



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Wokingham Borough Council

Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategy

2023 - 2025

A Borough in which all children and young people are safe and cared for, enjoy and achieve, are healthy and resilient, grow up ready for adulthood, and feel happy, hopeful and loved.

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Foreword from Prue Bray, Executive Lead Member for Children’s Services

I am proud to have taken on the important roles of Executive Lead Member for Children’s Services and Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board at Wokingham, and am passionate about ensuring that we, as a whole authority, are outstanding corporate parents to our children in care and care leavers. Everyone in the authority, from elected members to front line staff, is a corporate parent and has a part to play. For most children and young people in the Borough, Wokingham is a wonderful place to live and grow up. We are absolutely committed to providing the children who come into our care with the love and support they need, to ensure that they too can grow up with positive childhood memories, and are prepared for a fulfilling adulthood.

I am constantly impressed by our children in care and care leavers, their resilience, and their achievements. I look forward to continuing to work with everyone across the council and in the community beyond to ensure that we can provide all our children in care and care leavers with the help and support they need.

Prue Bray
Executive Member for Children’s Services



Foreword from Helen Watson, Interim Director of Children’s Services

Our children in care and care leavers are amongst the most vulnerable children and young people that we have the privilege of protecting and supporting in Wokingham. When a child comes into our care, as a council we have an incredibly important job to do. We become their Corporate Parent, a role which carries with it all the responsibility that comes with being a mother or father. We are committed to being their advocate, champion, protector, and guide through difficult times, providing safety, love, stability, hope and dignity. We are ambitious for their futures, and proud of all their achievements.

This strategy lays out the priorities for our work with children in care and care leavers, explaining what we will focus on so that our children and young people achieve the best possible outcomes and feel confident and hopeful for the future.

Helen Watson
Interim Director of Children’s Services



Foreword from our Children in Care Council

As the Children in Care Council, we proudly represent the views of all children in care and care leavers in Borough. We get together regularly and give feedback on things that matter to us.

We are happy this strategy is in place to give guidance to our corporate parents and help them understand what they should work towards.

We want to be recognised as any other children in the borough and enjoy what any of them enjoy in their lives. We want our childhoods to be the same as any of our friends, and we're happy that you recognise this.

We agree with the priorities in this document.

Wokingham Children in Care Council














This strategy on a page...

We appreciate that not everyone has the time to read a 30-page strategy document, so here are the most important parts summarised in one place.

Our Priorities:

To achieve our “mission” for children in care and care leavers (see right), we have identified 11 priorities that we will hold ourselves accountable for. These can be summarised as follows:

-  1) Being the best “corporate parents” that we possibly can be.
-  2) Ensuring that we put in place effective plans for children’s futures.
-  3) Maintaining strong, respectful & trusted relationships with children.
-  4) Working towards permanent and stable arrangements for children.
-  5) Ensuring children have the support to develop their physical & emotional health.
-  6) Encouraging children to engage in learning, employment & to meet their potential.
-  7) Making sure that all children have a safe and suitable place to live.
-  8) Supporting children to access any leisure or cultural activities that they enjoy.
-  9) Supporting & encouraging children as they make their transition into adulthood.
-  10) Meeting the unique needs of our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
-  11) Listening to the views of children, so that they can shape and inform our work.

Our Mission:

At Wokingham, our overarching mission for children in care and care leavers is to be the most effective “corporate parents” that we can be. By this, we mean that we want to see all council representatives deliver services to the standards that they would expect for their own children. To this end, our ambition is to instil a culture in the council of unwavering commitment and compassion towards the children and young people it works with - which is unashamedly aspirational in seeking the best possible outcomes for them.

GOING FORWARD:



Our work across the 11 strategic priorities will inform an action plan for our Service, which will be reviewed and updated regularly over the course of the next two years. As part of this, we will closely monitor the impact that our work is having on the outcomes of children and young people via various indicators. For example, data relating to educational progress; physical and emotional health; the quality and stability of our placements; the stability of our workforce; and the timeliness of our planning and decision making. Crucially, we will also listen to what children and young people tell us about how our work across these priority areas is affecting their lives, and will respond accordingly.

Introduction

What is the purpose of this strategy?

This strategy outlines where we, Wokingham Borough Council, will focus our efforts over the next two years to ensure that our children in care and care leavers receive the services and support that they need to do well. It recognises that as corporate parents, we need to be satisfied that the support we provide for children and young people would be good enough for our own children. It also recognises that each child and young person in our care, or leaving our care, is an individual, with their own very distinct experiences, personalities, and needs. Importantly, this is a strategy that has been informed and ratified by our Children in Care Council, who represent the children and young people we look after or support in Wokingham, and understand what it means to be a child in care or a care leaver.

How is the document structured?

This document is structured into the following core components:

- **Context:** a brief overview of how our work with children in care and care leavers is informed by - and informs - the Council's wider vision
- **Definitions:** a quick run through of what we and others mean when referring to "children in care" and "care leavers"
- **Our cohort:** a statistical overview of the children and young people that we currently have the privilege of looking after or supporting.
- **Our priorities:** some further detail on the eleven strategic priorities that we have identified, and what we mean by them.
- **Governance:** an explanation of how we will be held to account for our progress against this strategy
- **Appendix:** a bit more detail on how this document links to other strategies and documents.

