

Waltham Forest's Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report 2022-23



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Introduction



Message from Councillor Kizzy Gardiner, incoming Chair and Lead Member for Children and Families

It is my great pleasure becoming Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board. Our role as corporate parents within the Council and community is, to me, one of the most important jobs. I want to make sure that every child in our care has the best possible start in life and thrives throughout their journeys.

I am looking forward to building on the great work carried out by my predecessor Cllr Strathern, and to working with our young people and services so that we have only the best outcomes for our children.

Message from the outgoing Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board, Cllr Alistair Strathern

Key to the care of our children is how well all the services work together. The Corporate Parenting Board's role is to hold those services to account, and I feel privileged to have been able to lead this work for another year.

Being able to have open and frank discussions has been crucial to making sure our services are the best they can be and that our children are always at the heart of what we do. I welcome the active participation of our partners on the Board which continues to improve the delivery of joined up care that recognises and supports the unique needs of each of our children.

The courage, charisma and talents of the young people involved with the Corporate Parenting Board never ceases to amaze me. This year our young people, through the Voice and Influence Service, took being involved to a new and exciting level by taking charge of Board business and Co-Chairing the Corporate Parenting Board. They brought the lived experiences of being in care to the forefront of members' minds. It was very powerful and now, as a result, Brendan, one of our brilliant young people is co-chairing the Board. Our Children in Care Council are a vital part of the Board, and their influence runs through all aspects of the Board. Thank you as always for all that you contribute – it is invaluable!

One of the key highlights for 2022 – 23 is the innovation that has come from the Mockingbird Project. This vital asset continues to grow and goes from strength to strength, now with three constellations which has broadened support networks and created feelings of home for many of our children.

Ensuring that children and young people have a timely health assessment when they come into care and then regular review health assessments remains an area of concern for the Board and we have set clear expectations about how this will be monitored and challenged.

I want to thank each and every one of you across our corporate parenting services - colleagues, partners, foster carers, and adopters - for your ongoing dedication and hard work that continues to keep our children and young people safe and well and enables them to reach all of their potential. Whilst I am moving into a new role, I remain a dedicated corporate parent. I will keep the needs and voices of our children in my mind as part of my new responsibilities and I am pleased to be able to hand over to my esteemed colleague, Cllr Kizzy Gardiner who I know will continue to champion our children so that they can become all that they want to be and all we know they can be.

Purpose of this report

This annual report provides an overview of work that took place across the different Corporate Parenting Services from April 2022 – March 2023 to ensure that our children in care and care experienced children were kept safe and well and had every opportunity to flourish. It also describes the Board’s role in holding to account the services provided by the Council and partners for our care experienced children.

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

This report has informed the 2023/24 Corporate Parenting Strategy and it is recommended that these two documents are read alongside each other.

Role of the Corporate Parenting Board

The Corporate Parenting Board’s role is to ensure the council and its partners commit to excellent standards of corporate parenting, deliver the Pledge to Children In Care, and develop and carry out the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

Corporate Parenting Meetings – ‘what went down’

Six Corporate Parenting Board meetings took place in 2022-23 covering a range of key themes (see across). Each meeting looks at performance across all services and appropriate challenges made for areas requiring improvement. Young peoples’ workshops are now well embedded, ahead of each meeting. They gather our children’s views, help direct discussions and ensure our children’s ‘place at the table’.

April 2022	Focusing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical and mental health services and our children’s emotional wellbeing • Virtual School
July 2022	Focusing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review pathway plans and refresh local offer for care leavers
September 2022	Focusing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21/22 annual reports for Corporate Parenting Board and individual services • Schools Charter
November 2022	Focusing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions • Voice and Influence
January 2023 <i>YP shadowing as Chair</i>	Focusing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual School • Mental Health • Work with parents
March 2023	Young Person take-over with a young person Co-Chairing

What we've heard from our children

Everything we do within the Corporate Parent Board and the services it is responsible for, is informed by what our children tell us. Their voices are woven throughout this report and will be used to improve and develop in our roles as corporate parents so that they have every opportunity to flourish.

