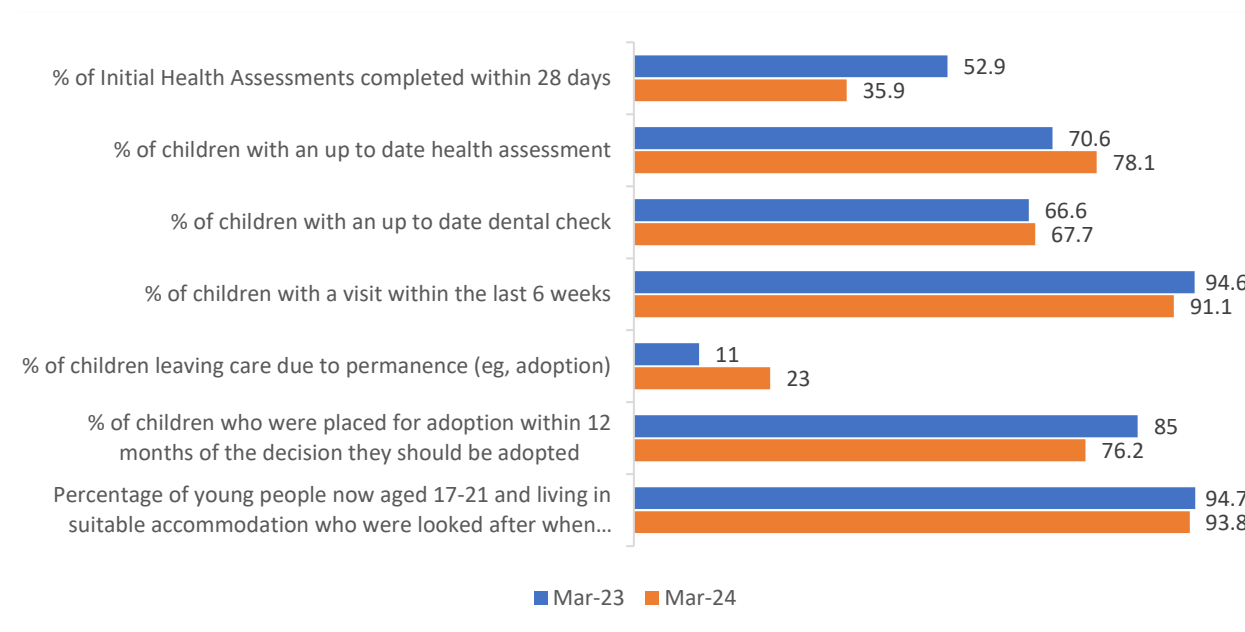
issues for which elected members can assist, such as the need for more social housing stock. See Appendix 1 for the full scorecard.

Performance Scorecard: Selected March 2023/March 2024 comparison data.

Children in Care Population:



Selected performance data:



Thematic and ad-hoc reports

At each meeting, the Board focusses on a topic relevant to care-experienced children and young people. NCT officers, partner agencies and young people are invited to contribute, and the Board minutes capture members’ reflective discussions about what they have heard. These sessions also provide the opportunity for oversight and challenge, and further items are added to future agendas if members need to know more about a given topic.

The following provides a summary of the topics discussed at Board during the year.

The Health of Children in Care

Presented by the Head of Safeguarding, Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board (ICB)

Many children in care have suffered the impact of abuse and neglect, such as poor dental health and nutrition, and mental health issues. The ICB works with the Trust and health providers to address these needs.

The ICB commissions community paediatricians to undertake initial health assessments for children coming into care, which must take place within twenty days of the child entering care.

Northamptonshire Health Foundation Trust (NHFT) undertake children's review health assessments. For children under five, the assessments take place every six months and are undertaken by a health visitor. For older children, specialist nurses undertake the assessment annually.

Long-standing challenges in delivering timely health assessments include the availability of paediatricians, nursing resource, logistical issues for children living out of county, and timely notifications from frontline Trust colleagues. At the time of writing, the ICB is conducting a full paediatric review in order to better understand service need and development, and a business case for increased nursing resource has been submitted. The new multiagency Children in Care Health Partnership meets every two months to address operational issues, such as ensuring that Trust colleagues have access to the right information and skills. It should also be noted that when a child has a known health need, their health assessment, and related support, are prioritised as required.

The availability of dentists is a national issue, and performance has also been impacted by recording issues within the Trust. In response, the Trust wrote to all in-house and third-party accommodation providers, asking them to provide updated information. NHS England has written to all NHS dentists setting out the need to prioritise appointments for children in care.

The ICB commissions a multidisciplinary mental health team for children in care. This includes clinicians from the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Team (CAMHS), though the service has a wider remit than the core CAMHS service. As well as carrying out specialist assessments, the service has a duty service available to all professionals for informal consultations. The service's caseload as of the end of March 2024 stood at 270. For older young people, an Advanced Mental Health Practitioner is now based within the Trust's Leaving Care Service.