A quick note on accessibility and language

The legislation governing services and support for children in care and care leavers, and the language used by those working in this area, can often be technically complex and acronym heavy. When writing this strategy, we have made a conscious effort to try and strip away as much of the jargon as possible, to ensure the document is as user-friendly as possible. Ultimately, we want this document to be easy to digest for specialists and non-specialists alike, and most importantly for any children or young people who might want to read it.



Context

How does this strategy fit into the Council's wider community vision?

Wokingham Borough has recently undergone a period of significant town centre regeneration, house building and infrastructure development. These improvements to the Borough, alongside wider service improvements, are part of a council-wide vision to provide the right environment for residents and communities to thrive. The council's overarching community vision is for Wokingham is to be

"A great place to live, learn, work, and grow, and a great place to do business".

To this end, for the years 2020/21 to 2024/25, the Council has identified seven strategic areas of focus (see graphic to right). These affirm Wokingham's commitment to providing the right environment for all children and young people in the borough to thrive, whilst recognising that the circumstances for some will mean that they might require additional support. Importantly, the type of additional support that children in care and care leavers will often require is carefully reflected throughout this vision - whether that be in terms of prioritising safety and good health outcomes, promoting excellent education and employment opportunities, or providing housing which supports independence. The Council's vision is therefore not only closely aligned with the ambitions of those working in Children's Services, but is also actively supportive in ensuring that its staff have the strategic backing to excel in their day-to-day work.

How does this strategy relate to other work going on in Children's Services?

Whilst this document represents an overarching strategy for children in care and care leavers in Wokingham, underneath it there are a number of corresponding strategies, policies and guidance documents, which guide our frontline work in various ways. Some of the more important ones are as follows:

- **Our Corporate Parenting Strategy:** which explains our approach or style to corporate parenting, and provides more detail on Priority 1 of this document.
- **Our Permanency Strategy:** which sets out how we plan to ensure that our children in care have a plan for achieving a safe, secure, permanent arrangement for the future. (Linking to Priority 4 of this document).
- **Our Sufficiency Statement:** which describes our approach to ensuring children in care and care leavers are found places to live that are right for them, as close as possible to home (Linking to Priority 7 of this document).

Wokingham's 7 strategic priorities:

- 1) Enriching Lives
- 2) Providing Safe, Strong Communities
- 3) Enjoying a Clean and Green Borough
- 4) Delivering the Right Homes in the Right Place
- 5) Keeping the Borough Moving
- 6) Changing the way we work for you
- 7) Being the best we can be

If you would like to learn more about Wokingham Borough Council's vision, more detail can be found on our website here:

<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/council-and-meetings/open-data/community-vision-and-council-plan/>

Find out more:

If you would like to learn more about these strategy documents, please see **Appendix A** for a visual representation of how they interlink. If you would like to read them in full, please visit our Children's Services Procedure Manual here:

https://www.proceduresonline.com/wokingham/childcare/local_resources.html

Definition 1: What do we mean by a child in care?

Why do children enter care?

There are a variety of reasons why children and young people might enter care. Some examples are as follows.

- Children can be accommodated under a voluntary agreement between their parents and the local authority (this is known as Section 20). This can happen if, for example, parents are too unwell to look after their child.
- Where a local authority has serious concerns about a child's welfare - to the extent they think they might be at risk of significant harm - the authority can also go to court to seek what is known as a Care Order or an Interim Care Order. When this happens, the local authority shares parental responsibility with the parents, and they are often (but not always) placed with relatives, in a children's home or with foster parents.
- Local authorities can also apply for emergency court orders to remove them from their parents or carers, which are put in place quickly where there are particularly urgent concerns about safety.
- Some children can also be what is known as "compulsorily accommodated". This can include children taken into custody.
- Children can also be unaccompanied asylum seekers, with no responsible adult to care for them, who thus need to come into the local authority's care.

Legal Definition

In England and Wales, the term 'looked after child' is defined in law under the Children Act 1989. A child is looked after by a local authority if they are in care or provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours by the authority. Looked after children are also often referred to as children in care, a term which many children and young people prefer. This is the terminology we use in Wokingham.

A child stops being in care when they are adopted, return home, or turn 18.



Definition 2: What do we mean by a care leaver?

Definition

A care leaver is someone who has spent time in foster or residential care, or in other arrangements outside their immediate or extended family before the age of 18.

How are Care Leavers supported?

