

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

# Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2020/21

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## Foreword

As Lead Member for Social Care and Health Integration and Chair of the Members Corporate Parenting Group, I am proud to introduce the 2020/21 annual report of Barking and Dagenham's Members Corporate Parenting Group (MCPG).

Since the last Corporate Parenting report was produced, we have experienced one of the most turbulent periods for public services – and people services in particular – with the global pandemic. Given the context of the borough and high levels of deprivation, the pandemic has posed significant challenges for our whole community, families, children, and young people and remains – one of the greatest challenges many of us have faced.

Despite the profound impact of the pandemic, and the significant challenge of maintaining business as usual throughout, we have continued our improvement journey. We have remained relentless in our ambitions to improve the quality of social work practice and lived experiences, with many key achievements and improved outcomes for our children in care and care leavers.

We were delighted with the overall positive feedback and published Ofsted letter from our ILACS focused assurance visit (July 2021) which confirmed many strengths and improvements during the pandemic. We have noted the areas for improvement relevant to children in care and care leavers and these have been incorporated into our improvement plan and progress will be reported regularly at MCPG this year.

The work of the MCPG has concentrated on delivering the promises we have made to our children in care and care leavers. We are ambitious for children and young people and want them to lead happy, safe, and successful lives.

Our children in care council are pivotal to the work of the MCPG and we continued to strengthen their voice and participation in 2020/21. We highly value listening to our children and young people and want them to be at the heart of service improvement.

This annual report provides an overview of what we are doing well, our key achievements in the last year, what are our key challenges and our plans to

address those challenges in 2021/22 and beyond. The report presents activity and performance data from 2020/21 and identifies the Board's plans and priorities for the year ahead.

We know we still have a lot to do to improve the lives of our children and young people in care and care leavers, but with our strong and effective MCPG and as committed Corporate Parents, we are relentless in our ambition to achieve this.

**Councillor Maureen Worby**

**Chair of the Corporate Parenting Group**

## 1. Introduction and Background

### Introduction

The concept of Corporate Parenting was first introduced in the Children Act 1989 and describes the responsibilities of the Council to provide the best possible care for our children in care and care leavers, as any good parent would do for their children.

Elected Members have a lead role in ensuring that the Council acts as an effective Corporate Parent and have high aspirations for our children and young people to improve their life chances.

***Corporate Parenting has been reinvigorated with strong leadership, challenge, and accountability at every level as confirmed by the recent DfE care leavers improvement visit.***

Elected members are playing a leading role in championing the Council's aspiration for our children in care and care leavers with the Lead Member as Chair and three other elected Members. Our MCPG has good representation from Children's Social Care, Health, the Virtual School, Community Solutions including Housing, Homes and Money, Health, Commissioning, Education, as well as representatives from the Children in Care Council (Skittlz), and a Foster Carer representative.

We were very pleased with the positive feedback from our two-day DfE improvement visit, undertaken in November 2020 by Mark Riddell, the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers. In summary, this visit endorsed our rapid improvement and progress to have a better offer for care leavers across the whole service area. Mark Riddell stated that he was *“very impressed by the leadership and management approach that was ambitious, aspirational and I got a real sense of passion and commitment to have a better offer for care leavers across the whole service area”*. The visit and feedback confirmed the strengthened leadership in this area and the significant progress we have made in our approach to Corporate Parenting, our local offer and the extended duties that apply to care leavers up to 25 years. As recommended by the DfE care leavers improvement visit, we have extended the membership to include Department of Work and Pensions and Probation

All new members are fully inducted, each committing to uphold and deliver the key promises made to our children and young people in care and care leavers. The MCPG is well attended, offers challenge, and holds all members to account in their role in delivering a quality service and improving outcomes for children in care and care leavers.

