Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategy 2024 - 2026

Our Vision for Our Children

"We are ambitious for our district's children and young people. Our vision is for children and young people to tell us they are happy, healthy and safe and thriving in communities where families and services work together to help them achieve their potential and dreams".

Wakefield Children and Young People Plan 2022-2025

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1. Foreword

Dear children, young people, parents, carers and colleagues

We are delighted to be able to launch our new Children in Care and Care Leaver's Strategy. This has been co-produced with our Build Our Futures Group, the staff and partners who work most closely with our children in care and care leavers as well as key strategic leaders. It expresses the commitment and ambition we have for our Wakefield children in care and care leavers for whom we all carry a joint corporate parenting responsibility and who deserve the best from us to ensure we get the best from and for them.

We are very proud to be the corporate parents of our children in care and care leavers, who invariably inspire us with their resilience, individuality and determination. Parenting is never an easy task, there are always challenges and for children in care, those challenges are often greater than for other children. That is why Wakefield's approach to corporate parenting involves the commitment of our whole partnership, council and children's workforce, so that we collectively promote the very best outcomes for children in care and care leavers. Our Corporate Parenting Committee has an important job to do in holding us all to account to make sure we do not just promise, but that we actually deliver.

On that note, we commend the strategy to your reading, but more importantly to your actions to make sure we really help to jointly build the futures of our children in care and care leavers.

Cllr Margaret Isherwood

Portfolio Holder

Children and Young People Services

Victoria Schofield

Corporate Director

Children and Young People Services

2. Introduction and context

Children only have one childhood, so this strategy commits us to realise our vision for all children and young people and, as corporate parents, to achieve the best possible outcomes for all of our Children in Care and Care Leavers in Wakefield.

In developing this strategy, we acknowledge that a child or young person in care is more likely to be vulnerable and face increased challenges, compared to their peers, to achieve positive outcomes.

This strategy sets out the commitments of Wakefield Council, working with our partners, to continue to improve the outcomes for our Children in Care and Care Leavers. We are committed to ensuring every child or young person in care has the best possible start in life, experience safe and positive care and is given every opportunity to achieve their potential. For Care Leavers we will ensure that they have the best possible individual help and support, so they are ambitious and make a successful transition to adulthood.

The priorities in this document reflect and build on our work from the previous 'Children in Care Strategy 2022-24' but more importantly what our children and young people and care leavers have told us is important to them now and going forward.

Our vision promotes our Pledge to Children in Care and Care Leavers; a promise given by the Council, with support from our partners, about the quality and nature of care that any child or young person can expect if they come into care. The Pledge was developed in consultation with young people, facilitated by the Participation Workers, build our Future's Youth Groups and the Children in Care Council who have told us how we can improve their experiences within the care system.

Our vision and priorities are shaped by our understanding of local needs and by national priorities. Our understanding of local needs and national priorities enables us to identify what our challenges are and will be, as we set out to achieve the best possible outcomes for all our Children in Care and Care Leavers.

Family finding for the right Adoptive Families and the recruitment and retention of Fostering Families are an example of the challenges we face in our commitment to improving the outcomes for Children in Care and Care Leavers. However, we are firmly committed to working with the Regional Adoption Agency and our own Fostering Service to meet this challenge. In terms of our Sufficiency Strategy, in order to continue to meet this challenge, we have ongoing activity to include the Mockingbird project, Bespoke Recruitment and Residential Transformation plan to support family-based care arrangements in which research tells us that these interventions promote improved outcomes for our children and young people.

In May 2022, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care published its final report and recommendations and in response the Government published its implementation strategy: Stable Homes, Built on Love. The review aims to support the needs of England's most vulnerable children, so they experience the benefits of a stable, loving home. It recognises that there needs to be change in the system so that there can be improvements for our children and young people. In Wakefield we are committed to making the changes so that all our children in care receive the stability and love they need so that they have the same life chances as any other child.

The national and regional pressures can at times make finding the right placement for children challenging. Despite ongoing work internally and with the external market and a range of providers, sufficiency of local provision can still be limited, particularly for those children and young people with more complex needs. It is important that this strategy is, therefore, read in conjunction with our Sufficiency Strategy 2024 – 2026.

The scope of this strategy also positively acknowledges children and young people in care from other local authorities that come to live in Wakefield. In doing so, it also recognizes that the availability of local provision is also affected by the number of other local authorities who have Children in Care placed in the Wakefield District.

The National Context

Out of the nearly 12 million children living in England, just over 400,000 (3%) are in the social care system at any one time. Just over 82,000 of these children are children in care as of 31st March 2023, across England.

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-care-data-in-england-2023/main-findings-childrens-social-care-in-england-2023

This trend on year has continued to rise as the data for 2019/20 showed there were 80,080 children in care at this time.

The national trend has been associated with a number of factors:

- Increasing severity/complexity of harm resulting in child protection processes being bypassed.
- Older children are coming into care with increasingly complex needs, supported by the Children's Commissioner's Report 'there is still a real sufficiency issue for children with the most complex needs, who are often turned away from many children's homes and end up deprived of their liberty' New statistics on looked-after children | Children's Commissioner for England (childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)
- An increase in numbers of unaccompanied child asylum seekers.
- Changes in guidance and regulations regarding Local Authority responsibilities towards homeless young people aged 16 and 17.
- The decreasing trend in the number of adoptions continues to be seen nationally.