Young people moving on to independence are provided with a health summary which details their health needs and history, and are encouraged to use the NHS mobile phone app. A pilot programme is rolling out for care-experienced young people across Northamptonshire to receive free prescriptions for a year.

Other health-related developments include the Child Protection Information System, which allows health professionals in unscheduled health settings, such as accident and emergency departments, to quickly identify children in care and other children known to social services. Over the coming months, this will be rolled out to more settings such as CAMHS and Community Dentistry.

**Children from Overseas Separated from their Families
Presented by two foster carers and NCT's Service Manager for the Separated Children's Team**

Children entering the UK who are separated from their families are entitled to the same support as any other child in care. The Trust's specialist Separated Children's Team works to meet the needs of these children, many of whom have suffered profoundly traumatic experiences in their home country or during the journey to the UK. Their physical health is also a major concern: some have contracted sexually transmitted diseases through being trafficked, have blood borne diseases or are malnourished. Children separated from their families have an initial health assessment like any other child in care. Bloodborne disease and TB screening programmes are also in place, and immunisation histories are reviewed.

The Separated Children's Team includes specialist social workers and family support workers, and the support they provide includes helping children get in touch with their families; finding accommodation and school places; arranging legal advice; and putting them in touch with support services such as the Refugee Council. Many young people arrive without identity documents and require an age assessment, a highly complex and controversial process, and the Trust has received guidance around this from the National Age Assessment Board. At the end of March 2024, the team supported 101 young people across the county, with around a third of those formally in the care of North Northamptonshire Council.

To mitigate some local authorities being overwhelmed by separated children, the National Transfer Scheme was established in 2016. This allows a more even distribution of such children among local authorities across England.

Major challenges in meeting the needs of these young people include a national shortage of foster carers, the time taken to process asylum applications and the complexity of age assessments. The Virtual School works hard to make sure that separated children have access to English language courses in local colleges, a vital step in helping them integrate into British society and go on to live successful lives.

Two Trust foster carers talked to the Board about their experiences of caring for separated children. On top of their history of trauma, many of these young people worry about their asylum applications and their future in general, and often do not sleep well. Once enrolled in education, however, joint working between carers, the Trust, schools and other parties can be highly effective in helping them achieve positive outcomes.

Despite the most extreme adversity, many of our separated children have gone on to great things including university degrees and setting up their own businesses, and have featured heavily in the Board's regular 'Young People's Successes' item.

The Pause Programme Presented by the Director of Public Health

The Pause Programme works with women who have had, or are at risk of having, children removed from their care. Through an eighteen-month programme, women are intensively supported, based on their specific needs. Such needs may include a history of trauma, learning difficulties or barriers to them achieving their aspirations. Women are helped to understand their sexual and reproductive

health and to make positive, informed choices. The programme has led to a pilot scheme tailored to care leavers.

Housing for Care-experienced Young People

Presented by the Strategic Manager for Corporate Parenting, NCT

The cohort of young people aged eighteen to twenty-one years consisted of 262 young people. 96% of the cohort were deemed to be in suitable accommodation at the time of the presentation, which was the highest in the country. Types of accommodation deemed unsuitable include Bed and Breakfasts, or custody. Between ten and fifteen young people were, for want of a better term, 'sofa surfing' but through a review by senior management, they were deemed to be safe for the immediate future. Some were in fact classed as 'sofa surfing' despite being very settled in their parental home. This demonstrates the importance of understanding the real-life experiences of young people, which labels and raw data may obscure.

The Trust's Leaving Care Service has a positive relationship with the council's housing services, which is vital given the shortage of available social housing stock. Housing colleagues are well represented at the monthly Accommodation and Transitions panel, which considers in detail how to help young people move on to independence and to suitable accommodation. Through the Local Offer to Care Leavers, the Trust provides a high degree of support for young people moving to their own accommodation. This includes help paying for home insurance and a television license, a £3000 setting up home allowance and a pack of home essentials. All care leavers have access to council tax discounts. Note however that much of leaving care support is based on assessed need and the young person's engagement.

Young people do not all become ready for independence at the same point in life, so the Trust has a variety of accommodation options available. Some care-experienced young people move on from foster care to Independent Supported Accommodation (ISA) and the Trust's Quality and Outcomes team helps make sure ISA providers deliver the support young people need. Homes 2 Inspire continues to manage Belinda Ferrison House, a suite of training flats where many of our young people have learned the skills they need to move on to full independence.

Creative solutions to young people's accommodation needs include shared social housing tenancies, and the Stay Close, Stay Connected programme, whereby young people who have lived in residential care move on to live semi-independently while receiving intensive support from the Leaving Care Service. The service works closely with adult social services to make sure that young people with a high level of need continue to be supported into adulthood, support which may include specialised accommodation.

Other plans to improve accommodation options and independence for young people include having a named lead on council tax issues in the Leaving Care Service, aligned council tax discount offers between the two councils and the expansion of the Independent Living Programme, with a range of webinars.