Our MCPG meets on a bi-monthly basis and all meetings took place during the pandemic virtually. The Forward Plan and agendas are set by the MCPG led by young people ensuring our young people in care and care leavers are instrumental in the priorities going forward. The MCPG hear from children and young people directly at every meeting about their views and experiences of services offered. Once a year, we hold a takeover of MCPG by our children in care council. The MCPG reviews performance and outcomes at each meeting through a comprehensive child in care and care leavers dataset inclusive of comparator data and targets set by the MCPG.

Our priorities and plans for 2020/21 are based on the analysis of progress in this annual report, Ofsted recommendations post the focused assurance visit in May 2021, the DfE Care Leavers improvement visit and from what we understand about the lived experiences of children in care and care leavers.

The Promises made to our children in care and care leavers remain the focus of the MCPG to shape the Council being the best parent we can be to those we are responsible for. Progress on the Promises is outlined later in this report.

## About the borough

Barking and Dagenham has become one of the fastest-changing communities in Britain. The population was estimated to be 214,107 in 2020: an increase of 29% over the last 15 years and 5% over the last five years. National statistics project the population to increase to 227,000 people by 2043.

The age of the community is changing with the highest birth rate in London, and a large proportion of young people. Barking and Dagenham has the highest proportion of children aged under 16 in London and the UK. The borough becomes more diverse each year with 66% of the resident population identifying as coming from black and minority ethnic backgrounds compared to 19% in 2001.

Barking and Dagenham had the highest overall deprivation score in London and 17th highest in England (IMD 2019; MHCLG). People in the borough die earlier, have poorer health and lower levels of education and skills than across London whilst too many residents are in low paid work and struggle to find suitable homes they can afford. Unemployment remains high. Nearly 4 in 10 dependent children in the borough live in a lone-parent household, double the national average.

Given the levels of significant deprivation and complex need in Barking and Dagenham, the pandemic has a considerable impact on the community and residents. At the time of writing, 557 of our residents have lost their lives to the pandemic. Since the start of the pandemic, 45% of working residents were either furloughed or in receipt of self-employment support. The number of residents in receipt of Universal Credit has increased by 133% during this time, with 15% of residents now receiving welfare support.

An increasing number of families have and are continuing to experience the effects and impact of the pandemic and as a result, are displaying a high level of need. This has led to an increasing demand on children’s services.

## Our child population

Barking and Dagenham is a young borough, with around 64,100 children and young people under the age of 18 - 30% of the total population, the highest proportion in the UK.

76% are from ethnic minorities and the proportion of children and young people who speak English as an additional language is more than twice the national average. This level of diversity presents its own challenges when working with families and young people, where a better understanding of cultural subtleties becomes crucial.

29% of children under 16 in the borough are living in low-income families, an increasing proportion, and way above the UK average of 19%. The proportion of children entitled to free school meals in nursery and primary schools is on par with the national average, but the proportion in secondary schools is higher than the nation average at 23% compared to 19% across England.

Domestic abuse is a significant issue in Barking and Dagenham and impacts on all service areas - 16.6 domestic abuse offences per 1,000 people - highest in London. It accounts for 39% of violence with injury offences in the borough and is a presenting factor for at least 30% of children's social care contacts annually and rising.

This sits in a context of an ever increasing stretched and challenged health and social care economy, struggling to keep pace with changing community needs and the fast-growing child population with increasing diversity and complexity. This is also on top of a global pandemic that has and continues to place significant pressure on the Local Authority, all partner agencies, the community, and children, young people, and families across the board.

Despite the challenging context, the Council and elected members are ambitious and aspirational in their commitment to improving the lives and outcomes of our residents as set out in the borough's Corporate Plan 2018/2022: No-one left behind.

### **Our children in care and care leavers**

At the end of 2020/21, the number of children in care decreased to 391 compared to 402 in the previous year. This end-of-year position corresponds to a rate of 61 per 10,000 children, which, has been declining in recent years, but remains higher than the London rates but lower than national and statistical rates. During 2020/21, the number of new children coming into care increased from 191 to 193, an increase of 1% and 204 children left care comparable with the previous year.

