

# Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report 2023 – 2024



Walsall Council



## Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the 2023/2024 annual report of the Corporate Parenting Board. As corporate parents, we take our responsibilities towards children in care and care leavers seriously and are committed to providing the best possible support to meet their needs and to improve their outcomes.

The Corporate Parenting Board aims to interact with children in care and care leavers in a meaningful way, celebrate their achievements and listen to their concerns and challenges. We have worked with Officers to review how the Board operates and considered how this could be made better in the future. Engagement sessions have been held at the TLC hub which is aimed at making young people more comfortable in their engagement with the Board. Moving forward we aim to review the way we engage with young people and to be more flexible in our approach to seeking input from young people.

It is my view that the Corporate Parenting Board has made great progress in listening to the views of children in care and care leavers and that it uses these views to influence services available for young people who are in the care of the local authority and leaving care.

On behalf of the Corporate Parenting Board, I would like to thank the young people, and the families that care for them, for their engagement, time, and commitment to the Corporate Parenting Board throughout the year. Without the involvement of the Young People, we would not be successful in meeting its aims.

I would also like to thank Officers and External Partners for their hard work which has helped the Board to achieve the outcomes that are set out within the report.



Councillor S. Elson  
Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board

## The Corporate Parenting Board

The purpose of the Corporate Parenting Board is to assist the Council to fulfil its legal obligations and responsibilities towards children in care and leaving care by providing strategic direction to ensure they are effectively supported to reach their full potential. Walsall's Corporate Parenting Board provides a welcoming forum for children and care leavers to discuss and influence the full range of services available to them. The Corporate Parenting Board convenes six times a year and comprises seven councillors (as below) together with the following advisors:

- The Designated Nurse LAC (Health)
- The Head of the Virtual School (Education)
- The Director Customer Engagement (Housing).

Advisors provide crucial contribution and expertise, in relation to their specialist areas, which are important to the lives of all children in care and care leavers. Other attendees include the Executive Director (Children's Services), the Director of Children's Social Work and the Children and Young Peoples Champion, together with officers from children's services and other directorates who attend when requested to discuss key issues. By including these advisors, we are helping to ensure that Walsall Council and partner agencies have a joint commitment to corporate parenting to achieve continuing improvements in outcomes for our children and young people in care and care leavers.



Councillor S. Elson  
Chair of the Board



Councillor T. Jukes  
(Vice-Chair)



Councillor L. Harrison



Councillor A. Hicken



Councillor A. Nazir



Councillor R. Worrall



Councillor Waters

## Work Programme

The Board has considered several matters during the 2023-2024 municipal year. All reports and associated minutes are available to view on the council's website. Items considered have included: -

- Future Governance of the Corporate Parenting Board.
- The Corporate Parenting Strategy and Action Plan.
- The Placement Sufficiency Strategy
- Quarterly Performance Reports
- Annual Adoption Report
- Annual Fostering Service Report
- Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report
- CAMHs Report
- Integrated Care Board Annual Assurance Report
- Independent Visitor Annual Report
- Engagement Sessions with Young People at the TLC
- Protected Characteristics for Care Leavers

Total Respect training is a national award-winning resource delivered by care experienced trainers. The course gives participants a glimpse of what it is like to be a looked after child, what is like to live within the care system and the difficulties this can create for those young people. The Board considered it of great value for Elected Members to attend this training. The Board recommended that a bespoke session be designed for Elected Members – several Elected Members attended this session in November 2023.

## Hearing the Young Persons Voice

The Board is passionate about improving outcomes for children and young people and strives to improve engagement with them. The Head of Service Practice Quality and Improvement and the Children and Young Persons Champion support the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and provide a valuable link between the Corporate Parenting Board and young people. The CiCC is the forum where Walsall's looked after children, young people and care leavers are able to shape and influence the care and support that they receive. The forum enables young people to build friendships and peer networks whilst learning new skills.

At its first meeting the Board considered the future governance of the Corporate Parenting Board to ensure that engagement with children and young people was effective. The Board has been in place as a formal committee since 2017, Members agreed to review the governance arrangements of the Corporate Parenting Board to ensure that the current arrangements were best placed to deliver the objectives of the Board and allowed full and open discussions with young people. Members were keen to expand the participation of children and young people to ensure that their views were considered in the deliberations of the Board. The Board found that there was no clear best practice for a Corporate Parenting Board model, and as such it was agreed that the Corporate Parenting Board would remain a committee meeting, however dedicated engagement sessions would take place with Young People at the TLC Hub to achieve the aim of increased engagement and to make interaction with the Board more meaningful for young people. Reports, minutes, and the meeting remain in public and/or private depending on the sensitivities and participants attending each meeting.