The Local Context

At the end of 2022/23, there were 635 Children in Care and the rate per 10,000 population stood at 88.0. This remained lower than the latest available statistical neighbour rate of 112, but higher than the national rate of 70.

The vast majority of Children in Care in Wakefield are placed with families. We believe that this type of placement is, in the vast majority of cases, the best arrangement for children, allowing for the development of attachments to main care givers and most closely matching the experience of the majority of children in the general population.

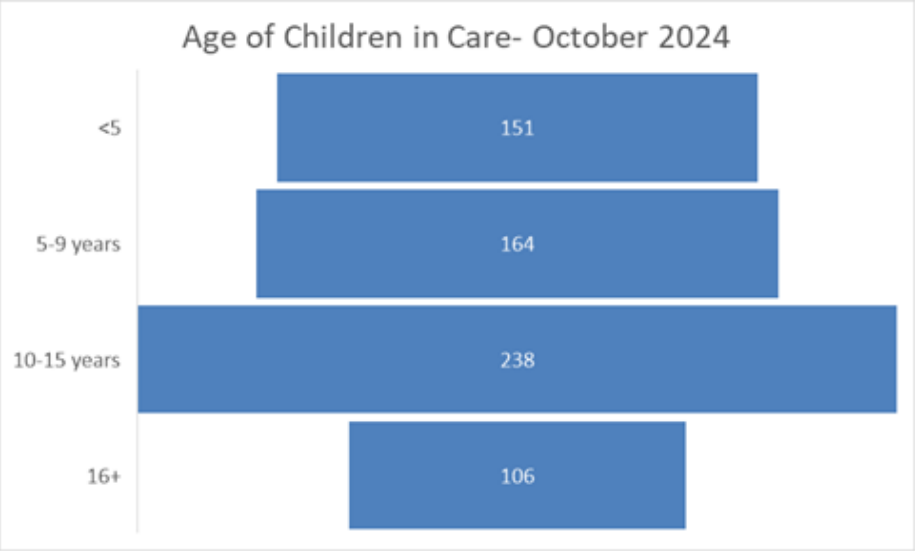
As of March 2023, 77% of Wakefield children in care were living with a foster carer. This is an increase of 4% from March 2022. Where possible, our aim is to place children with a Wakefield Council Foster Carer.

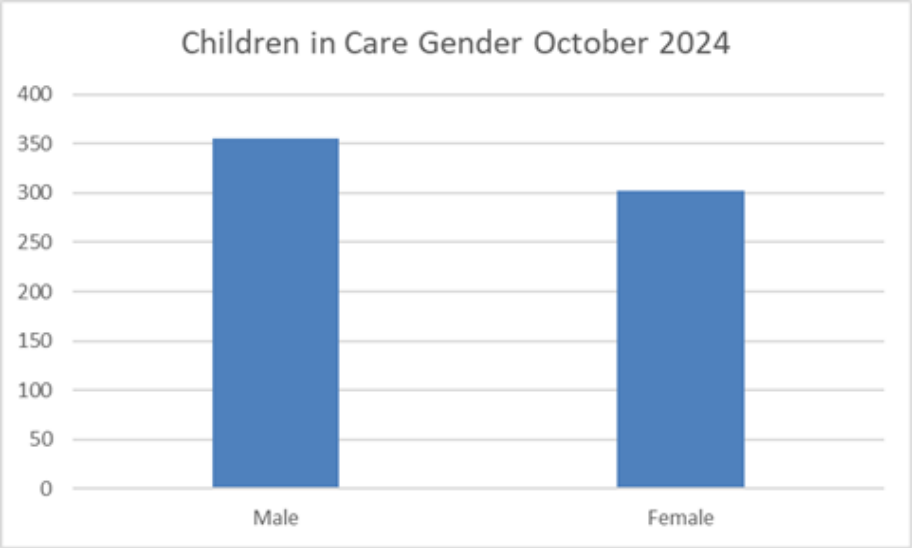
As of March 2024. Where possible our aim is to place children with a Wakefield Council Foster Carers of March 2024, 58% were placed with our own foster carers.

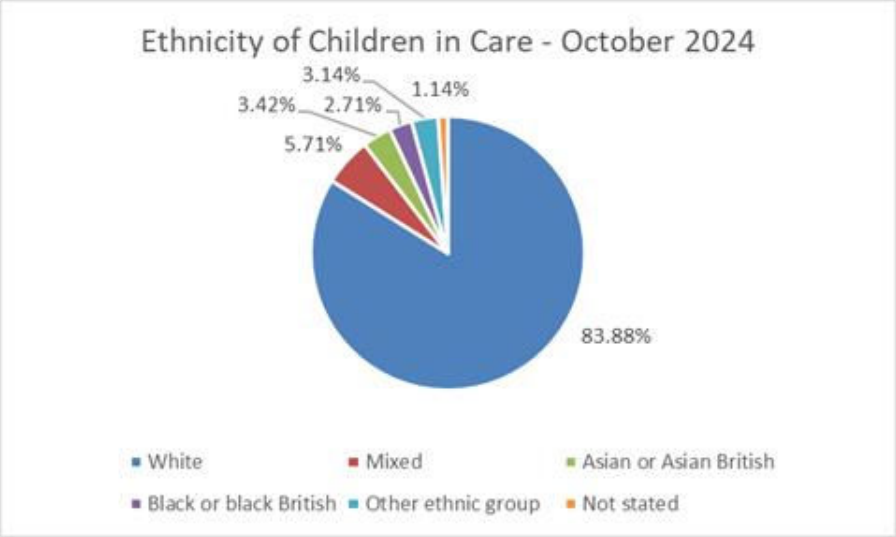
This is 12% higher than March 2022 and 2% higher than the England average (18/23).