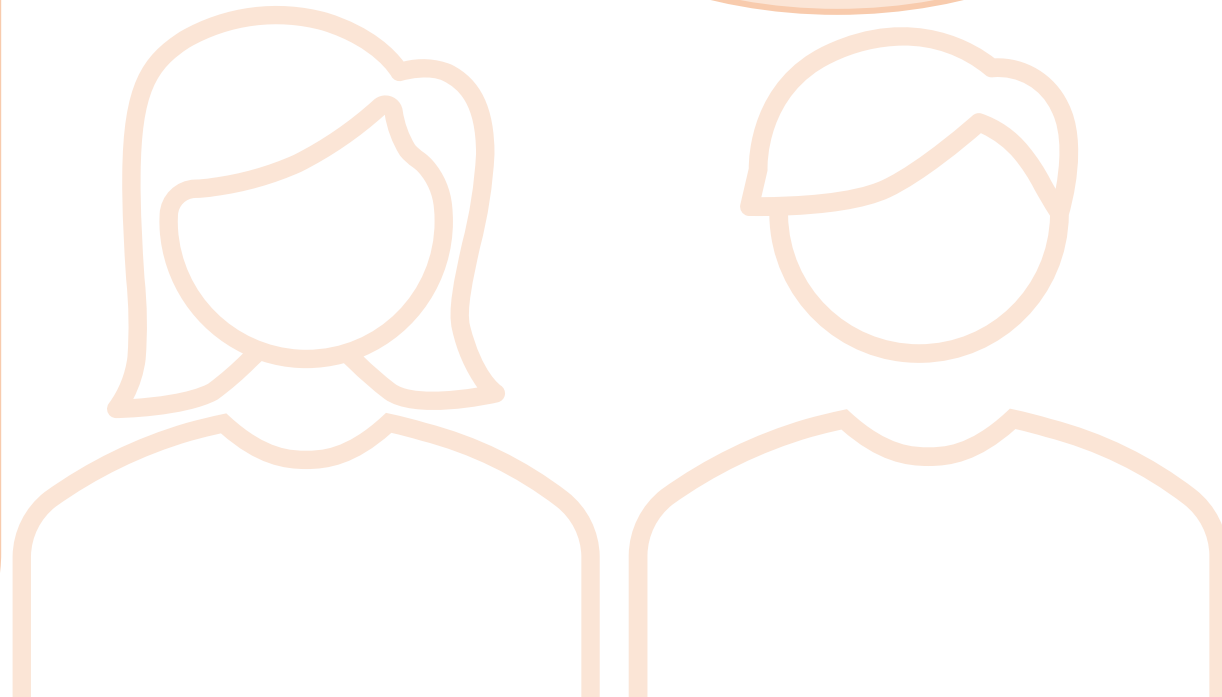
Local authorities have a duty to help care leavers transition into adulthood. The government has outlined what care leavers are entitled to. This includes:

- 1) **A needs assessment**, considering the young person's independent living skills and ability to manage their own finances.
- 2) **A pathway plan**, to help set out the support that will be provided once they have left care.
- 3) **A personal advisor** for when the child turns 16, to help them plan for their future and access any other support services which they might need.

Who is eligible for care leaver support?

Children Leaving care at 18 are entitled to support from their local authority until they are at least 21. For some children this will mean staying on with their foster carers, for others alternative accommodation options will be required. Young people who are entitled to this support are categorised into different groupings, defined by law. The type and level of support a young person will receive will often depend on the category they fall within. Four important categories that you might hear people talk about are as follows:

- **An eligible child:** this is a child aged 16 or 17 who has been looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14 and who is still being looked after.
- **A relevant child:** this is a child aged 16 or 17 who has been looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14 (and with a period of that time being after their 16th birthday) but who is no longer in care.
- **A former relevant child:** this is a young person over 18 who was previously an 'eligible' or 'relevant' child. They can receive support from their local authority until they are 25.
- **A qualifying care leaver:** this is a young person over 18 who was not previously an 'eligible' or 'relevant child', but still qualifies as a care leaver. For example, a young person can qualify because they were looked after for a period of time by children's services on, or after, their 16th birthday, or if they have spent less than 13 weeks in care since their 14th birthday.



Wokingham's Children in Care

The below summarises some key statistics about the group of children in care that we currently have the privilege of looking after or supporting. All data is accurate as of March 2023.

OVERALL NUMBERS:



In Wokingham, we have a relatively small population of children in care when compared to national and regional averages. We currently look after **137** children, which means we have a rate of **33** children in care for every 10,000 children living in the borough. This is notably lower than the national average rate of 67, or the south-east regional rate of 53. Although this is low in a national context, the amount of children we are looking after has actually increased quite significantly over the last two years. For example, just two years ago in March 2021, we had an overall cohort of 102. Recent growth has mainly been attributed to us looking after significantly more unaccompanied asylum seeking children (see below), as well as growth in the numbers of older children coming into our care.

GENDER:

73% of our looked after population



are male and **27%** are female. The number of males as a proportion of our total cohort has increased slightly over the last two years. The rise is in part due to the increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children that the borough now looks after (see below), who are typically male.

ETHNICITY:



Half of our children in care are White British. **17%** are from an Asian background. Black, Mixed and Other ethnic backgrounds represent a further **33%** of our total cohort (which is very slightly higher than the proportion recorded in Wokingham's local school population).



Where do our children in care live?



Where it is necessary and in the child's best interests to do so, there are various ways in which we accommodate children outside of their family home (often referred to as a "placement"). The majority of our children in our care - 64% - are placed in foster care. 8% live in children's homes, 16% live in a form of semi-independent living, and 8% have been placed to live with their parents. Placing children as close to their home and community as possible is a priority Wokingham. Excluding the work undertaken with UASC children and those that were placed with their parents (or in "short breaks" provision), **74%** are placed *within* 20 miles of their home address. We also put a lot of focus on working towards stability in the living arrangements that we provide for children (often referred to as "permanency") and this is something we monitor closely. The number of children in our care who have experienced 3 or more placement moves in the last 12 months is **9**, which although low, is something we want to reduce further.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children:



Wokingham currently has the responsibility of looking after **40** unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), which represents just under a third of all the children we look after. We have seen a significant increase in the arrival of these children over the last two years (in 2021 we had just 6 in our care). In light of this, ensuring that we have the right expertise and resources to meet their unique needs has been a significant focus for our service, and will continue to be a priority going forward (see Priority 10).