Several Board Members agreed to visit children placed in residential homes on a six-monthly basis and be the link Members to residential homes – building a relationship with staff and young people. These visits have commenced, and positive feedback had been received.

During the municipal year two engagement sessions have been held at the TLC Hub with several young people in attendance providing feedback on topics discussed. The first one was held on 13 November 2024. Several topics were explored and included:

- An update on the action plan created by Young People.
- The annual fostering report 2022/23.
- The annual adoption report 2022/23.

At the time of writing a further engagement session is planned for April 2024. It was agreed that arrangements for engaging with young people are reviewed by the Corporate Parenting Board at the first meeting of the new municipal year.

## **Areas of Focus**

### **The Corporate Parenting Strategy and Action Plan.**

The Corporate Parenting Strategy outlined the priorities for supporting children in the care of the Local Authority and set out a framework for the Council and Partners to be held accountable on their promises. Contained within the strategy is the 'Our Promise to You' - a list of commitments developed with young people and children's services decision makers to ensure that children in care and care experienced young people get the right services and support. Our 'Promises' form the Pledge to You for children in care and care leavers which tells children and Young People what the Authority promises to do for them as their Corporate Parents.

The priorities respond directly to the 'Our Promises to You', developed and agreed by the young people themselves and endorsed by the Corporate Parenting Board.

- Safety and Permanency.
- Mental and Physical Health and Wellbeing.
- Education and Employment.
- Transitions and Independence.
- Influence and Involvement.

The 3-year strategy and the action plan were approved by the Board in January 2022. The report provided an update on the progress against the action plan for 2022/23 and the proposed action plan for 2023/24. The priority areas and action plan for the delivery of the strategy were agreed by the Board.

### **The Placement Sufficiency Strategy**

The Placement Sufficiency Strategy sets out how Walsall Council will fulfil its duties to meet the needs of Children in Care and Care Experienced young people. When assessing placement "sufficiency," Walsall Council considers the condition of the local market and the amount and type of supply that existed. The capacity, quality and suitability of all providers and the unique challenges to Walsall are also considered as part of the strategy. Officers informed the Board that analysis suggested that an increased number of foster carers were needed for boys, older children, sibling groups of 2/3 and more complex children.

A summary of needs and trends in Walsall was provided, this included an increase in boys and Black and Asian ethnic groups entering care. Members were informed that there had been a reduction in the number of children living in foster homes (in the previous year) due to a shortage of available foster carers. The service intentions in relation to fostering, residential, supported accommodation, and permanence were detailed along with priorities and an action plan.

In response to challenge around the right children becoming looked after, the Executive Director stated that through the family safeguarding model, families were supported to ensure that children remained in their own homes, are cared for by their own parents or extended family where it is possible to do so, as it was recognised that this produced better outcomes for the child. The Turning Point service, which

was aimed at adolescents, had been successful in supporting families to stay together. It was stressed that services needed to evolve to respond to societal changes.

### **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services**

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) Children in Care (CiC) FLASH Team provides a therapeutic service to children and young people in the care of Walsall Local Authority, and/or adopted, that present with mental health difficulties. The services offered to children and young people were described and included direct therapeutic work. The average wait for a first appointment was 10 weeks, and data indicated that each child was subsequently immediately allocated and offered their next therapeutic follow up within a week of the professional meeting taking place. Due to harmonisation across the Black Country Healthcare Trust (BCHFT) consideration (alongside the Local Authority) had been given to the design of existing contracts and had inadvertently affected recruitment. The Board was assured that work was under way to rectify this issue.

Members acknowledged the hard work of the team, however in consideration of recruitment issues, requested an update on the Child and Adolescent mental health service to the Board, in 3-4 months.

### **Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report**

When a child first comes into the care of the Local Authority the IRO ensures that the Local Authority gives due consideration to any views expressed by the child and monitors the Local Authority's performance of its functions in relation to the care planning for the child. Regulations clearly specify circumstances when the Local Authority should consult with the IRO, for example, a proposed change of placement, change of education plan, or a serious incident. They also specify the actions that the IRO must take if it is felt that the Local Authority is failing to comply with the regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child. IRO's make an important contribution to the goal of improving outcomes for children in care. Their primary focus is to quality assure the care planning process for each child or young person, to identify any poor practice and any drift and/or delay that impacts directly on the child and which should be escalated appropriately. Equally the IRO should also recognise and celebrate good practice that has positively impacted on the child's care experience.