Snapshot of where we're doing well



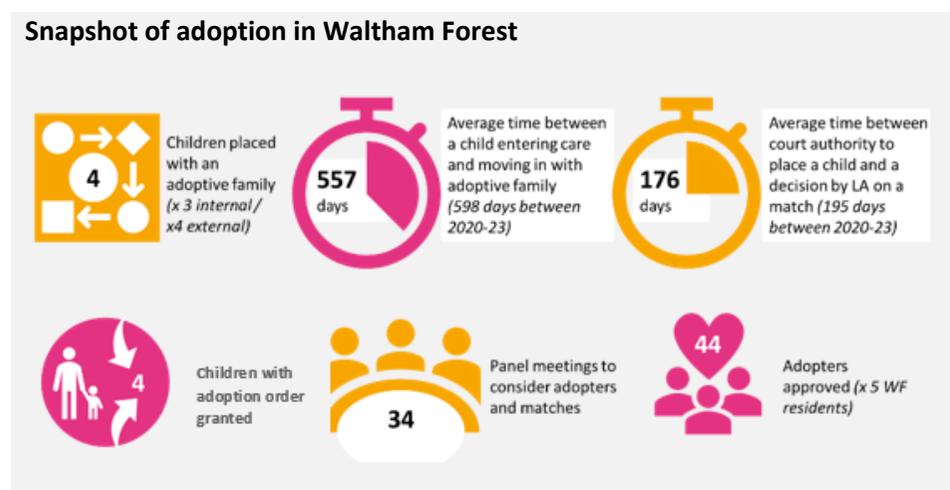
Snapshot of areas of improvement



Highlights from Corporate Parenting Services

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

Adoption Services



Coram has a national brief to supply adopters and arrange child placements. They are commissioned by the London Borough of Harrow to deliver the services of a regional adoption agency (RAA) for participating local authorities which includes Waltham Forest alongside Harrow, Bromley, City of London, Hillingdon, Redbridge, Slough and the Bi-Borough [Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster City Council].

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

Matches between children and adoptive families happen more effectively

- The Service Manager role as the Agency Advisor to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM), aids in the joined-up planning between the social work teams and the adoption service, but also drives improvements in social work practise regarding planning for permanence and also placement order applications.
- Practice regarding Early Permanence (EP) placements has improved and has set the local authority up for a positive 23/24. The preparation in the last quarter of the year led to two children being placed with EP carers at the start of 23/24, the first since Waltham Forest joined the RAA.
- There has been a significant increase in adoption activity and better grasp from social work teams on the need to consult with the adoption team, particularly at the early stages where EP may be a consideration.
- The adoption team supported its first student placement.
- The UEA Moving to Adoption model is becoming embedded in adoption and Corporate Parenting practice regarding transitions to adoption.

Matches happen for children who would otherwise have waited to find a permanent home

- Our family finding activity has been consistent and dynamic.
- We have maintained a stable permanent full time staff group with no staffing changes and have consolidated sound working relationships with teams across Children's Services.
- A robust tracking system has been developed for the early monitoring of children who may have a care plan of adoption all the way through to Adoption Orders being granted. The adoption team have become an integral part of Legal Planning, Permanency Oversight and Care Planning to ensure planning without drift and delay.



Children are loved and cared for in their permanent homes because their adoptive parents are appropriately supported

- 54 Adoption Support Fund (ASF) applications were made in this year, three of which were for SGOs (see below)
- Changes to the invoicing for providers of therapy, upon completion of work has led to a more streamlined process and has shifted greater emphasis on to the service providers, reducing the burden on the adoption team and Coram finance.
- No complaints about post adoption support were received during 2022/23
- There is a continued focus on the demand for adoption support services and the RAA has been part of a national working group in the development of a reporting dataset that will capture and improve the delivery of adoption support; this will include the support provided to birth families.

What have been some of the challenges for Adoption Services in 2022-23?

Nationally, there are fewer children exiting care and achieving permanence through adoption year on year, with more approved adopters than there are children to place. Less children are exiting care through adoption in London compared to anywhere else in England. When looking at current Waltham Forest data for children subject to plans for Adoption or are subject of Placement Orders it is likely that there will be an increase in the number of children exiting care through adoption in 2023/24. The ongoing increase in the demand for assessments of need and access to birth records and the limited resource in there being one adoption support social worker has led to the continuation of a waiting list to receive a service.

The post COVID impact can be seen in the delay of the disposal of many care proceedings and Adoption Proceedings, and evident across the RAA partners.

There has been a year on year increase in the numbers of applications to the ASF in Waltham Forest. Identifying practitioners that are able to support families with therapy accessed through the ASF remains a challenge. There are waiting lists with many providers and others do not always offer good value to the families or the ASF.

What's next for the Adoption Service in 2023-24?

- To continue to consolidate supportive relationship within the team and across Waltham Forest and create a distinctive identity
- To continue to develop the role of the ADM advisor
- Engagement in national forum on the implementation of an adoption support dataset
- Embed Early Permanence in Social Work Practice
- Development of Post Adoption Support recording systems and IT pathway.
- Evaluate the RAA partnership contract

Fostering and Permanence Services

Snapshot of Fostering and Permanence

By end of March 2023 there were:



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

Our children have a sense of belonging and stability

- Two additional Mockingbird Constellations had been launched by March 2023, increasing the Mockingbird family to three, which now comprises over 30 children
- The Mockingbird has also offered children the opportunity to have respite, which helps maintain stable homes, built on love, in line with the care review reforms.