The tables below provide a breakdown of the ages of children in care as of October 2024 along with gender and ethnicity.

There is a high proportion of children in care aged 10 – 15 years of 36%. 53% of of whom are male.







The vast majority of children in care are white British.

Our strategy and plans take account of these national trends, with a focus through our sufficiency planning on securing enough of the right kinds of placements, and as part of our service development activity on ensuring the right kinds of additional support and help for children in care, to address the impact of harm where needed.

3. Our Vision, Focus and Achievements

Building a Fairer Future

The Councils Corporate Plan 'Building a Fairer Future' sets out how we will work with communities and partners to deliver our ambitions for the district. The plan sets out the priorities that will make Wakefield an even better place to live, work, visit and study. At the heart the plan is the priority the Council has given to support our children and families to thrive by creating the best possible learning environment and making sure that children and families receive the right support at the right time.

Our Children in Care and Care Leavers strategy will make a direct contribution to achieving this key priority through ensuring that children for who we have a corporate parenting responsibility are cared for in a home where they feel safe, are well cared for and provided with the support and opportunities to build a positive future.

Wakefield Children and Young Peoples Plan 2022 - 2025

Children and young people from across the Wakefield district led the development and creation of this overarching plan for Wakefield Children. It sets outs an ambitious vision and focusses on the things that are most important to them. In summary:

"*We are ambitious for our district's children and young people. Our vision is for children and young people to tell us they are happy, healthy and safe and thriving in communities where families and services work together to help them achieve their potential and dreams".*

The plan has been agreed by the Children's and Young Peoples Partnership and endorsed by full Council. All partners are committed a range of actions to improve the lives of children with the focus on and five key priorities for children. They are:

- *Our Identity*
- *Our Safety*
- *Our Future*
- *Our Education*
- *Our Health*

Our Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategy will make a direct contribution to improving children's lives through ensuring this that are who are cared for by the Council and our partners are safe, respected and listened to, and provided with the care, education and health services that will help the on the path to success.

Our Pledge to Children in Care and Care Leavers

Wakefield Council and partners have signed up to 'Our Pledge to Children in Care and Care Leavers'. Through this pledge Our Promise to you is: -

- To involve you in decisions about your lives.
- Listen to your voices and experiences.
- Experts in your own lives and experiences.
- To direct you towards the path to a positive future.
- Get you the best – that includes foster carers, social worker, placements and all that is offered while in care.
- Encourage and support you as we would our own children.

Our Corporate Parenting Commitments

Throughout our strategy the Council seeks to demonstrate our commitment to the corporate parenting principles as set out in The Children and Social Work Act 2017. They are:

- To act in the best interests and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.
- To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings.
- To take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people.
- To help those children and young people to gain access to and make the best use of services provided by the local authority and the organizations it works with.
- To promote high aspirations and seek to secure the best outcomes for those children and young people.
- For those children and young people to be safe, and to have stability in their home lives, relationships, education, or work.
- To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living with an updated care leaver offer to young people who are preparing to leave care between the ages of 16 and 18, or who have left care and continue to require services between the ages of 16 and 25 years.

Our Focus

We are committed to ensuring that children and young people in care grow up with the support and services that are always of a high quality and appropriate to their needs. We know that the stable, placements and the relationships that build as a result are the foundation for our children's healthy development and future success. To ensure we achieve the best outcomes for children in care and care leavers our focus will be to:

Support Families to Stay Together - Early intervention and prevention play a critical role in de-escalating family problems and keeping children in their family and community networks. This way we will ensure only those who really need to come into care do so and at the right time. Children tell us that they want Social Workers to inform them how they are striving to keep children with their families, and they are kept up to date with information.

We have a strong offer from our Families Achieving Change Team who work with young people aged 10 and over. We have seen a significant impact in supporting young people to remain or return home safely to their families and communities. Due to the positive impact, we have developed an under 10 offer akin to the model delivered by the Families Achieving Change Team. This is delivered by Targeted Early Help and our evaluation of this extended model has had a positive impact supporting children to remain at home with their birth families.

Supporting Children into Family Settings - Whenever possible to minimize disruption for the children and people we will explore any family and friends as a care arrangement in exceptional circumstances. We support families to make arrangements to keep children safe in line with the no order principles, but where this is not possible look to statutory arrangements within the wider family and friend's network. It is usual that a child will be placed with siblings wherever possible unless it has been assessed that this is not appropriate.

Where family carers are not possible, Wakefield's own foster carers will be explored in the first instance to respond to the needs of children who are needing to be brought into the care of the local authority. Where this is not possible, Independent Foster Care Agencies will be consulted. Residential placements will be used where the child's needs require a different kind of living arrangement, usually for a time limited period and with a view (wherever preferable) to transferring a child back to a more usual, family experience in his / her timescale.