Wokingham's Care Leavers

The below summarises some key statistics about the group of care leavers that we currently have the privilege of supporting. All data is accurate as of March 2023.

OVERALL NUMBERS:



We currently have **115** young people aged between 18 and 25 who qualify as care leavers in Wokingham - of these **103** are choosing to receive a service from us. 80 of the total number of care leavers qualify for support as a "former relevant child" (See page 9). The numbers of care leavers that we have in Wokingham have steadily increased over the last two years - in March 2021 our care leaver group consisted of 95 young people, meaning the cohort has grown by 23% over the last two years. In light of our growing numbers of children in care (see Page 10) - many of whom are older children aged 16/17 - our modelling suggests that the number of care leavers in Wokingham is expected to grow substantially over the coming years.

GENDER:



Currently **42%** of our care leavers are female, and **58%** are male.



ETHNICITY:



47% of our current group of care leaver are White British.

45% are from ethnic minority backgrounds*.

*This diverse group of individuals includes those from Black, Black British, Caribbean or African backgrounds (8%), those from Asian or Asian British backgrounds (10%), those from Mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds (7%) as well as a further group who would be described as being from "other" ethnic backgrounds (18%) when recorded nationally (i.e. for the census).

Former Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children:



32 (or 27%) of our current group of care leavers were formerly Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. We expect to see this number grow almost exponentially over the next few years. This is because the UK Government has put in place a mandatory scheme, whereby all local authorities are required to take care of a certain number of UASC children from other parts of the country (capped at 0.1% of the authority area general child population). UASC children typically come into our care as older teenagers, and turn 18 relatively quickly – hence why we expect to see numbers continue to grow. As with our children in care service, responding to the unique needs of this group of individuals will be a significant priority for us going forward.

Where do our care leavers live?



We work hard to stay in touch regularly with all of our care leavers, and from this we know that an overwhelming majority of the group (**95%**) are in what can be described as suitable accommodation. This accommodation can take various forms, depending on the unique needs and circumstances of the young person. Currently 7 (6%) of our care leavers are in what are known as Staying Put Arrangements (where a young person continues to live in their foster home after their 18th birthday). 48 (42%) are living independently, 25 (22%) are living in some form of semi-independent accommodation, and 14 (12%) live with parents or relatives.

Our Vision and Mission for Children in Care and Care Leavers

Wokingham's vision for children in care and care leavers is the same as the vision we have for all children in the Borough.

This is to be...

“A Borough in which all children and young people are safe and cared for, enjoy and achieve, are healthy and resilient, grow up ready for adulthood, and feel happy, hopeful and loved.”

As part of this, our specific mission for children in care and care Leavers is...

“To be highly effective corporate parents, providing high-quality, tailored support which would be good enough for our own children.”

To this end, our ambition is to instil a culture across Wokingham based on...

High aspiration & ambition,
to give children in care and care leavers the chance to not only do well, but to thrive as successful, resourceful, and achieving members of their local communities.

Unwavering commitment
and dedication towards meeting the needs of the children and young people we work with.

Compassion & empathy,
which should be at the core of everything we do - with our work built on strong and stable relationships with children and their families.

Our Strategic Priorities for Children in Care and Care Leavers

We have identified **11** core strategic priorities for our work with children in care and care leavers.

These are all informed by our Pledge to Children in Care and by our Care Leaver Offer (these documents are explained in a bit more detail later on in this document), and have also been shaped by what our latest self-evaluation work reveals about where we need to focus our efforts over the next two years.

Although these priorities remain broadly similar to those included in the last version of this document (i.e. our 2021-23 strategy), there are notable differences which have been made. Perhaps most significantly, we have added a dedicated priority on meeting the complex needs of our unaccompanied asylum seeking children (or UASC) cohort. This has been added in recognition of the growing numbers of unaccompanied children that we are now looking after in Wokingham, alongside the growing demands formerly unaccompanied children will place on our care leaver service. More detail about this can be found under priority 10.



1

Being the best Corporate Parents that we possibly can be.



In short: Ensuring that our Corporate Parenting responsibilities are fulfilled to all children in care and care leavers, and that a council-wide culture is instilled that sees all WBC representatives working relentlessly and uniformly towards achieving the best possible outcomes for these individuals.

Why is this important?

Children in care start at a disadvantage, and the role that councils play in looking after these children is one of the most important things they do. Local authorities have a unique responsibility to their children in care and care leavers, and need to be satisfied that the support provided as corporate parents would be good enough for their own child – always meeting the particular needs and challenges of each child or young person. Everyone from the Chief Executive down to front-line staff, as well as all elected council members, should be concerned about children in care and care leavers as if they were their own. Local authorities with a strong corporate parenting philosophy recognise that the care system is not just about keeping children safe, but also about promoting recovery, resilience and well-being.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

We intend to reflect the seven Corporate Parenting Principles when exercising all of our duties to children in care and care leavers. These are as follows:

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

These principles are reflected in the aspirations of the next ten priorities.

More detail on our approach to corporate parenting can also be found in our
Corporate Parenting Strategy

2

Ensuring that we put in place effective plans for children and young people's futures.



In short: Ensuring that plans for children in care and care leavers are robust, ambitious, regularly reviewed and updated, and reflect the individual views and changing needs of the child or young person in question.

Why is this important?