Our children receive the love and care they need because their carers are appropriately supported

- With 10 foster carers in each Mockingbird Constellation, peer support is an invaluable part of what this project delivers
- Foster carers were back paid a 1.75% increase on their fostering allowance from April 2022

- A comprehensive programme of training for foster carers has ensured they are equipped to understand and appropriately respond to the risks and issues that our children face. In addition to the core offer, sessions have included themes around understanding of trauma, asylum seeking and refugee children and gang awareness
- Regular support groups provide special guardians with post order support in addition to the support from PAC-UK which is a subscribed service. The Adoption Support Fund provided support to three SGO carers and 51 adopters the ASF applications made

Our children's lived experiences are better understood

- Virtual Reality training via headsets and 2 / 3D videos continues to be utilised as part of the foster carer training programme as well as in reflective supervision.

Our children are cared for by people they know and love

- During 2022 – 23 the number of special guardians increased by nine (from 158) and there was a total of 14 special guardianship orders made. 21 temporary approvals were made for family and friends carers and 11 carers were approved under connected persons arrangements. This meant that 68 children have been able to be cared for by those they know and love.

Our children are cared for by those who have the right skills and ability

- The independent fostering panel remains robust and effective in discharging its functions i.e. reviewing and recommending approvals for foster carers and connected carers, recommending long term matches for Permanence for children. Five new fostering panel members were successfully recruited in 2023 which has enabled the panel to function more efficiently.

What have been some of the challenges for Fostering and Permanence in 2022-23?

Both Fostering and Permanence teams continue to follow through with ensuring adults' medicals are completed and returned in a timely manner to ensure children's permanence. However, there have been challenges with no dedicated medical advisor for adults, for fostering assessments. This creates delays with processing medicals at point of referral into the Permanence team so there is reliance on the paediatric consultants' goodwill to complete.



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

- Discussions are underway to apply the uplift in fostering allowance as directed by the Secretary of State, in response to the cost of living crisis.
- The fostering team is in the process of launching an application to promote and encourage life story work recording for children. The Caring Life app will allow children, social workers and foster carers to upload photos and also to capture and record the special moments, activities and memories for children. The caring life app will support direct work done with children in understanding their story and also journey in care.

Health

What difference has the work of our Corporate Parenting Health Services made to our children during 2022 / 23?

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

- The Corporate Parenting Board continues to have detailed oversight of performance of initial health assessments (IHA) and review health assessments (RHA) via:
 - Weekly joint meetings with CSC and the NELFT Provider team and NEL ICB to scrutinise Initial Health Assessments received and booked.
 - Monthly joint meetings with CSC and the NELFT Provider team and NEL ICB to scrutinise Review Health Assessments.
 - Updates from the Designate Nurse for Children in Care at each Corporate Parenting Board
- A part time Highly Specialist Clinical Psychologist was employed by CAMHS to work with children looked after by Waltham Forest and other boroughs. This has increased the provision of specialist therapeutic interventions for our children and their carers.
- New processes have been developed for initial health assessments (IHA) and review health assessments (RHA):
 - For IHAs of children who are placed outside of Waltham Forest, the decision on where that is carried out is made based on the best interests of the child
 - The Children's Social Care managers have created an Enduring Consent to be used for booking RHAs, which alleviates late paperwork. The Nursing team are kept informed about placement moves and any new issues relating for the child.

- Local Dentists are now part of the NEL ICB commissioning
- 6 children have been referred to The Healthy Smiles pilot which has been developed to support dental health assessments care for children who are looked after in London
- The Nursing Team is fully staffed
- The Care Leavers Compact provides care leavers, who are not currently entitled to free prescriptions with a pre-payment certificate (PPC) so they do not need to pay for items prescribed by their GP. This has now been adopted locally and will form part of the Care Leavers Offer.



What have been some of the challenges in health?

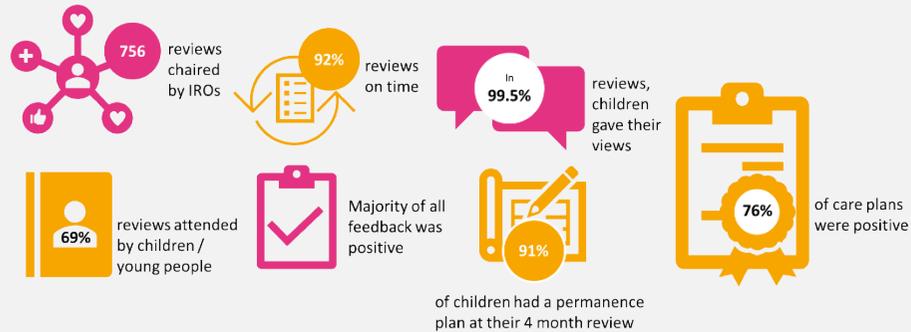
- Meeting statutory time frames for Initial Health Assessments and Review Health Assessments
- Reporting / recording and ensuring that Health and Social Care Data is aligned
- Monitoring / reporting patterns around was not brought / did not attend
- Monitoring onward referrals to other services as a result of the RHAs.
- The take up of immunisations
- The uptake of dental appointments.