Overall, this is positive when set against the growth in population and demand. The age profile of children in care is older than the local authority average and national average with 72% of our children in care aged 10-17 and we have a higher proportion of 16-17-year-olds in care – 30% compared to 9% in the population of the borough. White children are over-represented in Barking and Dagenham's children in care, comprising 49% of children in care at the end of 2020/21 (36% in the local under 18 population). Conversely, Black African, and Asian children are under-represented, making up 31% and 14% of children in care, but 37% and 22% of the under 18 population. We have a higher proportion of males in care, with 223 (57%) males and 168 (43%) females at the end of 2020/21. Of the 391 children in care at the end of 2020/21:

- 268 (69%) lived with foster and kinship carers - up 1% on the previous year.
- 54 (14%) were in residential care. This is an increase on the 2019/20 figure of 34 (9%) but our proportion remains in line with London and statistical neighbours.
- 15 (4%) were placed with their parents comparable with 2019/20.
- 42 (11%) were in semi-independent placements and this is a positive decline on the 2019/20 outturn of 62 children (15%).
- 12 (3%) were in adoptive placements with prospective adopters at year end, slightly lower than the previous year of 14 children (3.5%).
- 39% were placed in the borough – up by 2% and 58% outside the borough.

During 2020/21, 14 children were adopted (1 less than 2019/20), representing 7% of all children leaving care - above London, but below the national and similar areas averages of 10% and 11% respectively. 20 children (10%) had become subject to special guardianship orders (SGOs), lower than the 2019/20 figure of 33 children (16%), but we remain higher than similar areas and the London average.

At the end of 2020/21, 310 young people 18 plus were care leavers, of which 109 were former UASC. This is an increase on the previous year of 245 care leavers (82 former UASC). The number of UASC aged under 18 decreased to 33 (0.05%) at the end of 2020/21 compared to 38 (0.06%) in 2019/20 and numbers remained below threshold set at 0.08% (51 children).

## 2. Key achievements in 2020/21

- A robust and effective response to COVID-19 premised on our culture of putting the needs of the most vulnerable first, honest conversations, robust risk management and creating the conditions to work together as a team and with partners.
- COVID-19 has exacerbated our systems and strengths and challenges, and in some areas transformed the way we work for the better, especially with partners such as health and embracing technology in our ways of working.
- Seeing the benefits of this through increasing permanence in our workforce, good morale and services that have remained safe and resilient throughout COVID-19.
- Lead Member led Corporate Parenting Board going from strength to strength with honest conversations with children, young people, foster carers, and partners resulting in better understanding of experiences, what needs to be different and agreed actions for improvement.
- Further work to do, but continued improvement in our partnership working, with education and health outcomes improving. A health led overhaul of our initial health assessment and reviews has led to significantly improved performance.
- Practice improvement continues although consistency and variability remain a priority. This is set against a trajectory of improving practice as identified by audit, good stability, and sustained performance in adoption.
- Innovative and exciting Specialist Intervention Service continues to develop interventions that reflect children, young people and community needs to help keep children in their families or return home.
- For those children in care, a strong in-house fostering service supported by the Mockingbird programme continues to keep placements stable and responding to the variety of needs of our children, with stronger Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) footprint evident.
- We continue to respond to the diversity of children in care population including upskilling the workforce to better support our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). Also, in our anti-racist practice developments, ensuring our care offer understands and meets the needs and experiences of our black and ethnic minority children and young people in care.
- New care leaver service that is young person centred in capacity and processes and that responds to new duties.
- Our work with care leavers underpinned by “no expiry date” ethos for our care and support offered, with strengthening relationships, good rates of keeping in touch, and celebration of their achievements.
- Continuing to work to support our most vulnerable care leavers, including increased communication through virtual ways of working, exploitation and safeguarding oversight and intervention.
- Increased investment in our enhanced local offer underpinned by better internal and external partnership working including Community Solutions, Housing, Inclusive Growth, and Brokerage with aspirations to work towards Care Leaver Covenant.
- Continuous improvement plan that reflects our strengths and challenges of our offer and practice following a helpful and inspirational visit from the National Improvement Advisor for Care Leavers – Mark Riddell, owned politically and operationally at the highest level.
- Good progress in strengthening consistency and visibility of child’s voice and lived experience.
- An active and greater presence of children in care council in our improvement and corporate parenting work including shaping virtual ways of working.
- Young people voices and experiences shaping our strategy and ways of working to big local and entrenched issues such as domestic abuse and structural racism.