The plans we develop to keep children in care and care leavers safe and promote emotional and physical wellbeing - as well as to prepare them for adulthood - should be of a high quality. They should specify how the authority proposes to respond to the full range of their needs, whilst also clearly reflecting the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person in question. When plans are based on detailed professional assessment of the circumstances of the child and put in place the right support to meet identified and changing need and are ambitious (just as a parent would be for their own child) the outcomes are far more likely to be positive. Plans need to be independently reviewed by senior and experienced practitioners (known as Independent Reviewing Officers or IROs) who should be satisfied that the plan identifies who is responsible for achieving the plan's objectives and that clear timescales are set. The process for reviewing the plan must also consider its quality and progress, and should challenge any drift and delay in achieving the specified objectives.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

We will continue to develop a stable and dedicated team of experienced and child-focused Independent Reviewing Officers (Commonly referred to as "IROs", these are specialist social workers responsible for overseeing and scrutinising the plans that we put in place for children). This team will strive to review plans in a timely and efficient manner, and will work with children's social workers to ensure that the reviews we undertake include robust assessments and analysis. Our work in this area will also be undertaken in an inclusive and accessible manner, with reports from reviews always written with the child in mind, and with as many as possible written directly to the child. Where appropriate and possible, summary letters will also be written to children following reviews of their plans, to make it easier for them to understand the process and any important updates that they should be aware of.

3

Maintaining strong, respectful and trusted relationships with all of the children and young people we work with.



In short: Ensuring that children in care and care leavers are supported to develop strong, stable and trusted relationships with their social workers, personal advisors, foster carers, advocates, family members and others in their support network. At its core, this approach will be built on respecting and understanding the unique identities, backgrounds and personalities of all our children in care and care leavers (irrespective of gender, sexuality, disability, race or ethnic background) to ensure we are able to fully understand and meet their needs.

Why is this important?

Social workers and other specialists working with children in care and care leavers want the best for the children and young people they work with, and are better able to achieve this when they develop strong, respectful, stable and trusting relationships with them. When it is not possible for a child to stay with the same social worker or other specialist, it is important to ensure that the transition to a new worker is smooth, with time taken to build the new relationship. Disruption is already a feature of the lives of many Children in Care and Care Leavers - minimising this for the future is vital. Understanding the unique identity and background of an individual is also crucial in being able to offer appropriate support and intervention in their lives.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

We will continue to focus on delivering relationship-based social work throughout our work. This means prioritising consistent relationships between children & families and their social workers, and allocating personal advisors to our care leavers early, wherever this is possible. This ambition will also, in part, be facilitated by our ongoing recruitment and retention strategy and our work to attract permanent social workers into our workforce, which will provide a stronger basis to develop long-term and consistent relationships with children. Our focus on relationship building will also be complimented by the organisation of a busy programme of participatory events for both children and care and care leavers - from Eid Celebrations to camping trips and Christmas lunches. We also commit to an ethos and culture of inclusivity and non-discriminatory practice, which will seek to meet the needs of children and care leavers from all backgrounds and identities, irrespective of gender, sexuality, disability, race or ethnic background – or indeed any other protected characteristic they may have, such as age, gender reassignment, religious belief, or being pregnant.

4

Working towards permanent and stable arrangements for children and young people wherever possible.



In short: Where it is safe and in their best interests to do so, always working towards children returning home. Where this is not possible, ensuring legal permanency is sought through placements with a relative, friend or other connected person (i.e. via Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders), or where children cannot remain within the family network, via adoption. To support this, we will ensure all children in care have an effective plan for permanence.

Why is this important?

Permanence for a child or young person means an enduring long-term commitment and stable family experience that lets the child put down roots. It is important because it promotes stability and a sense of belonging, which are key indicators of future positive life chances and provide the best chance of recovery for children and young people who have experienced abuse and neglect. It also helps maintain other important connections to people around them such as their siblings and extended family members. It helps in building and maintaining friendships and social connections. National regulations require that a Permanency Plan is in place for every child or young person who is in the local authority's care by the time of their second Child in Care review.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

We believe that all children have the right to experience family life, and that wherever it is consistent with their health and wellbeing this should be within their own birth families. Where it is necessary for a child or young person to leave their family, we will aim for this to be for as short a time as needed to secure a safe, supported return home. In cases where a child is unable to be cared for by their birth parents, we will first look to place the child or young person with a member of their extended family (whether that be on a temporary or permanent basis), provided that it is assessed as being consistent with the child's welfare. Permanency will then be secured through the appropriate legal order to meet the child or young person's needs. We will be robust in ensuring that we have effective plans for permanency for all children, which will always be in place by the time we undertake the second statutory review of a care plan. Our Service Managers will also undertake regular tracking meetings to identify and address any instances of drift or delay that might arise. We will also always provide children and young people with an age-appropriate explanation about how we reached their permanence arrangement.

5

Ensuring children and young people have the support to develop their physical and emotional health.



In short: Working with our community and agency partners to ensure that children in care and care leavers are supported to be both physically and emotionally healthy.

Why is this important?