Supporting Children to Live Locally - We will strive to ensure that placements allow young people to remain close to their communities and networks where safe and appropriate. Out of area placements are a last resort that we will consider and only use when all other options locally have been explored, or there are individual reasons as to why this is necessary for some children or young people. We will then work with providers to ensure that support is available for the young person to maintain links to their home networks, as well as providing a regular oversight around the extent to which a child or young person should be helped to move back into the district, again in line with assessed need and his / her timescale.

Planning for Permanence - We are committed to ensuring that each child or young person has a plan to achieve permanence. Wherever possible, this will include physical, emotional and legal permanence, such that children move on to family carers, either within their birth family, broader kinship network, fostering family or through adoption.

Though we know that legal permanence (by way of parental responsibility) will not be achieved for every child who enters care in Wakefield, we are equally committed to achieving as much physical and emotional permanence for other children as possible, so that they have sustained relationships with carers / significant others who provide a commitment to supporting them both now and into the future.

We have put in place arrangements that help us to oversee the permanence planning for our children and young people, driving permanent outcomes from the earliest possible stage, including, through:

- Returns home to birth parents (where safe to do so).
- Care within the child's wider family or with friends (including with associated Child Arrangement or Special Guardianship orders).
- Fostering for Adoption.
- Adoption.
- Long-term Fostering.
- Transition planning to independence for care leavers aged 16+.

Ensure Placements Deliver Positive Outcomes - We will work with children and young people, as well as other professionals, to ensure that placements meet the full range of the child or young person’s needs and wishes, including education and health and they deliver positive outcomes and support transition into adulthood. We will do this with regular reviews and oversight and inclusion of the Local Authority’s placements team to hold providers to account to maximize opportunities and promote positive outcomes.

We actively seek to minimize placement disruption and promote placement stability, recognizing that this kind of change can be distressing for young people and can lead to poorer outcomes. We use “placement stability” processes to support young people at times when placement disruption might happen and put in place a “team around the placement” drawing on the skills of our Emotional Wellbeing and Families Achieving Change Teams to help where needed.

Our Achievements - what we have done since 2021:

- Successfully long term matched 165 children to live with their foster families until 18 or beyond.
- Continued to exceed our annual target of foster carer recruitment, achieving 15 in 23/24 against a target of 12 households.
- Developed a range of accommodation across the district (some of which is owned and managed by the Council, and some of which is commissioned from private providers). A total of 58 places are available in-house for our care leavers.
- Made available 3 x Crash Pads for homeless young people/unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who need them. Wakefield does not use bed and breakfast for any of their young people as reflected at the last Ofsted inspection in 2021.
- Embedded our Staying Close offer, which includes supporting care leavers with a bespoke plan to develop independent, emotional skills and resilience to become tenancy ready.
- Grown our Staying put arrangements with foster carers. As at the end of 2023/2024, 14% of young people were in Staying Put arrangements. This breaks down to 23 young people out of 162 18–21-year-olds. Enabling them to stay with their foster family post 18.
- Registered with Ofsted for the new 16/17-year-old supported accommodation framework.
- Developed our Supported Lodgings offer, with 3 young people currently in placement.
- Developed relationships with adult social care and accommodation providers to jointly plan and support a collaborative transition for young people's post 18 provision for those with complex needs who require more supportive accommodation.
- All our Internal Residential homes have been judged by Ofsted as 'good' or 'outstanding'.
- Progressed our residential transformation resulting in decommissioning our larger children's homes for 2 bedded homes, including one specialist home.
- Created a specialist children's home, for those young people subject to DoI's/step down from Tier 4, mental home provision. This specialist home has been developed in collaboration with health colleagues providing 50% match funding and a clinical team, offering clinical interventions within the home, this home is thought to be the first of its kind in the Country.
- Implemented Transition teams at our Wasdale home, to include two groups for 16/17-year-olds and 18/ 24-year-olds. Each programme lasts 12 weeks and it helps young people in the Wakefield district to work on their independence skills from making beds, cleaning the house, to preparing meals, independent travel, money recognition, basic first aid and sexual health.
- In order to support our children to understand their life story we have a stand-alone 'All about Me' form. This is an activity which is completed with a child or young person to form an understanding within their written files of their identity, needs, likes, dislikes and important aspects of their life.
- The matching process for children is enhanced, we use an updated proforma which has been updated following consultation across the service and with the Placements team to ensure that the carers are best able to meet the needs of our children.
- Care plans capture a child's current and upcoming needs and provides in full targets around achieving the best outcomes possible. All plans are written for the child in a way that they would understand and to ensure that they would be able to access their files and comprehend the planning and decision making. It also encourages Social

Workers to ensure that the child's wishes and feelings remain central to all work that they undertake and all information that they record about a child.

- 16+ risk and support plans are completed when a young person is moving to in house semi-independent accommodation. This enables us to understand their needs and is kept.
- In consultation with our communications experienced team we reviewed, re-designed and updated the Local Offer in July/August 2023.
- We have increased our support to care leavers by developing independent living skills by offering a 12-week skills program which runs three times a year. The skills program is offered to young people in semi-independent accommodation, residential and foster placements.
- We have reduced digital poverty by gaining funding to open a connect café within our existing space for care leavers to utilize on an ad hoc basis with support from PAs to address housing, benefits, Education Employment Training and Emotional Wellbeing. We also offer drop-ins, and the Connect Café acts as a safe and warm place for our harder to reach young people. We have extended our digital offer to ensure young people have the means to access the internet, this may be through WIFI, mobile data, SMART phones or accessing the internet through WF Connect.