## Promise 1: To make sure you get the best care

The MCPG is committed to making sure children in care and care leavers get the best care. Skittlz - our Children in Care Council – has an active membership and continues to help shape practice and influence decision-making through our Member Corporate Parenting Group (MCPG) guided by the Council's *'Children in Care and Care Leaver Promises'*.

Skittlz' comprises of two groups: a 6 -13 and 14 - 21-year-old group. The Leaving Care team also have a cohort of young people with whom they regularly consult. The younger group has 21 members, and the older group 14, the largest representation we have had in over five years.

During 2020/21, Skittlz continued to meet virtually, and representatives attended each MCPG meeting. Our children in care council provided invaluable feedback on the MCPG review of its Terms of Reference and how to make the meetings more valuable for young people, sharing feedback from our various consultations, including housing and communication between young people and social workers. Young people also set their own themes, and one of those was the transition from being in care to becoming a care leaver and the level of support and information they felt they needed and is sometimes lacking.

In October 2020, we consulted with children in care and care leavers about Black Lives Matter (BLM) to understand their experiences and views. Young people shared personal experiences of being a young black person within the care system, noting positive experiences alongside areas for improvement. Their feedback was shared at the November Members Corporate Parenting Group meeting. Further work will be undertaken with regards to ensuring all foster carers know how to meet the needs of children who are cross-culturally and racially placed, as this issue was raised by some young people as an area for further development.

The older Skittlz group have been involved in a range of consultations aimed at giving young people in care and care leavers a chance to express their views based on their experiences. The group were approached via youth workers to give their views about employment in the NHS and what potential barriers would prevent them from pursuing a career in the NHS. The feedback is helping to

shape a DWP pilot in collaboration with NHS to offer employment options for care leavers. As a follow up to this, two Skittlz members attended an online conference entitled Creating the Future with peers from across NEL sharing their views about what care leavers need in relation to pathways to employment. This was during the COVID period, and the two Skittlz members spoke about mental health and the additional support that is needed for care leavers, particularly during the pandemic.

Skittlz members have also participated in other consultations including an air quality consultation looking at how they feel their air quality is affected and what they would like to see implemented to improve their air quality. They have also met with the Principal Social Worker to discuss effective relationships and communication with social workers.

They have met with service managers to discuss housing options and how this information is conveyed to care leavers, as well as giving valuable input into a housing brochure which will be given to all young people who are transitioning to being a care leaver. Lastly, young people have consulted with Bedfordshire University regarding document an Adolescent Safety Plan, which forms part of the borough's commitment to contextual safeguarding. Young people gave their views about the language in the document, what questions to ask and the name of the form. This will be combined with feedback from the BAD Youth Forum and will help to shape the form content and how it is used.

Skittlz members formed part of the panel that appointed the borough's new Independent Scrutineer, who oversees Barking and Dagenham's Safeguarding Children's Partnership. Skittlz members helped devise questions to put to the candidates and completely led the interview process.

In addition to local discussions, Skittlz members are also regular attenders of the London Children in Care Council. These meetings give older Skittlz members the opportunity to meet with peers from across London, hearing about their experiences and being able to discuss common issues and sometimes how to resolve them. Much of the work in 2020/21 focused on the Local Offer and ensuring young people in care and care leavers know what they are entitled to and how to ensure they get it. These have been interesting discussions and will likely shape the work we do locally going forward.