Education for Children in Care

Presented by the Head of the Virtual School (VS)

The VS is a statutory body which promotes the educational attainment of children in care. This involves monitoring and improving the timeliness and quality of Personal Educational Plans (PEPs); monitoring children's progress, attendance and exclusions; and devolving the centrally funded money set aside for the education of children in care. The VS also runs a programme of school activities, such as drama and sports groups, and delivers a wide range of training to school governors, teachers, carers, parents and guardians. Training has a strong focus on the impact on education of trauma and attachment issues. As per an update to legislation, the VS now also delivers advice and guidance to previously looked after children.

Children's school attendance has been a national issue since the Covid lockdowns, particularly for children in care. This is also the case in Northamptonshire. Re-engaging these children in education has the positive knock-on effect of reducing risks such as criminality and exploitation. To achieve this, the Virtual School works strategically with key partners such as education and health teams, education settings and social care.

As well as pupil attendance, areas of focus include reducing fixed term and permanent school exclusions, supporting the education of children with social and emotional needs, and helping the post-16 cohort into education, employment and training. The VS is also providing expertise into the decisions made for children's accommodation options, so that any disruption to their education is minimised.

Board also heard about three case studies: three young people who had had very different experiences of education. Each of them had experienced challenges such as a lack of pastoral support in college, but also benefitted from support such as positive Personal Education Plan meetings, and strong advocacy from their foster carers.

The Adult Learning Service Manager also presented a short piece on the education services available to young people aged nineteen and over. This can play a vital role in helping young people into long term employment and training. It was agreed that these services would in future link up more closely with the Trust, to improve outcomes for care-experienced young people.

Securing Permanence for Children in Care

Presented by the Strategic Manager for Corporate Parenting, NCT

Planning for permanence means ensuring that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security. The Trust emphasises the need to secure permanence at the earliest possible stage, whether this means returning to parental care, matching with a foster carer, adoption or a special guardianship order. In some cases social work teams simultaneously plan for two or more outcomes, to avoid drift and delay in children and young people's permanence arrangements.

Formally recognising a child's foster placement can give them a sense of security and belonging. It is worth noting however that long-term foster matching should not be regarded as a child's 'forever home' as this perspective can have the unintended consequence of making a child feel they can never return to their parents. Instead, long-term foster matching simply means that all parties believe the child is in the right place for them right now, and there are no plans to seek anything different.

The Trust's permanence tracking panel helps social work teams to keep permanence a key goal in care planning, and to overcome barriers to achieving this. Permanence planning meetings are becoming a standard part of care planning, and permanence information sessions have been held for all social workers in the Trust. At a permanence conference in February, held in Kettering, practitioners heard directly from young people who had achieved permanence through very different journeys. The recent Department for Education (DfE) paper *Stable Homes Built on Love* set out a number of ambitions including keeping children safe, supporting families to help children, children to have great social workers and to help improve the system. The DfE have been talking to children and social workers to try and make the work of a social worker much better.

All this is having a positive impact. In the year 2022-23, 11% of children who left care did so into a formally recognised permanent arrangement, such as adoption or special guardianship order. The figure rose to 23% for the year 2023-24. The Circle to Success framework has permanence as a central concept, and this is increasingly embedded in business-as-usual practice.

Care-experienced Young People and the Criminal Justice System Presented by the Head of the Northamptonshire Youth Offending Service (YOS)

Children in care are over-represented in the criminal justice system, in Northamptonshire and nationwide. The cohort is predominantly male, over half are aged seventeen and over, and black and minority young people are overrepresented.

The YOS and its partner agencies are working to reduce the criminalisation of care-experienced young people. The joint working protocol between partner agencies, published in 2020, had a modest impact, so this is being refreshed through a review, to be completed in 2024. Other initiatives include sentencing to take place in-county rather than elsewhere (as higher sentences tend to be handed down out of county); problem solving hearings to explore the wider context of young people's lives; restorative meetings with residential homes; the Turnaround pilot scheme, in which YOS and mental health practitioners provide intensive support to young people; and communication passports, which help professionals understand how best to engage with young people with complex needs.

The board heard a case study of a young woman with experience of being in care. She had a history of abuse and neglect, and complex needs including ADHD and a moderate learning disability. Sadly, she spiralled into a pattern of multiple placement moves and repeated offending, with over seventy arrests in an eighteen-month period, including for assaulting a police officer. Working with the Probation Service, YOS helped arrange psychological and speech and language assessments and

support. A communication passport was developed and uploaded to the NICHE computer system, meaning that police officers would have access to this in the event of future contacts. A problem-solving hearing was held, which helped to avoid a custodial sentence.

3. Young People's Participation and Successes

Officers and elected members try hard to include young people in the Board's functioning, whether by inviting them to attend in person or provide materials such as videos or artwork. More needs to be done, however, to involve young people in the Board directly, and the chair has requested that members of the Board provide their views on this.