4. The Voice of Children in Care and Care Leavers.

We are the Build Our Futures, Children in Care Council, CICC Juniors, and 16+ Forum. We represent the voice of children in care and care leavers in Wakefield. Our aim is to help Wakefield improve their experience.

We meet monthly in person in our main Council Meetings and in regular activity groups. We have developed strong relationships with each other and our corporate parents, building long lasting, honest, and caring relationships which help us grow and develop. Many of our 16+ Forum met in our CICC Junior group.

CICC Junior

We have two participation groups, one for children aged 4-8yrs and the other 8-12yrs. We meet monthly to do fun activities together, in 2024 we are exploring the elements and producing artwork which will be shown in an exhibition as part of Wakefield Council's "Our Year" initiative taking place throughout 2024.

CICC

The 'Children in Care Council are pivotal in helping Wakefield improve its services for children in care, leading on many key projects over the years, such as our contribution to this strategy.

We work with each other and professionals to make sure we continually develop good services. We have developed a new way of engaging with Corporate Parents, having a regular place on the committee where young people set and run the agenda, and develop projects with elected members and officers of the council.

We are also in the process of developing an 'Advisory Group' to the Head of Service in which six care experienced people will meet monthly with the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting to address priorities, make innovations, and find out what improvements have been made on behalf of Children in Care and Care Leavers.

16+ Forum

We work closely with Wakefield Voice and Participation Team's, Build our Futures (BOF) groups. BOF is the umbrella term for the voice of children in Wakefield. Children in Care have been instrumental in developing youth voice across the whole of the Wakefield District and were founding members of the Build Our Futures Forum.

Two of our members are co-chairs of the Youth Voice Steering Group, helping to coordinate district wide youth voice activity and we work with wider partners in the Children and Young People Partnership Board. This means that children in care can help to find the solutions to problems that all young people face in Wakefield.

Some highlights of our recent work:

- We delivered training to prospective foster carers, designated teachers, social workers, partners from the Wakefield Children and Young People's Partnership Board and other regional children in care councils.
- Delivered Challenging Stereotypes training to partners which was rated by one Nurse as "The best Safeguarding training I have ever received" This important training has now been commissioned by Leeds University and The Violence Reduction Partnership.
- We conducted interview panels for the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's service, Next Step Personal Advisors, Social Work Managers, Youth Workers, and Social Workers.
- We celebrated the Achievements of Children in Care, Care Leavers, and foster siblings at three Annual Awards Ceremonies.
- Our priority work has raised awareness and led to meaningful changes around social worker retention, siblings and adoption, and preparation for adulthood.
- We have developed an Escape the Dungeon activity with Museum Services at Pontefract Castle.
- We have worked with One Adoption to raise awareness around the importance of maintaining contact with children who remain in care.

Our Messages to Decision Makers

- **Use co production whenever you change something**

  The problems start when we don't get a chance to be part of the solution. Involve us early and let us lead the discussions. Working this way, and acting upon our wishes, will show that you are serious about learning from us. This will help you ask the right questions and make us feel respected and valued.

- **Respect us, trust us, listen to hear, not to respond**

  We do not tell you things without a good reason. Please listen carefully before making assumptions. Decide solutions with us, based upon what we have said. This will help us develop the resilience and assertiveness we will need when we live independently.

  If you work with us, we need you to listen to our views, we need you to know what we want. Please don't guess or assume – ask us and trust us.
  Listening is powerful. It helps us to think through the answers to our own questions. It creates a great environment for us to learn from each other – this is the way great things begin to happen!

- **Use language we understand**

  We live in homes, not placements. We have time with our families, not contact. Please be mindful of using abbreviations about us. Encourage children in care to download the Mind of My Own One App and you download the workers version. Mind of my Own and the Care4Us website are accessible in many languages. This gives us a chance to think things through and tell you about our wishes in our own time and with less pressure.

- **Stick with us**

  Build lifelong relationships. When workers change frequently, it's not just us who have to re-tell our story, it also means that our carers and our families need to too. This is how things get missed. It has a massive impact.

- **Help us feel a sense of belonging**

  Make sure we can see our brothers and sisters regularly; with your help these will be our longest lasting relationships. Give us time to learn, and space to grow. Treat us the same as you do your own children, involve us in decisions and all work together to build a better future.

- **Be honest and keep us in the know**

  Make sure you show us the care4us.co.uk website. It's fun, it has lots of clear information, and it will help us understand our rights and responsibilities.

Please plan ahead and be creative

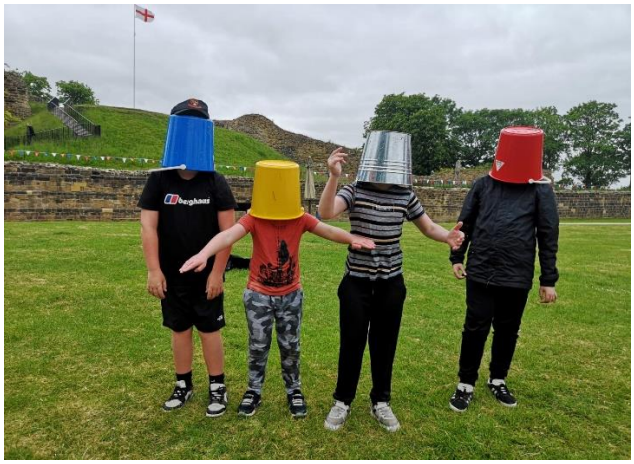
We know you are busy. Making our voice central to your decision making may seem difficult or time consuming. Please plan ahead, be creative, and use Mind of My Own and Care4Us website to help us express ourselves. Long term it will be worth it.