We also formally consult with our children in care and care leavers through an Annual Survey. Survey findings in 2020 were largely positive and an improving picture with 90% of children in care aged 8-17 feeling listened to; 92% telling us that they can contact their social worker and 89% said they know how to make a complaint. One of the most significant improvements is a reduction in the number of social workers children (aged 8-17) had – only 8% had four or more social workers compared to 26% last year. Frequent changes of social worker are one of the most significant issues that children in care raise.

To continue our commitment to listening to young people we hosted two consultations in November this year. Care leavers were also invited to speak to Mark Riddell, the DfE National Implementation Advisor for Care Leavers during the virtual visit. Overall, feedback was positive and personal advisers were viewed as generally good. Care leavers expressed the need for more support as they get older, and recommendations are being taken forward.

A consultation was held asking young people in care and care leavers for their views in relation to the council's plans for accommodation for young people. The group were able to share their views about what home should feel like, what they would need to feel safe, the style of the accommodation and what facilities should be available for them. The young people enjoyed the opportunity to participate and look forward to meeting with the architects in the future.

In 2020/21, during the pandemic, the IRO service continued to strive to deliver a high-quality service to our children in care. The IRO service in Barking and Dagenham is stable and made up of permanent workers who say that the borough is a great place to work. This is despite having caseloads of around 71 children, just above the recommendation of 50-70 children.

From March 2020 and during national lockdowns, all statutory work continued and the IRO service worked closely with social care teams and partners to develop ways by which reviews could be held virtually. Within 48 hours of lockdown, staff implemented the use of Skype for Business and then moved to MS Teams to ensure service continuity.

Participation of parents and agencies have improved greatly since working virtually and consideration will be given to the use of virtual and hybrid meetings following the ease of Covid-19 restrictions due to its success. Children have

reported that they have liked the use of MS Teams or WhatsApp. IROs have reported that they have seen some improvement in children participating in their reviews although this is dependent on their ages and understanding.

IRO's have also recognised in some children an impact of the pandemic and restrictions, an increase in anxiety, the risk of online exploitation and the difficulties a break in education may bring and have provided support accordingly.

A high percentage of children participate before and during their care planning review meetings. IROs have encouraged young people to 'have a say' about how their care plan is meeting their needs through a range of methods. IROs strive to have face to face conversations with children but during this year this has been difficult to achieve. IROs have offered online feedback, telephone discussions, meetings via Teams or communication via WhatsApp. The anecdotal feedback is that children enjoy the virtual meetings and feel able to communicate in an easier and more fluid way.

The IRO service has successfully continued to drive a child friendly review process. We have worked with our partners to ensure that the review meetings are focused on and celebrate the progress and success of our children. IROs encourage the participation of children in their reviews and in more cases, children are supported to chair or co-chair their Reviews. IROs continue to increase the monitoring and tracking activities between reviews to reduce drift and delay in implementing actions in the Care Plan. The recording of their monitoring is visible on children's files and an IRO box for recording is now available on the Liquid Logic system.

Children in Care reviews are also timely with 95% being held in statutory timescales in 2020/21. This is 1% lower than last year but accounts for some of the challenges related to the pandemic - foster carer illness, difficulties holding reviews in residential settings and YOIs due to illness and staff shortages. We have developed good communication with social work teams to ensure that in most situations we are aware of children who have become looked after within 24 hours. This ensures we have more time to consult with children about arrangements for their meeting. We have a tracking system for all reviews.

IRO contribution to permanence planning for children has improved. The IRO Manager is part of the strategic Permanence Taskforce, which provides the opportunity to ensure single oversight and assurance of permanence through the child's journey, from CIN through to adoption, including children placed with parents and those on remand. In addition to dispute resolutions, the Permanence panels e.g., CIN, CP, Resettlement and LAC panels are an early opportunity to highlight where any drift or delay has been identified.

During 2020/21, 100 practice alerts were raised by IROs on behalf of young people. This is an increase on the 72 practice alerts raised last year. The key themes arising from practice alerts were drift and delay (recommendations not being acted on); reports not being prepared for statutory reviews; and visits taking place outside of timescale. Our senior IRO will present those findings and the 2020/21 IRO annual report to MCPG later this year.