Materials prepared for the Board are written in a young person-friendly format wherever possible, and the Board liaises closely with the participation groups: the Children in Care Council, the Care Leavers' Council, and the Shooting Stars group for young people with special educational needs or disabilities. Children and Young people's contribution is evidenced in many of the reports and presentations which come to Board. The Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report for example, includes feedback from young people and a special version of the report written directly to them.

Celebrating children and young people

The Corporate Parenting Board celebrates the achievements of children, as any good parent would. Each meeting includes a slot in which anonymised stories of children and young people's successes are shared, and all receive a certificate and shopping voucher in recognition. Achievements include high-level accomplishments such as having written work published or securing university degrees. But the Board also celebrates those ostensibly small steps which add up to significant progress. This has included achievements as simple as being able to attend school regularly or engage with a social worker. One young person showed incredibly bravery by giving evidence in court in a criminal case.

"R moved to his current home after his carers gave notice, and he had several moves prior. With firm boundaries and consistent routines, he is doing amazingly well. He started school yesterday after two years of struggle to find him the right place. R joined the Sea Cadets about a year ago and loves it. He stayed overnight with the Cadets prior to the remembrance day in November. This is a significant progress for him. As his social worker I'm ever so proud of his progress and think his success should be celebrated" – Children in Care Social Worker

Care-experienced young people are also building careers with the Trust. One young person is a Transitions Worker with the Leaving Care Team's Stay Close, Stay Connected project, and is training to become a Personal Adviser.

The Awards and Celebration Event for Children in Care returned in a big way in July 2022 and has gone from strength of strength. In May 2023 we had a fantastic day for our children and young people. Over 500 children and young people were nominated for awards with around 400 attending on the day, with forty volunteers from NCT supporting the event.



Activities included an animal experience, a singalong, bouncy castle, face painting, football competition, balloon modelling, an indoor climbing wall and other sports. Sponsorship allowed us to provide a buffet which was enjoyed by all. The day ended with a football match with young people competing against staff. The awards ceremony was opened by a care-experienced young person who performed two songs. All children received a letter explaining their nomination, a certificate, and a gift voucher. Both younger and older children came up to receive their award and were individually congratulated by Trust CEO Colin Foster, Cllr Fiona Baker, Cllr Scott Edwards, and the Lord Lieutenant of Northamptonshire.



4. Celebrating Our Foster Carers

Foster care fortnight

In May 2023 we celebrated Foster Care Fortnight, the UK's biggest foster care awareness campaign, delivered by The Fostering Network charity. The campaign showcases the commitment and dedication of foster carers and supports the need for more carers to be recruited. Thousands of new foster families are needed every year to care for children, with the greatest need being for foster carers for older children, sibling groups, disabled children and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

This year, the campaign ran from the 15th of May to the 28th of May 2023 with the theme Fostering Communities. Trust staff and foster carers manned a stand at the Waendel Walk in Wellingborough to kickstart the two weeks. They also held an information evening during the fortnight at Dunelm Store café.



Foster Carer Awards

In March 2024 the annual Foster Carer Awards Ceremony took place at the Marriott Hotel in Northampton. The event, organised by our Fostering Service, was a fantastic celebration of the milestone years achieved by our foster carers. It was an amazing occasion, with a range of achievements recognised, including eight carers completing their first year, two reaching five years, and families marking ten, fifteen, twenty-five, and an impressive thirty years of foster care.



The event featured incredible performances by care-experienced young people singing songs from opera and musicals. Additionally, fostering families enjoyed entertainment by 'Just Karen' and 'The Twisted Guy,' who crafted balloon objects for the children and ending with an interactive magic and bubble show.

NCT Fostering Ofsted Inspection

Ofsted carried out a weeklong inspection of Northamptonshire Children's Trust Independent Fostering Agency in January 2024.

"Since the last inspection, there have been significant improvements in how well foster carers are supported and supervised." – Ofsted inspection report

Inspectors said "supervising social workers spend time with children on a regular basis. This has helped to improve the overall quality of relationships between children, foster carers and their supervising social workers." In turn this means "children are settled and make good progress. Many children remain with their foster carers for many years and into their adulthood." This leads to positive outcomes for children in giving them stability and consistency.

They also saw that "The fostering agency is working hard to better understand the quality of children's lived experiences. Care practice is now more meaningful and child centred. Children have their own separate recordings that are, overall, written in a child-friendly way." The inspection helped to evidence that children and young people are at the heart of all that NCT do.