What's next for health in 2022-23?

- A process is being put in place to record referrals arising from RHAs and this will be reviewed quarterly by the Designate Nurse and Named Nurse to look at patterns and waiting times.
- Ensuring that every Care Leaver has their health summary when they turn 18
- For the monthly meetings for RHA - currently this reports on future allocations for the nursing team, showing peaks and troughs in the caseload. Designate Nurse will request to look at retrospective months and gather the narrative for why RHAs were not completed (starting June 2023), to be reported quarterly at the CPB.
- A joint local authority and health administrator post is being requested to provide extra support with the complex paperwork and processes that are required for Children in Care.
- Fully implement the health aspects of the Care Leavers Offer, including the localised Care Leavers Compact

Independent Reviewing Service

Snapshot of Independent Reviewing Service



What difference has the work of the Independent Reviewing Service made to our children during 2022 / 23?

Our children & young people are being heard and they are receiving the support they want with their living arrangements, family time and keeping safe

- In 2022/23 our children gave their views to nearly all reviews (99.5%) and most reviews were actually attended by the child / young person.
- There has been an improvement in the quality of Pathway Plans that were completed, with IRO's being satisfied with 93% of those plans.
- 91% of children had permanence plans at their second review, which has been maintained since the previous year.

Our children have people in their lives who can and will 'fight their corner'

Examples of how Waltham Forest Independent Reviewing Officers have supported our children

Two of our young people on remand were only receiving £5 per week allowance, which is less than other children who are looked after receive. The IRO advocated and persevered and managed to increase both their allowances to £10 per week in line with others. The overarching policy is now being reviewed to ensure appropriate equity and that this doesn't happen again.

Another of our young people was due for early release from prison but was not able to not return to where they had been previously living, which was significant in terms of the support that would be available. The IRO advocated for additional consideration to be given, and for the support package to be increased to include adult and mental health services. This young person is now living in a place they are familiar with, and in receipt of a support package that reflects their needs.

What have been some of the challenges for the Independent Reviewing Service during 2022-23?

As with last year there continues to be room for improvement in keeping care plans and pathway plans up to date and of a high standard. We have seen some excellent examples of practice by Leaving Care Coaches, but pathway plans need to be consistently completed and kept up to date, involving young people in the process.

There has been a small reduction in the proportion of care plans up to date at the statutory review. There has been a notable reduction in the number of reviews that took place within statutory timescales attributed to a reduced capacity in the IRO service and a high turnover of social workers, meaning it has been more difficult to rearrange reviews within timescales when needed. We would benefit from more feedback from children / young people and their parents / carers about the service they are receiving and their experiences in care.

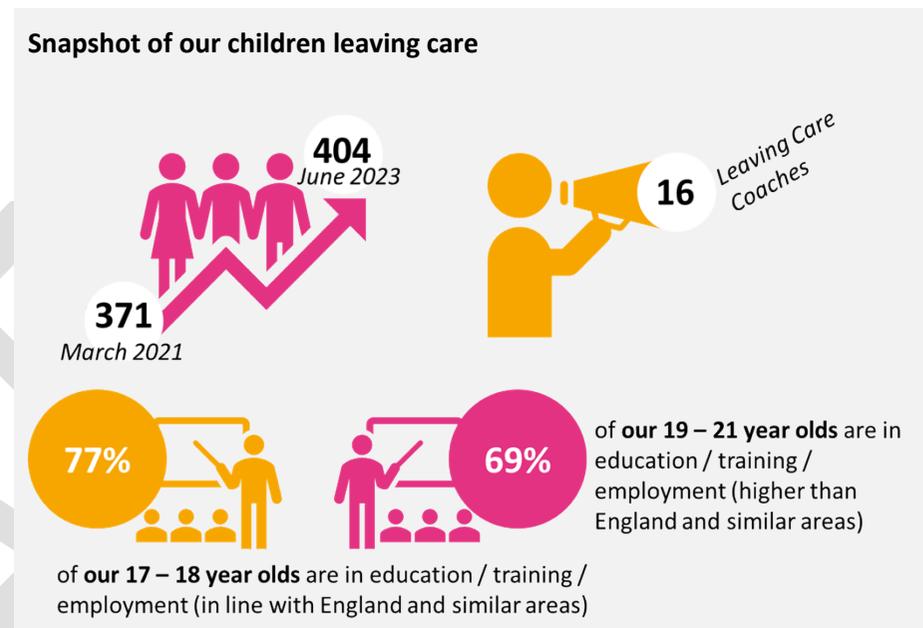
What's next for the Independent Reviewing Service in 2022-23?