Please use this strategy as a guide to the way you work

And please let the children in care Council and the 16+ Next Steps Forum know about all the good things you are doing.

Our priorities for children in care and care leavers for the next three years:

- To celebrate care experience in an exhibition of all the things we have done as part of "Our Year".
- Improve emotional wellbeing for care experienced people, Foster Carers, Social Workers, and all children and young people in Wakefield.
- Work with One Adoption to improve Letterbox contact.
- Make sure that children in care and care leavers have all the information they need on their journey through care.
- Update and improve the Care4Us website.
- Continue to let us interview professionals.
- Keep in touch and support each other through regular activities.
- Deliver our 'Participation and Voices' training. This is mandatory training for newly qualified social workers and all CYP Staff
- Get more young people involved in participation through activities.
- Thank You.
- Please use this strategy as a guide to the way you work and please let CICC and the 16+ Next Steps Forum know all the good things you are doing.



A last word from Trinity

Trinity's Message

Care leavers are like unfinished paintings,

We are still wet, there is still work to do.

We need you to help us fill in the gaps,

And work out the small details.

Please do not smear or smudge us.

5. Our Priorities for children in care and care leavers

- Our Safety
- A Stable Home
- Our Health and Well-being
- Our Education and Enjoyment
- Making a Positive Contribution
- Our Economic Stability and Well-Being
- Our Local Offer of Support for our Care Leavers

For each of our seven priorities, we have a view of where we want to be, which has been developed as a direct result of what children and young people told us and our Pledge to them.

Wakefield's Local Offer to care leavers has been developed together with children and young people from the Children in Care Council and the Leaving Care Forum. Feedback from recent surveys of children and young people who are in care have also informed the Local Offer. The Offer has been co-produced with our care leavers and key stakeholders and it provides young people with the information to enable them to understand their entitlements, access appropriate services and utilise any offers unique to care leavers.

Much of the delivery of this strategy is embedded in the way we work and is set out in operational delivery plans to ensure each promise is kept. However, some promises will require a more strategic and longer-term approach, particularly where they are responding to local or national challenges and a changing legislative framework.

Our Safety

What Children and Young People Told Us

Children told us that, for them, feeling safe is about feeling that they belong in the home and the community where they live. Children said that spending more time with their social worker and planning and settling into where they live or go to school is what helps to make them feel safer and included in ways that their views are taken into account.

We will ensure that we know our children well by developing and keeping good relationships with them through social workers, carers, family members, teachers and others involved in their lives.

Through our direct work with children and their families we will ensure that we value their lives before they came into care and who or what is important to them about their history.

We will ensure that social workers work to our practice standards and that children feel able to tell us if they are unhappy about anything. Children are also able to contact our Social Workers through the Mind of Our Own app.

We will make sure that through regular contact with children, including visits to see them at home, we actively involve them in any discussions, plans and decisions that affect them by being open and honest and by listening to their views.

We will work with our local police and families to keep children safe on the streets and work with schools to prevent bullying and stereotyping. When children and young people in our care go missing from their home or placement, we will work hard with our partners to ensure that they are located at the earliest opportunity. We understand that when children and young people go missing this can be a symptom of their vulnerability and we will work alongside the young person to ensure that we support them to feel safe within their home and community.

A Stable Home

What Children and Young People Told Us

Children told us that working closely with their social worker was the first important step in helping them to feel that their placement was a good match for them based on their needs and wishes. They also said that being open and honest about finding the right carers was equally important to them and that, wherever possible, involving them in any choice about their carers would be best.

We will work directly with children to involve them and understand their wishes and feelings about where they live.

Through positive relationships with social workers, foster carers, and other carers we will ensure that children feel that they have been involved in deciding where they live and that they feel safe and cared about. Young people are instrumental in providing training to foster carers and Social Workers in respect of their roles and responsibilities.

We will respect the relationships that children have with siblings and other family members when finding the best place for them to live.

We will also ensure that wherever children live, we take into account their education and make sure that this is fully considered and discussed with them. We will continue to involve children in developing placement options through recruiting more foster carers and prospective adopters, as well as developing family based alternative care options for children and young people. Our children and young people are involved in the recruitment within this process.

We will ensure that placements are of good or better quality and that carers work with us to achieve permanence for children as well as good outcomes in all areas of their life. The Emotional Wellbeing Team offers support and advice to assist in the longevity and placement stability for our children and young people where required. To support this the Local Authority have developed a process to track and provide advice to support placement stability which include conversations with all professionals involved with the child or young person.