5. Next Steps

This report makes the following recommendations:

1. For the Board to continue to welcome the thoughts, feelings and wishes of our Children Looked-After and Care Leavers and to ensure that there remains representation from children and care experienced young people at the Board. Celebrating their achievements of all young people and promoting opportunities for them to thrive.
2. Elected Member Board Champions to be identified to liaise directly with Housing, Education, Health, foster carers and children and young people engaged with the Participation Team. This will seek to improve the offer to our Children Looked-After, Care Leavers and foster carers.
3. To meet the needs of our Children Looked-After and Care Leavers by advocating on their behalf, ensuring that we actively engage with partners and local communities. To encourage and promote the opportunity to become a foster carer and subsequently increase placement capacity for our Children Looked-After.
4. An updated Board forward plan to be designed, agreed and implemented for the next 12 months. For the Board to deliver to our Looked-After Children and Care Leavers on all elements of the Pledge.
5. To ensure that the Board supports and promotes opportunities for those young people who are NEET and to support and advocate for children subject to SEND.
6. To undertake regular training so that Board members are enabled to carry out their corporate parenting responsibilities.

6. Conclusion

It has been a challenging year. National issues continue to impact the capacity of all local authorities to meet the needs of the children in their care, and North Northamptonshire is no exception. A lack of sufficiency of foster carers and adopters is compounded by the increasingly complex needs of children coming into care. Strained health resources mean that we have struggled to provide a timely health assessment for all children coming into care. While the Covid pandemic accelerated many innovations in the way we work, its lingering effects have left many children and families disengaged from education. A shortage of social housing across the country means that young people leaving care struggle to find a tenancy, whether in Northamptonshire or beyond.

We are proud of how we have responded to these challenges, however, and the Board has played a key role in providing oversight and promoting accountability. Better support for families at an early stage means less children are coming into care in the first place, and when they do come into care, we are embedding a strong focus on achieving permanence for them as soon as possible. Through cooperative working with the Integrated Care Board, we are making health pathways more robust, and children with known health needs are always supported as a priority. Similarly, our multi-agency Accommodation and Transitions panel helps frontline workers negotiate the housing arena, helping to secure stable housing for young people moving to independence. A huge amount of work means

that the development of a wide range of accommodation options for these young people continues to progress.

Across the Trust, we are embedding the Valuing Care approach, which enables us to identify and track the changing needs of children and young people, and address them. We are excited to be on the cusp of rolling out the systemic practice model, which focusses on relationships and individual's networks and social context.

As we look forward to building on the improvements we have already made, we would like to take this opportunity to extend a warm thanks to all the current and former elected members of Board, and employees of the Trust and partner agencies who have worked tirelessly to improve outcomes for our children and young people. And of course, we would like to thank all our children and young people for just being amazing. It has been wonderful to see them at our regular celebration events, and we will continue to put them and their families at the centre of everything we do.

Steven Orchard

Strategic Manager for Corporate Parenting

Appendix 1: March 2024 Board Scorecard

		Last 4 Months Activity					Comparators		Target	Trend	
Measure		December	January	February	March	YTD	SN	England		21/22	22/23
Children In Care	Number of children in care	538	537	531	532	532	n/a	n/a	n/a	523	544
	Children in Care rate (per 10,000)	67.0	66.8	66.1	66.2	66.2	66.0	70.0	n/a	65.1	67.7
	Number of children in care who are UASC	40	37	36	38	38	n/a	n/a	n/a	12	29
	Number of children entering care	20	19	13	15	205	n/a	n/a	n/a	190	189
	Number of children discharged from care	20	18	17	18	218	n/a	n/a	n/a	164	374
	% of children leaving care due to permanence (Special Guardianship Order, adoption, residence order)	15%	22%	29%	6%	23%	tbc	n/a	30%	27%	11%
	Percentage of eligible Children in Care of statutory school age with PEPs completed by the end of last term (reported April/July/December)	99.0%					n/a	n/a	95%	-	-
	Percentage of Initial Health Assessments completed within 28 days of becoming looked after.	47.6%	17.6%	7.7%	15.4%	35.9%	N/A	N/A	90%	30.3%	52.9%
	Percentage of Children in Care with an up to date dental check	62.2%	65.0%	65.3%	67.7%	67.7%	63.0%	70.0%	90%	45.0%	66.6%
	Percentage of Children in Care with an up to date health assessment	75.1%	72.0%	72.3%	78.1%	78.1%	86.0%	89.0%	93%	68.0%	70.6%
	% of Children in Care with an up to date care plan	86.8%	91.4%	92.6%	91.4%	91.4%	N/A	N/A	95%	88.0%	85.9%
% of Children in Care with a visit within the last 6 weeks	92.5%	92.8%	91.5%	91.1%	91.1%	n/a	n/a	95%	91.2%	94.6%	