Members received detail on the workload of the IRO's who (at the time of reporting) had an average of 51 children allocated to them in their role and an average of 17 children on child protection plans. The IRO service is fully staffed, of the 13 IRO's in the service 12 are permanent with only 1 agency covering maternity. Further to challenge from Members assurance that the case load was well within expected workload and provided capacity to ensure a good quality service to children in the care of the Authority.



Key performance indicators were considered by the Board, it was noted that 94.7% of child in care reviews were held in timescale, which was an increase from the previous year. Participation (by children) in reviews was discussed, Members questioned what the reason for the increase in attendance was – it was suggested this was due to good preparation by the IRO and work done in conjunction with social workers.

In response to challenge in relation to performance indicators, Officers explained that it was the role of the IRO was to identify such issues and any areas of challenge or difficulty.

### **Care Experienced Status as a Local Protected Characteristic**

Members were provided with detail on the proposal for Walsall Council to treat individuals with care experience as a protected characteristic in all policy and decision making.

It was acknowledged by the Board that people with care experience faced significant barriers that impacted them throughout their lives and despite their resilience, society often did not always take their vulnerabilities into account. As such, care experienced people often faced discrimination in all facets of their lives including access to housing, health, education, relationships, employment and as an overrepresented group within the criminal justice system.

An Independent Review of Children's Social Care by Josh McAllister was published in May 2022. This national report included recommendations that the 'Government should make care experience a protected characteristic'. It also noted that making care experience a protected characteristic would provide greater authority to employers, businesses, public services, and policy makers to put in place policies and programmes which promote better outcomes for care experienced people.

The Board agreed that this was a positive proposal and would benefit individuals with care experience, also agreeing that the outcomes of this proposal to be monitored at a future meeting of the Board.

Members resolved to submit a notice of motion to Council, due to be held on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024) to allow debate and discussion on the proposal that care experience is treated as a protected characteristic by Walsall Council. It was agreed that the notice of motion should include a recommendation to Cabinet that care experience is treated as a protected characteristic by Walsall Council.

### **Independent Visitor Annual Report**

Independent Visitors are trained volunteers who befriend and support children and young people up to the age of 18 who are in the care of the Local Authority. All children in care should by law, be offered the chance to have an Independent Visitor. it was noted that 386 hours of independent visitor time had been provided to Walsall children, along with 41 indirect hours. Challenges around recruitment were acknowledged, and further to Member challenge, Officers stated that the potential for

Walsall Council employees to be volunteers was with Human Resources for consideration.

The Board commended the Team for the improvement in performance of this service.

### **Performance**

The Corporate Parenting Board monitors the progress on outcomes and performance indicators for looked after children through a quarterly performance report. This contains a dashboard of measures detailing the direction of performance. Members provided challenge on those measures where performance had dipped and sought reassurance that action had been taken to rectify any issues. Members challenged the action being taken to improve the percentage of children in care who had received a dental check. They received information about a dental pathway which had been implemented to improve the performance of this indicator and ensure children and young people in care had access to dental care.

The Board noted that the data demonstrated a slight decrease in children's placement stability. Assurances were provided that audit activity was underway to explore this issue and that service developments such as the support and stability team were already established.

### **Fostering and Adoption Service Annual Reports**

The Corporate Parenting Board receives an annual report of the adoption service, which is provided through Adoption@Heart – a regional adoption agency, providing adoption services on behalf of Sandwell, Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton Councils. The service is hosted by Wolverhampton City Council and became operational in April 2019. Information provided to Members included the number, type and age of children waiting for adoption and the length of time waiting and the number of children adopted and details of the recruitment of new adoptive parents. Members provided challenge to this information and sought assurances.

The Board also receives an annual report of the fostering service for the period from April 2022 to March 2023. The Walsall Fostering Service was located within the Children's Services Directorate of Walsall Council and had the aim of ensuring that there were enough registered foster carers. A range of information is provided to the Board, including the challenges recruiting new foster carers. The Board was advised that there had been an increase in the number of Children in Care in Walsall over the last 5 years, from 645 in 2017 to 650 at the end of March 2023 with 448 living with Foster Carers. However, on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, there were 177 approved internal fostering households. Detail was provided on foster carer recruitment and retention in Walsall – it was noted that nationally applications to become foster carers had dropped.