From what our children are telling us, we know they would like more help with education, becoming an adult and knowing their rights so we will focus on this for them.

We will also generate more meaningful participation with high quality social work reports and care plans shared before reviews which we'll aim to ensure are:

- held on time, with the right people present
- inclusive, where children, young people and their parents are involved in decision making, and where they don't get what they want they understand why. This includes children with complex needs
- collaborative, with operational teams to evaluate participation, including how we can increase feedback and harness it more effectively

Leaving Care Service



What difference has the work of the Leaving Care Service made to our children during 2022/23?

Being loved, feeling loved and a sense of belonging

- The HUB provides a space for young people that they can call home and where they feel comfortable, meet other people and use as a place to get away from the hustle and bustle of life.
- Our young people continue to receive support from their leaving care coach post their 21st birthday

- Once our young people have turned 25 years of age and / or have asked us to deallocate them from the service there remains an open invitation for them to return any time if they need further support
- Our current, highly motivated and determined Leaving Care Coaches have positive, established relationships with young people and pride themselves on helping them feel heard and cared for which means our young people experience more than ‘just another worker’
- Two managers provide dedicated management oversight and robust networking skills to the Leaving Care Service so that none of our children fall through the gaps
- 92% of our care experienced young people are in touch with their leaving care coaches which demonstrates that they feel heard and supported. Furthermore, in the latest feedback from our young people, everyone who responded said that they were happy with the relationship they have with their leaving care coach. The majority of our young people feel that their views are heard (96%), it’s easy to contact their leaving care coach (89%), their birthdays and celebrations are remembered (97%) and that their Leaving Care Coach understands them as a person (92%).

Supported with living independently

- We continue to cover the costs of council tax for our young people, whether living in Waltham Forest or not.
- Our young people are able to access additional financial support where it is needed, for example the Housing Support Funds and also on an ad hoc basis to pay for unforeseen expenses, or in emergencies or where there are issues around budgeting in these difficult times.



Independence and developing key life skills

- The multi-professional network has provided support to our young people up until their 25th birthday, encouraging them to integrate into their communities
- The transition panel brings together partner agencies such as DWP, Housing, SEND, Virtual School, Primary Mental health, Placements Team and LBWF probation. Working together, the panel reviews the support in place and our children’s future aspirations to maintain an ongoing focus on their specific needs whilst they move into independence. This ensures that future planning is robust, and person centred as they approach 18 years of age.

- Acknowledging the different levels of skills and different stages of maturity there are various ‘moving on’ or ‘preparation for independence’ workshops that are available to our children. Whilst offering future planning they also create opportunities and networking. The workshops include: ‘what it means to maintain a home’; ‘what do I need to do to apply for my own accommodation’; ‘what are benefits’; ‘what are my benefit entitlements’; ‘how do I access education, training and employment’; and ‘what alternatives are available if I am not yet ready to access education, training or employment’
- Housing teams acknowledge the challenges that some of our young people face when moving into their own accommodation, and good working relationships have made sure that any arising issues are appropriately, and sensitively handled and alternative solutions / opportunities / chances are considered as required.



Access to an abundance of opportunities and encouraged to aim high

- Our raising aspirations work starts from year 9. We offer visits to universities and hold focus groups to discuss / review the support available to achieve each of our children’s aspirations. Virtual School continues to forge close ties with individual universities and can broker support packages for individuals. Where there are challenges or setbacks, we help to create new opportunities and build stepping stones to help them achieve their ambitions
- We celebrated Care Leavers’ Week again this year, in October 2022 with activities that included go-karting, cooking at the HUB, ‘Yonder’ wall climbing, boxing and cricket. Additionally, an Employment, Education and Training workshop was set up at the Queens Road Learning Centre in conjunction with the Council’s Employment Opportunities Team, Jobs Brokerage and Virtual school

- There continues to exist very close collaboration between universities, virtual school, Wilson Dixon, The Army, Tottenham Spurs, DWP, Waltham Forest College and Drive forwards. and the leaving care service to ensure there exist opportunities for our young people. necessary support is in place for those young people who need extra support.

Harnessing an opportunity in the arts

A ‘joined-up’ and creative approach with the Employment Opportunities Team ensures that our care experienced young people have access to a varied pool of opportunities in the employment market.

One of our young people has recently secured a job at the Victoria and Albert Museum which is testament to all of their hard work. We are all very proud!

Considered a priority for suitable housing when ready

- All of our care experienced young people aged 18-25, live in suitable accommodation, apart from a small minority of those who are in prison or detention.
- Good collaborative working exists between the leaving care service and housing associations where our children are placed which means that care experience young people are able to access suitable council accommodating when they are entitled to.
- Housing teams are well versed in the risks that our children and young people face, such as gangs, county lines, criminal exploitation, and previous trauma which means each of their needs are considered and appropriately safeguarded.