Measure		December	January	February	March	YTD	SN	England	Target	21/22	22/23
Placements	Percentage of Children in Care with three or more placements in the previous 12 months	14.7%	15.6%	14.1%	13.0%	13.0%	10%	10%	10%	13.0%	11.4%
	Children who have been in care 2.5 years or more, and of those, who have been in the same placement for 2+ years/placed for adoption (%)	65.2%	63.0%	62.2%	62.7%	62.7%	tbc	tbc	66%	68.9%	66.1%
	% of Children in Care in residential placements	13.0%	12.8%	12.6%	14.3%	14.3%	15.0%	17.0%	n/a	11.0%	12.7%
	% of residential placements which are in house	10.9%	12.5%	14.1%	11.1%	11.1%	n/a	n/a	tbc	-	11.7%
	% of Children in Care & Care Leavers aged 16+ with a personal advisor	80.6%	84.5%	82.7%	83.1%	83.1%	n/a	n/a	tbc	-	77.3%
Measure		December	January	February	March	YTD	SN	England	Target	21/22	22/23
Adoption	Number of adoption orders granted	7			7	21	n/a	n/a	n/a	-	20
	The average number of days between children entering care and being placed for adoption	526.7			456.9	546.3	tbc	376	273	436	454
	The average number of days between the placement order being granted and being matched (Quarterly)	105.9			81.3	90.7	tbc	178	178	165	54
	Percentage of Children in Care who were placed for adoption within 12 months of an agency decision that they should be adopted (Quarterly)	57.1%			85.7%	76.2%	tbc	74%	72%	-	85.0%

Care Leavers	Measure	December	January	February	March	YTD	SN	England	Target	21/22	22/23
	Percentage of eligible Children in Care and young people with up to date Pathway Plans	87.9%	85.4%	86.1%	87.3%	87.3%	N/A	N/A	95%	-	84.1%
	Percentage of eligible Children in Care and young people with up to date In Touch Visits/Contact	72.4%	74.2%	88.5%	94.0%	94.0%	N/A	N/A	90%	-	88.2%
	Percentage of young people now aged 17-21 and living in suitable accommodation who were looked after when aged 16	88.3%	94.1%	93.3%	93.8%	93.8%	89.0%	89%	90%	89.9%	94.7%
	Percentage of young people now aged 17-21 and in employment, education or training who were looked after when aged 16	55.6%	55.4%	55.2%	53.5%	53.5%	48.0%	58%	55%	55.6%	58.4%

Appendix 2. Corporate Parenting Strategy Priorities and Progress

The NCT Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-25 sets out four key priorities. This appendix sets out progress against the specific criteria under each priority. Note that unless stated otherwise, data applies county-wide rather than to NNC specifically.

Priority 1: Live safe, be safe



Key service areas and strategies: Sufficiency Strategy, Fostering and Adoption Recruitment Strategy, Commissioning Strategy

How we achieve this:

- We will work with communities, businesses and partner agencies to recruit more foster placements to meet the needs of the looked after children cohort and increase placement choices.
- If a child or young person has to move from where they are living, we will involve them in the decision making as much as possible and give them an information profile of the placement they are moving to.
- If possible, we will keep our children who are looked after with their brother and sisters when they come into care.
- Families and friends are always considered in the planning process and our children are placed with family and friends in instances where it is safe to do so.
- We will improve choice and quality of accommodation and support for older young people in care and care leavers.
- We will offer support to care leavers moving to independence to maintain tenancies.
- We will continue to develop clear service pathways for children at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Female Genital

- Mutilation (FGM) supported by a multi-agency process.
- We will continue to ensure that all children and young people who go missing receive return interviews, a completed risk assessment and timely management of identified risks.
- We will further develop a multiagency response to serious youth violence enabling early identification of young people.

Key success criteria:

- Increase sufficiency of local placements to increase choice for children in care.
- Increase in the number of children in foster placements who turn 18 and stay put in their placement.
- Reduction in the number of children in care with 3+ placement moves.
- Reduction in the number of children returning to care within one year of previous period of care.
- Increase in the number of children in care in long-term placements (fostering).
- Percentage of children in care during the year who were placed within 12m of the decision (adoption).
- Reduction in number of missing episodes for looked after children and increase in number of independent return home interviews.
- Reduction in number of looked after children who are first time entrants to criminal justice system.

Progress:

- The Permanence Tracking Panel takes place monthly, helping social workers remove barriers to children achieving permanence. The panel reviewed all Section 20 voluntary agreement in May 2024, with these to be reviewed by the regular panels as needed. Permanence learning sessions for staff have been well attended, including a Permanence Conference in February 2024.
- For NNC, 23% of children leaving care moved to a permanent arrangement, such as adoption or Special Guardianship Order, compared to 11% the previous year. However, placement stability dropped slightly reflecting the enormous pressure on placement sufficiency; for children in care over two and a half years, the proportion who were in the same placement for over two years fell from 66.1% to 62.7%. Similarly, 13% of NNC children had three or more placements, compared to 11.4% the previous year.
- Two new emergency children's homes have opened, reducing the use of unregistered placements.
- 76.2% of NNC children were placed for adoption within 12 months of the adoption decision being made, a drop from 85% the previous year. However, in many cases the longer period reflects sound care planning, with the right homes being secured for children.
- 80% of the children in care workforce are trained in Valuing Care and over 400 Valuing Care assessments are completed. The Circle to Success Forum helps frontline workers create strong, outcome focussed care plans for children, including minimising the use of high cost residential care for older

young people. This has helped children reunite with their families or step-down from residential to foster care.