### **Integrated Care Board (ICB) Assurance Report**

The Corporate Parenting Board has a responsibility to ensure that Walsall Council and Partner agencies have a joint commitment to corporate parenting to achieve

continuing improvements in outcomes for children and young people in care and care leavers. The ICB assurance report provided an overview of the statutory health responsibilities of the ICB in relation to children in care and provided further detail of action taken to deliver on-going improvements to health outcomes for looked after children.

The Board had previously recommended that care leavers should receive free prescriptions, the Designated Nurse confirmed that Care Leavers would soon be able to apply for a pre-payment certificate. Care leavers had access to the care leavers health passport app, which provided important information about health, appointments, and health history all in one place.

Challenge was provided around the timeliness of health checks and the data sharing between the ICB and the Local Authority. The Designated Nurse explained that actions were in progress to improve this issue.

### **Looking Forward to 2024 - 2025**

In 2024/25 the Board will continue to deliver its remit and in particular: -

- Continue to review and evolve the approach to engagement with young people to make engagement meaningful.
- Build relationships with children and young people in care and care leavers and be an advocate for them.
- Attend future events and activities with young people to further develop relationships.
- Challenge services and partners to ensure that young people are receiving the best services and given every opportunity to succeed.
- Monitor the delivery of the Corporate Parenting Strategy and associated action plan, and set the Boards remit around its priorities.
- Recommend the development of a Corporate Parenting Partnership subgroup with a wide range of representation from lead partner agencies. The subgroup will ensure that the council and its wider partners are fulfilling their responsibilities in relation to Children and young people in care and Care Experienced.

## **CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD TERMS OF REFERENCE**

### **Membership**

7 Members of the authority as determined by the Council to include:-

- The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (Chair);
- The Chair of Education and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**Note:** A representative from the NHS shall be invited to each meeting as an advisor.

### **Substitution**

Substitute members may be nominated to the Committee in accordance with paragraph 4 of the Council procedure rules (Part 4), subject to them having undertaken the relevant training as detailed below.

### **Chairman and Vice Chairman**

The Chairman shall be the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services.

The Vice-Chairman will be appointed at the Annual Council meeting for the municipal year.

### **Quorum**

The quorum of the Board shall be one third of the membership, subject to a minimum of two.

### **Meetings**

The Board will meet every eight weeks or thereabouts and will usually meet at the Council House, Walsall at 6.00 p.m.

### **Access to information**

The Board will comply with the Access to Information Rules set out in Part 4 of the Constitution.

### **Purpose**

To assist the Council fulfil its legal obligations and responsibilities towards children looked after and leaving care by providing strategic direction to ensure they are effectively supported to reach their potential.

## Remit

Members of the Corporate Parenting Board shall:

- (1) Provide clear strategic direction in relation to corporate parenting to improve the outcomes and life chances of looked after children and care leavers.
- (2) Ensure that Walsall Council and Partner agencies have a joint commitment to corporate parenting in order to achieve continuing improvements in outcomes for our children and young people in care and care leavers.
- (3) Make a demonstrable commitment to prioritising the needs of looked after children and young people.
- (4) Set objectives for monitoring the work of and evaluating the progress of the Officer level 'Operational – Corporate Parenting Steering Group'.
- (5) Develop and sustain clear linkages with Children in Care Council, 'Council 4 Kids', Walsall Safeguarding Children's Board, Walsall Foster Care Association and Partners to include the Police, the NHS and education providers and others.
- (6) Approve a work plan with clear aims and objectives which reflect the terms of Walsall's Corporate Parenting pledge.
- (7) Monitor progress on outcomes and performance indicators for looked after children.
- (8) Submit reports to the Council, the Executive, Education and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee or such other body as the Board considers appropriate or necessary.
- (9) Submit an annual report to Council in April each year.
- (10) Listen to, consult with and involve looked after children and care leavers and their carer's in the assessment, development and delivery of services, including inviting them to act as advisers to the Committee on a regular basis.
- (11) Develop knowledge and be aware of the experiences and concerns of looked after children and care leavers.
- (12) Promote achievement and acknowledge the aspirations of children and young people and show ambitions and aspirations for all looked after children and care leavers.
- (13) Champion the provision of Council based work placements and apprenticeships for looked after young people.
- (14) Monitor the effectiveness of the Virtual school.