In Wakefield we were 1 of only 10 local authorities nationally who were successful in securing DFE support to implement the **Mockingbird model of fostering** in the district. Since first launching the model in 2020 we have successfully launched 3 Mockingbird Constellations. This approach links a number of fostering households to one experienced "hub" foster carer, who offers practical and emotional support to the group as a whole. All the carers within the constellation also support each other, creating a normalised extended family model of fostering. Our plan is to further increase our Mockingbird households over the next two years and our aim is to have four constellations, we are currently recruiting for an Advanced Practitioner whose role will be dedicated to the Mockingbird Service in terms of supporting our current carers and progressing our goals to achieve further constellations.

"Mockingbird, a global award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK, delivers sustainable foster care. It is an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community." (Fostering Network).

The programme is aimed to improve the stability of fostering placements and strengthens relationships between carers, children, and young people, fostering services and birth families. This is an extended family model that provides respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities.

Our Health and Well-being

What Children and Young People Told Us

Children told us that working with social workers and other professionals about understanding their health and well-being needs is important to them. They also said that having access to people who can provide the right support and the right services available to meet their needs is equally important and that where services could be accessed in one place would be even better. They were particularly focused on having access to emotional and mental health support quickly and felt that equipping their carers, teachers, and social workers with skills of increased awareness, support and confidence around emotional wellbeing would be helpful and less stigmatising.

They said that if early strategies were in place to support them it may avoid the need to be referred for specialist mental health support through CAMHS.

Through our direct work with children, we will know what they want and need to support them to be healthy. We will make sure that social workers, carers, and other people supporting the child understand their health needs and that they work with them to access the right support. Every child and young person will have a health assessment so that we know what their needs are to provide timely intervention.

We will make sure that timely consent ensures that children have access to the right, good quality health care and services to meet their needs. This will respectfully take into account the child's history and what they tell us about their thoughts, wishes and feelings about their earlier life experiences.

We will ensure that children have access to healthy lifestyle choices including a range of leisure activities and emotional well-being support, including from social workers, foster carers and teachers. We recognise the importance of understanding the emotional needs and well-being of our children and young people and the impact this can have on relationships and placements. The local authority has a process in place to assess and review the emotional well-being of our children and can draw upon internal and external resources to review impact on them and their placement. One of the tools we have in place for our children and young people is the Strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ), we use this to measure emotional wellbeing and identify any difficulties the child maybe experiencing, we use this tool to be able to support our children and young people to make any necessary changes that will benefit their wellbeing. We will continue to work with children to ensure that they remain healthy and that we take the relevant steps to adapt to any changes to their needs. Our children have set up an emotional wellbeing group along with our Build our Futures wider youth groups which enable them to talk directly with our health partners to shape the services and support to Children and Young People.

Our Education and Enjoyment

What Children and Young People Told Us

Children told us that having positive experiences in school is really important to them. This includes Teacher awareness and sensitivity around care issues and for children to feel included and to be treated like any other child in their school.

We have high aspirations for children and ensure that they are in good or better schools with support from people that understand and respect their care experience. We will also make sure that children have good quality personal education plans that are tailored to their unique and individual ambitions, needs and abilities. We will also ensure that children have access to the right resources and support to enable them to thrive in their educational attainment and prepare for life beyond school.

Through our work with schools, we will make sure that children's education is not disrupted as a result of being in care, for example, by not holding reviews at times that impact on lessons. Wherever possible we will make sure that a child's school place is maintained. Care experienced young people work with the Virtual School to offer advice and training to designated teachers to ensure children's education is not disrupted.

We will ensure that children have access to leisure activities through school clubs and after school activities to promote their emotional well-being.

We recognise that each child is unique and so we will ensure that we celebrate their achievements in ways that are in keeping with their wishes and feelings.

Making a Positive Contribution

What Children and Young People Told Us

Children told us about that positive relationships with adults who get to know them and build their confidence is important to them in order to enable and support them to be more involved, both as individuals and groups. They also said that having their voices heard and acted upon, such as through the Build our Futures group, was equally important to them to show that they are listened to.

We will ensure that children are able to control their lives, enable them to make a positive contribution to their day-to-day living and make their own informed choices about what they do, appropriate to their age and understanding.

Children will be central to developing new Care Plans and ensuring that each child is involved in the development of their own care planning using the Mind of My Own app. Plans will be reviewed with young people by Independent Reviewing Officers that advocate for positive outcomes being achieved.

We will encourage and support children to contribute and have a say in the future direction of service provision, including working together with 'Build our Futures', the Children in Care Council represent their views along with other children and young people in care. Children and Young People also have access to the Care4Us website to share their views.

Through our corporate parenting arrangements, we will make sure that there are regular meetings between Leaders, senior managers and other people who make decisions, for example, through our work with 'Build our Futures'. Through this work we will review how we are meeting our commitments to children.

Our Economic Stability and Well-Being

What Children and Young People Told Us

Children told us that having access to financial support, including pocket money and other support for activities and holidays is important to them to enable them to feel equal to their peers.

We will make sure that social workers and carers offer children choices about what to do with pocket money and other resources to support their hobbies and access activities.

We want children to learn about money and so we will ensure that adults involved with children support them by helping them to have a bank account and / or savings account.

We will ensure that young people are supported by social workers to develop their Pathway Plans taking into account what they want or need to fulfil their potential. Through this we will make sure young people are able to access careers advice, guidance and support, including access to information relating to benefits.

The Care4Us website contains information regarding financial entitlement and what to expect in the transition to independence.