Improved access to support for emotional and physical health needs

- The number of primary mental health workers has increased from one to three following a review of primary mental health provision
- Primary mental health workers continue to take part in the practice support group and in addition, provide individual support and consultation to social workers, leaving care coaches, foster carers, the virtual school and young people. They liaise with CAMHS, accessing additional services as necessary.
- A pathway has been developed to enable care experienced young people to access support more easily from the Waltham Forest CAMHS Children & Young People 18-25 Service
- We have taken the lead in a pilot project rolling out free prescriptions for care experienced young people.



Care experience is recognised locally as a protected characteristic

The London Borough of Waltham Forest have agreed and accepted being a care leaver as a protected characteristic

Our young people have opportunities in activism and to influence

Getting involved with politics

Two of our young people, alongside Terry Galloway (Campaigner and Champion for care leavers for protected characteristics) joined a meeting led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza. Along with others from Doncaster and Oldham, they shared how they have been affected by being in care and how having a protected characteristic could help them.

Our young people then handed in a signed petition to Downing Street to make discrimination against care experienced young people illegal, in the same way that disability, race and sexual orientation are under the Equality Act 2010. The petition was in response to the government not including this change in its Children's strategy despite it being a recommendation in The Care Review. The petition is designed to help policy makers / government understand the issues our children and young people face and stress the importance of them receiving equitable treatment and opportunities as the wider population of children / young people.

Next stop was the House of Commons where they listened to a debate on the current cost of living crisis.

All agreed what an insightful day it had been that built some understanding of politics and democracy and also demonstrated the influence they can have and how they can be part of decision making and change.



Our children are seen as individuals and are cared for as such

- We celebrated a rise achieving in GCSE English and Maths. We have also recognised those of our children who may not have passed exams and made enormous progress from their starting points despite often having to overcome many more barriers to success than their peers.
- We have created spaces for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children to flourish. Recognising that different groups of children in care require different forms of support, we have worked closely with our Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking young people to ensure they receive the best learning and development with provision of support tailored to their needs. This has involved running a food and cookery programme, establishing a cricket club, arranging talking therapy in young people's home language and commissioning a ground-breaking Educational Psychology Assessment carried out through a specially trained translator.
- Regular sessions with CAMHS, and close working with schools has helped with recognising signs of poor emotional wellbeing and ensuring the right support is on offer



What have been some of the challenges?

Too many children are missing school regularly

The number of children missing at least 10% of school days is worryingly high, and while this has been a nationwide trend, we acknowledge this as a particular issue locally, and even more so with children in care. While we work hard to keep children in school through individual children's PEPs and by holding multi-agency attendance forums, we know that more needs to be done. This is a priority, and we will be working with multi-disciplinary colleagues to enable a co-ordinated approach to supporting excellent school attendance for all our children

Emotional wellbeing is a big barrier to learning for many of our children

The high rates of absence and suspension from school of children in care only serves to underline the challenge we all face in helping children to feel safe and happy in school. Although there are many reasons children in care might experience difficulties, we have seen an increase in young people reporting difficulties with anxiety, low mood and emotional dysregulation.

What's next in 2023-24?

- Finding new and powerful ways to amplify the voice of our children and young people through a research project
- Rolling out an exciting new programme of interventions for young people aged between 16-19, using the newly created Post-16 Pupil Premium
- Seizing opportunities for apprenticeships and employment through the Council making 'Care Experience' a protected characteristic
- Re-designing the Virtual School offer for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, especially available support across the age range locally and aligning with Waltham Forest's ambition as a Borough of Sanctuary
- Raising children's aspirations in partnership with Universities, particularly the University of Portsmouth

Voice and Influence Service

What difference has Voice & Influence made to our children during 2022/23?

There are many ways to be heard

- The Staff Appraisal Survey gathers the views of children and young people about the professionals that work with them. This information is then used to help with understanding how services / individuals are performing within some of the Corporate Parenting Services and with making improvements where required. There was a 34% decrease on the number of surveys completed this year.
- The Children in Care Council (CiCC) meets fortnightly and has a core group of nine young people. A further ten young people regularly attend the sessions during the school holidays when it is more convenient for them to do so. Through training sessions and smaller pieces of work, the group has grown and developed into a powerhouse of ideas and expertise.
- The Champions Group comprising a core membership of six has similarly undertaken lots of development work. They have helped the Leaving Care Service to create an accessible version of the Care Leavers Offer, they've presented to the Semi-Independent Provider Forum and one of our Champions is the young person co-chair of the Corporate Parenting Board.