- The Systemic Practice roll-out is underway, starting a five-year programme. Supervision templates have been updated accordingly and training began in April 2024.
- A new Access to Resources panel reviews funding requests. This allows greater scrutiny and oversight on residential homes seeking funding for additional resource, and helps identify the right therapeutic resources for children.
- NCT's Independent Fostering Agency was rated 'Good' at last inspection. An IFA quality assurance programme is in place. Supervising Social Workers saw children during visits to foster carers 84% of the time as of February 2024.
- The Youth Offending Service was rated 'Good' at last inspection. Their Turnaround Plus project includes children in care; only 2% of children on the programme reoffended. As of March 2024, 15% of the Youth Offending caseload were children in care, the same figure for the previous year, however children remain overrepresented in repeat offending statistics.
- A new Exploitation Framework is currently being developed; six social workers and a team manager will form a new exploitation hub.
- The monthly Accommodation and Transitions multi-agency panel helps remove barriers to care-experienced young people moving on to independence successfully. It is led by the Leaving Care Service and attended by housing services, adult social care, the leaving care mental health practitioner, and other agencies as needed.
- 93% of NNC young people aged 17 to 21 were in suitable accommodation, including 21 staying put or shared lives arrangements with their previous foster carer, at the end of 2023-24.
- Drop-in services in the north of the county for care leavers are in place; the search continues for a suitable venue to use as a hub. The Leaving Care Service's Stay Close, Stay Connected programme provides intensive support, including accommodation, to young people leaving residential care who are not ready for a social tenancy.
- The Missing Children Steering Group has used the Application of Children's Society tool to identify priority areas that have been taken forward, including impact of return home interviews. Children missing data for 2023-24: 2592 missing episodes, down from 2733 in 2022-23; 40% of missing episodes were children looked after, down from 46% 2022-23. Children's engagement with Return Home Interviews has improved. 98% of required interviews were completed in 2023-24 and 68% of young people engaged, up from 66% 2022-23.

Priority 2: Fulfil potential



Key service areas and strategies: Virtual School, SEND Strategy and Transformation Programme, Care Leavers Strategy.

How we achieve this:

- Educational needs or requirements of the child will be considered at the outset of any placement.
- We will support our children with education, training and employment options to help them achieve the best they can.
- Children who need to change schools will be allocated a new school place without delay.
- Children with additional needs will be supported to have appropriate provision so they can achieve their potential.
- All children will have a Personal Education Plan (PEP).
- Young people leaving care will be encouraged and supported with accessing further and higher education and training opportunities including apprenticeships.
- We will increase apprenticeships, work experience and training opportunities across the councils, partners and the private sector.

Key success criteria:

- All looked after children will have an up-to-date PEP supported by daily monitoring calls to each school where a child attends to ensure attendance.
- Improvement in educational attainment of children.
- Increase in proportion of care leavers in education, employment and training.

- Reduction in number of children without a school place.
- Increase in care leavers undertaking apprenticeships and other opportunities in the Trust and councils.
- EHC Plans for children are reviewed annually and quality assurance demonstrates plans are of good quality.

Progress:

- Prospects remains the Trust's NEET prevention partner, helping young people into education, employment and training. The service works with the Trust to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET before the end of their formal education.
- By the last measure in December 2023, 99% of NNC children had a Personal Education Plan completed. PEP quality continues to improve at statutory school age with a 7% improvement in the number of good PEPs in 2022-23 to 86% from 79% in 2021-22 and 63% in 2020-21.
- PEP quality at Post 16 has improved with an 8% rise in the number of good PEPs, despite an increase in the number of completed PEPs from 88 in 2021-22 to 144 in 2022-23.
- PEP quality at Early Years remains high with 80% of completed PEPs being good over the last three academic years.
- A new ePEP tracker is available online to Virtual School officers and Trust managers.
- Children Not in Education who are in care are reviewed monthly by the Strategic Manager, with social workers required to provide updates. This is a key area of scrutiny in the Circle to Success Forum. For the county as a whole, there has been a 33% reduction in the number of children not in education.
- Positive engagement with local businesses took place at an event hosted by NCT, leading to offers of apprenticeship for care leavers. WNC, NNC and the Trust consider care-experience a protected characteristic for the purpose of recruitment.
- The proportion of care leavers aged 17 to 21 in education, employment or training remains above the figure for our statistical neighbour local authorities.
- NNC's Adult Learning service offers a study programme aimed at those at risk of being Not in Education, Employment or Training. This can include English and maths courses alongside employability skills. The programme is due to expand over the next two to five years. The service can also offer workshops on topics such as financial literacy.

Priority 3: Develop resilience



Key service areas and strategies: Reunification Policy, Workforce Development Strategy, Joint Housing Protocol, Participation Strategy.