Our Local Offer of Support for Our Care Leavers

The Corporate Parenting Principles set out in Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the 'Local Offer' for care leavers and also the six priorities outlined above are included in the list of priorities for care leavers.

We will work closely with our Care Leavers to ensure they we constantly meet their needs and review our Local Offer to reflect any changes that may occur locally and in legislation so that it matches the needs of Care Leavers. We will do this by creating a culture where all professionals working with Care Leavers share our high aspirations and ensure that our Children Looked After and Care Leavers have all the opportunities we would give our own children through good access to high quality education, health and social care services.

Personal Advisers

All care leavers are assigned a Personal Adviser when they turn 16 years old and can continue to receive support up until they are 25 years old. They review pathway plans (PWP) with individuals to ensure they are getting the right support, particularly in relation to financial entitlements and planning; support with accommodation and support accessing services such as health. Care leavers themselves are involved in co-producing the Care Leavers' Offer primarily through the Children in Care Council. Our young people have been integral to plans around the care leavers service and Care Leavers Local Offer.

Children in Care Council and 16+ Forum represent the views of care leavers. They meet monthly to discuss issues related to leaving care. Members of the group are keen to ensure that young people are supported through transition to adulthood. The group also runs an annual event for all care leavers in Wakefield.

Staying Put

Our Staying Put Policy provides details of the process to support young people to remain with their foster carers beyond 18 years of age where both the young person and foster carer would like the arrangement to continue.

Housing

The Joint Housing Protocol developed jointly with our housing colleagues will enable care leavers to move to social housing in a planned manner, avoiding the need to present themselves as homeless. The protocol also ensures all care leavers are being placed on the relevant local authority housing register at age 16 or 17 and automatic highest banding priority, and they will be supported by the Housing Home Search Team and Personal Advisors from the Next Steps team who will also track progress. Furthermore, both Housing colleagues and Personal Advisors will ensure that resources are available to support them in securing social housing accommodation. In addition, to the strong working relationships that we have with our Housing Colleagues we were also successful in having one of our Personal Advisors seconded into Housing Services and this post has been impactful in securing permanent tenants and reducing homelessness for our young people.

Our Pledge to Care Leavers

The Pledge is our promise to all our young people leaving care in Wakefield. It is based on what young people leaving care have told us about their individual experiences and moving into adulthood.

Our Local Offer of Support for Care Leavers

A comprehensive Care Leavers Local Offer, co-produced with our care leavers and following discussions with relevant stakeholders has been launched. The comprehensive Local Offer provides young people with information to enable them to understand their entitlements, access appropriate service and utilise any offers unique to care leavers. The Local Offer includes information on:

- **Housing and accommodation**. We will provide care leavers with suitable support, advice and guidance to manage both housekeeping and maintenance tasks. We will also provide continuous advice and support to enable them to maintain a stable tenancy.
- A full guide to available **financial support** and guidance on managing money.
- **Education, training and employment** opportunities with links to schemes, programmes and jobs.
- **Health and wellbeing** including a comprehensive guide on the Health Service for Care Leavers, physical health, mental health, sexual health, young parents, smoking, drugs and alcohol and staying safe services.
- **Relationships** with immediate and extended family, building appropriate relationships, relationships with professionals and developing a good support network including Staying Put arrangements.
- **Participating** and contributing to the wider community through volunteering, membership of groups and opportunities to influence and make services better.
- Support available to Unaccompanied **Asylum-Seeking Children**.
- How **young people can have their say** on their experience of our Children's Services.
- Supporting our young people to **reduce digital poverty.**

Multi-Agency Working

Our aim is to work in partnership with other organisations to deliver holistic support to our care leavers, ensuring they receive the appropriate support for their individual needs. We will continue to work with partner agencies and support them in their roles to ensure that care leavers are able to achieve happy and fulfilling lives. Alongside our own Children's Service practitioners there is a dedicated team of multi-agency professionals all seeking to ensure that the needs of our care leavers are met.

6. Governance and Accountability

The responsibility for implementation of this strategy, and its ambition to improve outcomes rests with the multi-agency partnership for Children in Care, coordinated at an operational level by the CYPS Children in Care and Leaving Care Service.

A detailed annual implementation plan accompanies the strategy which, along with our partners, supports the delivery of the priorities set out in this strategy and it identifies key lead officers and various timeframes for the completion of all actions.

The implementation plan specifies an outcome for each action and references recognized national performance measures against which we will evidence the impact of our actions. The partnership will continue to evolve and develop to ensure the needs of Children in Care and Care Leavers are prioritised within all partner agencies and a joined-up approach is adopted in identifying and providing services for Children in Care and Care Leavers. The implementation of this strategy and the work of the partnership will be reported to the Children's Social Care Senior Management Team and, in turn, the Directorate Management Team on a quarterly basis.

Subsequently, the work of the multi-agency partnership will be reported to the Corporate Parenting Committee which also includes representatives from 'Build our Futures', the Children in Care Council.

Any work considered by the Corporate Parenting Committee, including this strategy, will also report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to demonstrate how satisfactory progress is being made across each of the outcome areas strengthening the governance of the multi-agency partnership.

Links to Key Documents

This strategy can be read in conjunction with the following documents:

- Pledge to Children in Care and Care Leavers
- Sufficiency Strategy 2024 - 2026
- Wakefield Safeguarding Children's Board Business Plan
- Our Top 10 Tips
- Care Leavers Offer