Our children's input results in tangible change / improvements / action

- Our children spent the summer holidays updating the Children in Care Pledge. They shared their views on the previous Pledge and reflected on its purpose and how it could be improved for people to take more notice of it:

Views: "I've seen it in a social services building / I never knew it existed / It looks boring / It has dull colours / Too much writing / It's not really made for us"

Reflections: "It needs to be brighter / It could be made into a smaller document / It could show how young people could use it, with quotes from those who have / It should be given to all young people who come into care / It could be a video or cartoon"

- Over the sessions, our young people told us that they wanted more accountability with specific promises from key people in their lives and to know who to speak to if they felt like these things were not happening. They suggested that the pledge should evolve into a document which gives each team a list of responsibilities, meaning young people would be clear about who was responsible for each aspect of their lives. The young people now feel that the pledge is clear as to what a young person can expect from each of the professionals involved in their lives. The new designs were created by two of our young people from the Children in Care Council and the Pledge has also been recreated in different media (recording) that means it will be available to a wider audience.

- We have ensured that our children know when their feedback has resulted in change.

“Thanks for letting us know how you feel about your IRO. We are pleased to hear that most things are good, but we’re pleased to hear about what we can do better. Because of your feedback we will be making sure that we see you alone before your review meeting, so you can tell us what you want us to know, and what you want to talk about in the meeting. We will also be talking to you about your care plan and finding out what you think about it.” Jane Whyte – IRO Team Manager

- The Children in Care Council helped to create the new Voice & Influence logo via an interactive, creative workshop during the Easter holidays. Their feedback has shaped the resulting branding, now used in all promotional materials, including on t-shirts that are worn with pride by professionals and our young people on visits and at events.



- Across the year, eight ‘participation days’ took place for the Children in Care Council during the school holidays. These all day sessions provided an opportunity for those young people, not usually able to join during term time to get involved with the core group to carry out larger pieces of work mixed in with activities. This included helping the team overhaul the pledge to Children in Care and influencing the service design of the new foster carer recruitment campaign. Other activities offered team building and exercises to grow their confidence and presentation skills, smaller pieces of consultation work and an art project themed around ‘what home means to us’.

- This year our young people have once again been a huge support to recruitment, sitting on interview panels, sharing their views of candidates. We have made sure they are prepared and equipped by providing an interview skills session covering various aspects of recruitment and selection such as time keeping, presentation skills, scoring and unconscious bias. Some of our young people have shadowed others who are more experienced.
- Our children created radio adverts to recruit foster carers which was really well received



Helping professionals / community to understand what their lives as children who are care experienced really looks like

We revisited the ‘In my shoes’ training with a group of our young people who were new to presenting / public speaking. In order to make sure that the activities are still relevant we held development and training sessions over the summer holidays. During these sessions we:

- Introduced them to the ‘In My Shoes’ programme,
- Imparted presentation skills which enhanced their confidence
- Taught them how to deliver the specific exercises
- Helped the trainers to build a team dynamic and empowered them to rely on and support each other



- a trip to the Sea-Life Centre and the pantomime Mother Goose at Hackney Empire, for our under 12s
- A trip to Thorpe Park for our children not in education, employment or training was purposely organised on a day where other children / young people were in school / college which meant that they got the maximum enjoyment from all that was available and no queuing. The trip inspired some more of our young people to join the Champions Group who have gone on to conduct interviews, train counsellors, present at forums and much more. It also enhanced the collaboration between Virtual School and the Leaving Care Service

Being a child, having fun and making memories

- We have organised a range of different fun events throughout the year such as:
 - a celebration fete held on Saturday 3rd September at Holy Family School. 37 young people, their carers, and professionals had a fun filled day to celebrate the achievements of our children. Young people enjoyed food trucks, inflatables and face painting on a gorgeously sunny day, followed by cake and a raffle. One of our children (aged 8) created beautiful glitter tattoos for all the professionals that she picked for them based on conversations about their likes and favourite colours!