Most children come into the care of a local authority because of abuse and neglect. Because of their past experiences, children in care and care leavers may need extra help and support. Delays in identifying and meeting their emotional and physical needs can have effects on all aspects of their lives, including their chances of reaching their potential and leading happy and healthy lives as adults.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

We will ensure that all health assessments for children in care are undertaken promptly by a registered medical practitioner and within required timescales - which will then inform the child's overall Care Plan. This process will always ensure that the opinions and wishes of children are listened to, and we will work with other relevant partners - including carers and schools - to ensure that they too take into account the child's wishes and feelings about how to be healthy. We will seek to measure the emotional and behavioural difficulties that our children in care are experiencing on a regular basis, via what are known as Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (a clinically proven questionnaire designed for children and young people). We will also work with our partners to ensure that the mental wellbeing of children is promoted, via what is locally known as the "Thrive Model" of effective prevention and promotion strategies. This model focuses on offering a person-centred approach to delivering mental health services, and perhaps most importantly, seeks to talk about these services in a common language that everyone can understand, with a clear distinction between treatment and support options. Finally, in collaboration with regional health partners and other local authorities across West Berkshire, we have recently launched a bespoke child and adolescent mental health service (often referred to as CAMHS) which is exclusively available to children in care. This innovative service will ensure that children in care receive quicker access to mental health support, and will make sure that such interventions are evidenced-based and informed by information sharing and partnership work across the region.

6

Supporting children and young people to engage in learning opportunities, obtain employment and meet their potential.



In short: Ensuring children in care and care leavers achieve the best possible outcomes in relation to education, employment, and training, by offering access to academic as well as broader enrichment and well-being activities. This includes making any necessary adaptations for our children and young people with special education needs or disabilities, to ensure they too have an equal chance to succeed and meet their potential.

Why is this important?

Every local authority in England has a statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of children in care and care leavers, including those placed outside the authority area and children who were previously in care. Children in care and care leavers start with the disadvantage of their pre-care experiences and as a consequence can miss out on the educational support and aspiration that a parent provides to their child. This can also make it more difficult for young people to access further or higher education, or to obtain meaningful employment opportunities as they transition to adulthood.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

Like all local authorities, as part of our corporate parenting role we have what is known as a Virtual School. This is a team of specialist staff who act as educational advocates for the children and young people in our care. In Wokingham, all children in care aged 2 years or older will have a named and allocated Virtual School case worker, to ensure they have effective support and advocacy from an early age. Our Virtual School vision is that all children in care and care leavers achieve expected - or better than expected - levels of progress, and that the difference between their achievement and that of those without care experience is diminished. As part of this, we will identify any special educational needs or disabilities across our cohort, and where necessary will support individuals with a tailored plan of support (known as an Education Health Care or EHC Plan) to help them overcome barriers to educational attainment. Our care leavers will also be supported by a dedicated NEET Prevention Team where needed, to ensure they have the best possible chances of securing opportunities for education, employment or training in their adult lives. In line with our bespoke apprenticeship programme and policy for care leavers, we will also work to ensure that our local care leavers are encouraged and supported to apply for any apprenticeship opportunities that arise across the council and the borough's maintained schools - this policy includes a guaranteed interview pledge (subject to the candidate meeting minimum requirements) and various other elements of financial and/or mentoring support.

If you would like to learn more about our work to improve access to apprenticeships for care leavers, more detail is available in our **Apprenticeship Programme and Policy for WBC Care Leavers.**

7

Making sure that all children and young people have a safe and suitable place to live.



In Short: Children in care and care leavers will have a safe place to live, in the right location, which meets their individual needs. Unless it is not in their interests to do so, children and young people will be placed as locally as possible so that they can maintain contact with family members, build effective community networks and continue their education, employment or training with the least possible disruption.

Why is this important?

Where a child lives, and with whom, whilst in care or as a care leaver (both the type of placement and the location) can have far reaching effects on their emotional and physical wellbeing, as well as their ability to recover from the circumstances which led to their being in care. Each child is an individual with distinct needs who will require a tailored approach to ensuring they are found a place to live which provides the right environment and the right support.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

Unless it is not in their interests to do so, children and young people in our care will always be placed as locally as possible. We believe that this is important for allowing children to maintain contact with their family members (where appropriate) and to build effective community networks, as well as continue their education, training or employment with the least possible disruption. We will achieve this by undertaking robust planning, allowing us to meet future demands in a flexible and responsive manner. We will place a particular focus on the unique housing needs of our older children in care and care leavers, so that we can respond to the often-fluctuating needs of this cohort. A good example of our work in this area is the recent launch of our London Road facility in 2022 - a property in central Wokingham that provides seven placements for our children in care and care leavers aged 16 - 21. We will also continue to focus on supporting and growing our fantastic network of local foster carers, who provide care and support to many of Wokingham's children in care. This will include working with Central Government under a pilot known as the "Mockingbird" programme. This initiative will see us develop resilient and caring communities (or "constellations") of fostering households - structured around the support and relationships that an extended family provides – and will support us to improve foster care and outcomes for fostered young people.

More detail on our work to ensure we can meet future demand for different accommodation and placement types can be found in our

Sufficiency Statement.

8

Supporting children and young people to access any leisure or cultural activities that they enjoy.



In short: Children and young people in care and care leavers will have access to leisure and cultural activities that they enjoy, and will be supported and encouraged to pursue such activities.

Why is this important?