How we achieve this:

- We will help our children to learn about who they are as well as the important events in their lives.
- We will make sure all necessary information and paperwork is obtained in a timely way such as passport, birth certificate and national insurance number.
- We will promote family time between children, young people and their families in a way that enables them to have positive relationships with the people who are important to them where this is safe.
- We will support children to reconnect with family and other trusted adults in a safe and to learn about their family history.
- We will work with children and families to ensure there is effective support in place to support and maintain a return home.
- We will continue to build positive relationships with our children and never give up on them.
- We will ensure children have a variety of means to express any concerns they may have and that these are acted on promptly.
- We will aim to keep changes for our children to a minimum.
- We will make certain that we have a robust and active Children in Care Council who are able to influence and shape services.
- We will offer support to care leavers moving to independence to maintain tenancies.

Key success criteria:

- Increase in children moving out of care and number of children returning home.

- Proportion of visits to children in timescale.
- Increase in percentage of permanent social workers in the corporate parenting service.
- Increased number of children engaging in Children in Care Council and participation events.
- Feedback from children and young people.

Progress:

- The population of children in care for NNC fell from 544 at the end of 2022-23, to 532 for the end of 2023-24, demonstrating greater responsiveness to assessed needs for those on the edge of care. For NNC, 23% of children leaving care moved to a permanent arrangement, such as adoption or Special Guardianship Order, compared to 11% the previous year.
- The proportion of NNC children with an up-to-date visit dipped slightly from 94.6% in 2022-23, to 91.1% the following year. However, the proportion of NNC children with an up-to-date care plan rose from 85.9% to 91.4%.
- A new Strategic Manager is in place to oversee the Legal Gateway panel and case progression. Average length of care proceedings reduced from 67 weeks in June 2022, to 32 weeks in December 2023. The use of family network meetings has increased, to explore alternatives to foster care.
- Life Story Work training sessions were undertaken with the Innovate service, with new NCT Life Story Work Champions appointed from frontline staff to roll out learning across the service.
- A quality assurance framework is in place, which will be updated in line with the Systemic Practice model.
- Collaborative Reflective Practice Discussions include a dedicated section around children's identity and culture. 86% of these assessments were rated 6+ for this criterion in April 2024. 92% were rated 6+ for overall care planning quality.
- 11.4% of social workers had a caseload of more than the recommended level, a reduction from the previous year. Similarly, social worker vacancies reduced to 15.8%.
- Large-scale Children in Care Celebration and Awards events are taking place annually, with the Children in Care Council heavily involved in planning and running the event. Separate events take place for care leavers.

Priority 4: Enjoy good health and wellbeing



Key service areas and strategies: Integrated Care System, CCG Health of Looked After Children Strategy

How we will achieve this:

- Children receive appropriate, dedicated services within agreed timescales including access to health assessments, dental appointments and emotional health and wellbeing services.
- We will give access to appropriate emotional and mental health support for looked after children when they need it.
- We will support care leavers to achieve positive mental wellbeing and emotional resilience.
- Children with complex needs and disabilities will have access to integrated services.
- We will make sure our children who are looked after can access their health records and history.
- We will develop support offers to foster carers including access to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
- We will help our children do the things that are important to them in terms of culture and religion.
- Children will enjoy a smooth transition between children's services and adult social care.

Key success criteria:

- Children and young people identify themselves as health and happy.
- % of children in care with Strengths and Difficulties (SDQ) scores.
- Proportion of care leavers provided with a health passport.
- Reduction of care-experienced young people who are street homeless or involved in offending behaviour.
- Increased placement stability performance.

- Number of children referred to MIAP aged 16.

Progress:

- Range of communication styles used to gain children's voices within Disabled Children's Service to inform assessments of need. The service has embedded multidisciplinary team meetings, involving the Children in Care, adult services and other teams to ensure a multi-agency response to children's needs.
- The Disabled Children's Team leads the new Transitions and Outcomes Group, which considers at an early stage whether young people would benefit from a referral to adult social care.
- 78.1% of NNC children had an up to date review health assessment, compared to 70.6% the previous year. Initial Health Assessment performance is down compared to the previous year, but has recovered from a low of 7.7% in February, to a year-end figure of 35.9%.
- An action plan to improve performance around health assessments is in place, including a full review of Community Paediatrics being undertaken by the Integrated Care Board and greater tracking of children placed out of county.
- The new Children in Care Health Partnership reviews operational issues and performance around health assessments, dental and optical checks and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires. The Children in Care Health Team has a new intranet page, with guidance for frontline staff on procedures and timescales.
- NHS England has written to all dentists, explaining the need to prioritise appointments for children in care.
- The ICB commissions a multidisciplinary mental health team for children in care which carries out consultations and specialist assessments. The service's county-wide caseload stood at 270 children and young people at the end of March 2024.
- The Child Protection Information System continues to roll out to more clinical settings. This allows clinicians to see quickly whether a presenting child is known to social services.