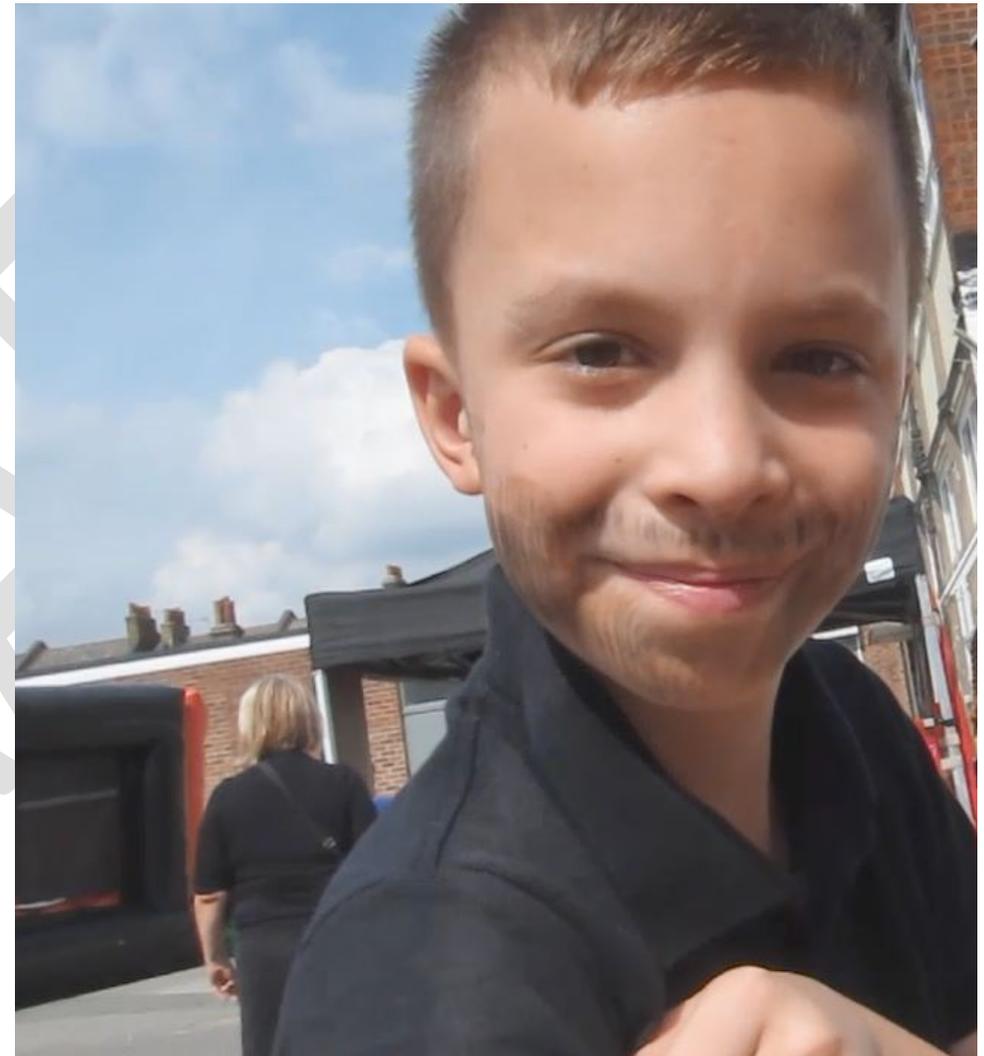


- The Care Leavers Christmas Party brought together our children / young people and staff at Leyton Cricket Ground in a full afternoon of games, music and a traditional Christmas dinner. Everyone seemed to have a blast.

“It feels like having a big, crazy, family Christmas and I haven’t had that in years!”

Meeting young people where they are means opportunities are inclusive

- In the first half of the year, in an attempt to make getting involved with the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Champions Group more accessible, we visited five young people who were living across two semi-independent residential homes and two foster carers. We took the content of the recent CiCC and Champions Groups to these visits so that a more diverse range of children had the opportunity to feed in.
- The Waltham Forest Commissioning Team organised a forum for semi-independent providers that aimed to update them on new developments within the care system. This provided an ideal opportunity for our children / young people to share their views directly with those enlisted to provide them with accommodation. The Champions Group developed a presentation that covered what they felt providers should know and they came up with a script which three of the Champions shared with over 40 people at the forum.





alongside the Lead Member for Children and Families. This young person led process started with them coming up with ideas about what outcomes they might want from their takeover.

“If these are the people making decisions about our lives, they really need to understand what life looks like for us. We grow up different to lots of people and they need to know how that feels.”

Over several sessions they came up with a plan for how they would make an impact and generate for professionals in the room just some of the feelings that they as care experienced children regularly feel i.e. powerless, different, not normal and frustrated. They devised activities, prepared a script and created a meal to share together afterwards. The activities incorporated the staff appraisal survey results and highlighted the importance of language and involving young people in decision making.

Examples of what professionals took away from the takeover:

“I have a much better understanding of how my work has an impact on young people. Particularly in regard to case notes – it was excellent!”

“I will take away a greater felt understanding of the losses and difficulties that children in care have to carry”

Their voices are heard at all levels

Young people’s input into Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) has gone from strength to strength, culminating in one of our young people taking on the role as Co-Chair. We carried over last year’s formula of young people creating and presenting their own reports, enhanced by adding the views of those not attending groups that had been shared through other means.

Young people’s takeover of the Corporate Parenting Board

The March Corporate Parenting Board was a ‘youth take over’, which has resulted in one of our young people taking on the Co-Chairing role

What’s next for the Voice & Influence Service in 2023-24?

- Encourage more of our children to take part in the staff appraisal survey
- Review the Children in Care Pledge