As well as the importance of ensuring excellent educational support, the experiences children and young people have access to outside the classroom are a vital part of their development and contribute to their emotional and physical wellbeing. These activities provide opportunities to learn new skills, to socialise whilst doing something fun, and to build confidence.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

Wokingham will continue to actively support and promote leisure and cultural activities throughout all of its work with children and young people with care experience. One of the key components of our offer in this respect, is the benefit of **free gym membership**, which is made available to all children in care and care leavers. We also commit to listening to children and young people about their interests and hobbies, and will encourage them to engage in such activities, with financial support offered where appropriate. A good example of our recent work in this area was the organisation of a dedicated football team for our local care leavers, who meet frequently (every half term) to play, and often go for food after sessions. We will also ensure that our busy programme of participatory events and activities for children in care and care leavers remains responsive to their interests and cultures. For example, the recent introduction of an Eid celebration was notably successful and particularly well attended, which is something we will continue to build upon.

9

Supporting and encouraging children and young people as they make their transition into adulthood.



In short: Children and young people with care experience will be well-prepared for adulthood. As part of this, all children and young people will have a comprehensive and age-appropriate understanding of their family and why the decision was made for them to come into our care - providing them with the security and confidence to go forward with their lives.

Why is this important?

Children in care do not always experience the support a parent may provide for their child to prepare them for independence and adulthood, and may need additional help to navigate the worlds of work, housing, health, wellbeing and finance, as well as understand their rights as an adult. For children with additional needs, this may also involve ensuring an effective and smooth transition to support provided by Adult Social Care.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

Our approach to preparing children and young people for adulthood will be underpinned by the development of individualised, robust and co-produced plans for 16 and 17 years olds in care (known as Pathway Plans). We will also continue to commission independent life-skills programmes, which are delivered to children and young people individually or in small groups, as appropriate. Building on the recent decision of our leaving care service to purchase a Virtual College Tenancy Training course (which offers learning around the basics of being a first-time tenant) we will continue to explore how we can support young people to live as independently as possible via workshops, including in terms of finding accommodation, managing their finances and budgets and undertaking basic DIY.

We will also always provide an age-appropriate explanation to children of their family background and circumstances, why the decision was made for them to come into our care, and how we then went about seeking a permanent solution for their living arrangements under our care.

10

Meeting the unique needs of our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children



In short: Ensuring that our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people receive services that acknowledge the significant challenges and trauma they may have experienced, so that they feel supported and nurtured to settle and find stability in their new country of residence.

Why is this important?

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are likely to have a particular set of support needs due to the fact that they have very often travelled long distances, often taking significant risks, in order to reach the UK. In light of the trauma that many of these children and young people will have experienced, they may have an urgent need for specialist emotional and mental health support as well as tailored support to integrate them into the education system - so that they are afforded the best possible opportunities to learn and achieve.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

In response to the increasing number of UASC coming into our care, we will firstly take steps to ensure that we have sufficient staff capacity and expertise to deliver the high-quality services that these young people need and deserve. We have already recruited an additional social worker in our children in care team, and plan to further increase capacity and resources by employing an additional personal advisor in our care leaver team. Staff will also be given the opportunity to develop relevant skills and expertise in this area via an enhanced training package, which will focus particularly on developing knowledge in relation to legal rights, immigration status, and mental health. Our Advocacy Offer has also already been adapted accordingly to reflect the growing needs of the cohort, with our in-house Children's Advocate committing to supporting all new UASC arrivals at their age assessment and their first Children in Care review. In acknowledgment of the significant trauma that many of these children will have endured, we have also taken steps to ensure that local mental health services that are dedicated to young people with care experience (known as the CIC CAMHS service) will cater to the specific needs of UASC children and young people - based on relevant approaches, such as trauma recovery models. Finally, our Virtual School will continue to deliver bespoke work with our UASC cohort, underpinned by the appointment of a dedicated UASC officer based within the Virtual School team, and amongst other things the development of a UASC Specific template for Personal Education Plans.

11

Listening to the views of children and young people, so that they can shape and inform our work.



In short: Children in care and care leavers will have a strong voice and will be supported to articulate their needs and wishes. They will be provided with regular and meaningful opportunities to voice their opinions, and to shape the way that we as an organisation think and deliver services that affect them.

Why is this important?

Understanding the needs and wishes of children in care and care leavers is vital if plans for their future are to be effective and meaningful. In some cases, children and young people are old enough and confident enough to speak for themselves. But when they are not, it is important that there is support available from someone who can advocate for their needs, and be their voice, in the same way a parent would act as a strong advocate for their child.

What will our approach in Wokingham be?

In Wokingham we conduct an annual children in care survey, which invites our children in care to provide their thoughts on our performance. The questions are aligned against the promises that are set out in our “Pledge” (see Page 25). The feedback obtained from this survey will continue to be analysed carefully, to see where it can be used to inform the delivery of our services, underpinned by a robust “*You said, we did*” approach. We are also very lucky to have a highly engaged and committed Children in Care Council (CICC) in Wokingham, which meets regularly throughout the year to represent the views of our wider children in care population. With the support of our Child Friendly Wokingham Project, the CICC is regularly invited to inform the design of services and to provide their feedback on any significant strategies or commissioning decision. The CICC’s attendance - either pre-recorded, remote or in person - is also encouraged and welcomed across a variety of strategic boards and panels in Wokingham - most notably at our quarterly Corporate Parenting Board - to ensure children’s voices are heard by decision makers and elected councillors throughout the year. To further strengthen our approach, we have recently launched a dedicated Care Leaver Forum, which will provide a similar vehicle for young people with care experience to shape and inform the services that affect them.

More detail on our work to listen and respond to the views of children and young people can be found in our **Participation Strategy**.

Governance and Accountability

Our Pledge to Children in Care

We are determined to achieve the strategic aims set out in this document, and want children and families to hold us accountable with regard to our progress against them.

As part of this, we have laid out our offer and commitment to children and young people in care in the form of a **pledge**. The components of this pledge correlate closely to the strategic priorities set out in this document, and we will work to ensure all children and young people in our care are aware of them.

The Pledge can be found in full via our website here.

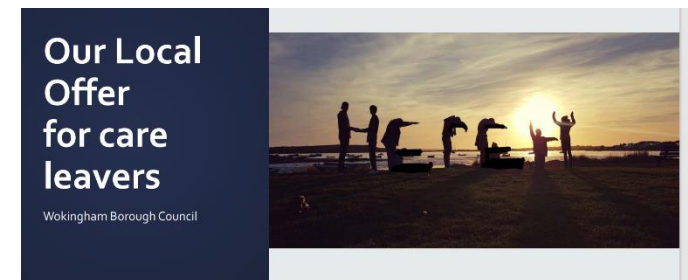
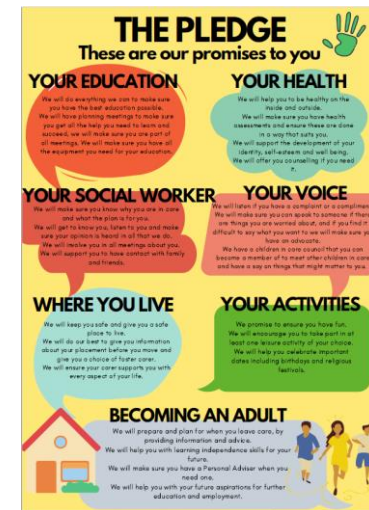
<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/children-and-families/child-protection-and-family-support/children-in-care-council/>

Our Care Leaver Offer

We are equally determined to achieve our aims and ambitions with regard to supporting care leavers, and want to be held accountable for our performance in this area in the same way. To ensure young people have a clear understanding of the support they are entitled to, we have set out a clear and accessible **Local Offer** for care leavers. This indicates their entitlements in areas such as housing, education, health and leisure, and is also reflective of the priorities set out in this strategy.

Our full Care Leaver Offer can be found via our website here.

<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/children-and-families/child-protection-and-family-support/children-in-care-council/>



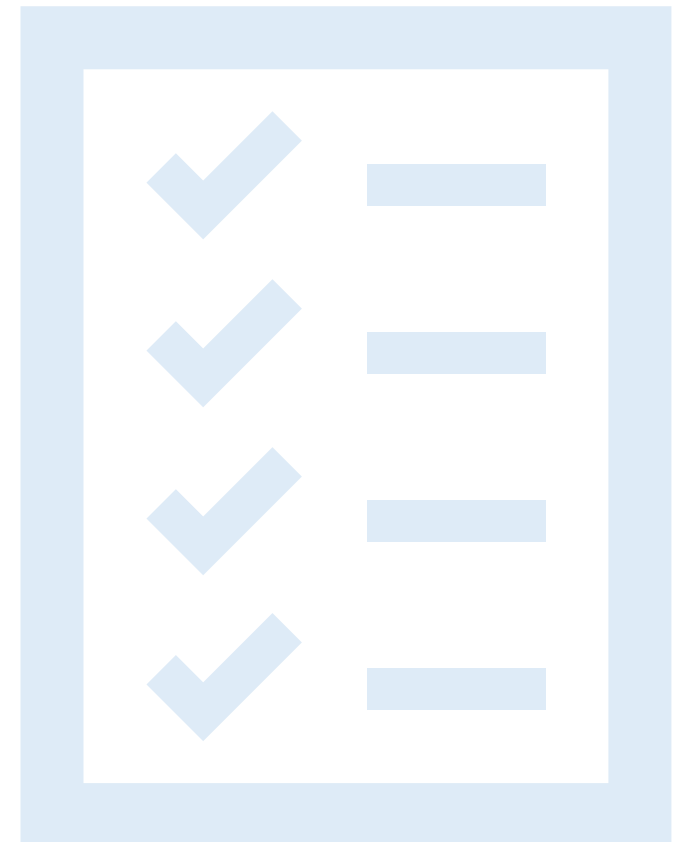
How will we know that this strategy has made a difference?

We will closely monitor the impact that this strategy is having using a suite of information and data. Amongst other things, this will include:

- What children and young people tell us about the difference the support we provide has made to them.
- Data collected on educational progress and outcomes.
- Data collected on physical and emotional health outcomes.
- Data collected on the quality, suitability and stability of housing and accommodation;
- Assessments made around the extent to which we achieve permanency for children and young people i.e. providing secure and long term placements;
- Data collected on the stability and skills base of our social care workforce, including regular reviews of the training opportunities offered and undertaken by our staff.
- Assessments we make of the quality of and timeliness of our planning for children and young people, including via internal and external audit work;
- Data collected on whether we are “in touch” regularly with our care leavers or not; and
- Data collected on the rates of our young people who are not in education, employment or training.

We commit to creating an annual update on our progress against our 11 strategic priorities, which will pull together our learning from such indicators in one place.

The next of these updates is scheduled for **October 2023**.



Appendix: How this strategy links to other WBC documents

Interlinking and contributing strategies

Examples of relevant policies, procedures, and protocols