## Promise 2: To look after you and treat you well

### **Promise 2: To look after you and treat you well**

To look after and treat children in care and care leavers well has been critical during the pandemic with so many challenges and widespread restrictions posed by national lockdowns. Our values and ambition that "we are corporate parents to all children in care and care leavers up to the age of 25" with no expiry date has been strengthened during this challenging time. Launching the new Corporate Parenting and Permanence Service in April 2020 was also very timely as it provided increased capacity. There are now four Corporate Parenting teams responsible for children up until the age of 18 and two Leaving Care teams responsible for care leavers aged 18 through to 25. This service has a clear focus on planning, permanence and improving the experiences and progress for children in care and care leavers and is beginning to demonstrate positive impact.

Plans to increase the Corporate Parenting and Permanence Service further with additional leaving care adviser capacity is in development this financial year. This will enable us to provide personal advisers to children in care at an earlier age and not wait until they are almost 18, an Ofsted area for improvement.

In 2020/21, social workers and leaving care advisers prioritised contact with children in care and care leavers using virtual visits interspersed with face-to-face visits when lockdown restrictions allowed. Our workers and IROs have been creative in maintaining and building strong positive connections, and for many young people virtual visits have been positive. 95% of children in care were visited every six weeks and 99.5% were seen every three months.

Care leavers have been visited regularly, and those visits have been face-to-face where appropriate and virtual during the pandemic. Care leavers keep in touch figures are high at 96% and over 90% of care leavers say they can contact their worker. Anecdotal evidence is that virtual visits between care leavers and leaving care advisers has been positive, enabling increased communication and a timely resolution of any issues or problems.

Pathway planning is an area for improvement. All care leavers should have a pathway plan which should be regularly updated. Our performance has dropped by 9% in 2020/21 with 78% of care leavers having up to date plans. Improving compliance, consistency and the quality of pathway plans remain priority areas for the Corporate Parenting Service and MCPG.

In 2020/21, most of our children in care (76%) continue to be placed within family settings and are living in stable homes. Most children are placed less than 20 miles from their home enabling them to maintain connections with school, family, and friends – a positive outcome.

We have seen an increase in the demand for residential placements, due to the level and complexity of need of children coming into care, which has been exacerbated due to the pandemic, when comparing data to 2019/20. 54 young people (14%) were in residential placements at the end of March 2020/21 compared to 34 (9%) at year end 2019/20. There has also been an increased demand for Mother and Baby Units – demonstrating the positive impact of the pre-birth team. Planning for unborn babies and young babies entering care is much stronger with the pre-birth team in place. There has also been an increase in placements in Youth Offending Institutions and two children in care were admitted in hospital, due to being sectioned under the mental health act. Despite this overall increase, we have a lower proportion of children placed in residential care than London and are in line with similar areas.



The number of children coming into care via police protection increased in 2020/21 to 19.7% (38 children) and we are now above London, similar areas, and England. As reported in the recent Ofsted Focused Assurance Visit not all children come into care in a planned way and we are working on improvements and addressing any practice issues. We track and report numbers of children entering care on police protection weekly and audit all children subject to police protection quarterly. Findings and recommendations are reported to senior leadership, the Children's Improvement Board and MCPG.

The number of children coming into care under section 20 increased slightly to 26% in the last year but remains below London, similar areas, and national averages. The proportion of children on a Full Care Order or Interim Care Order are above national, London and similar areas.

We have increased investment in good edge-of-care services to ensure, where possible, children can remain at home with their families. The Specialist Intervention service was launched in July 2020 bringing together a range of existing edge of care services such as Family Group Conferencing, Restorative Intervention, Family Support, Therapy, Family Contact, Lasting Links, Group work and Substance Misuse under one Head of Service who joined also in July last year. Despite being launched in the middle of the pandemic, the service is working with increasing numbers of children and their families. The service has worked hard to raise its profile providing consultation and bespoke support for some of our most vulnerable children. This service already has waiting lists due to the demand for such good quality interventions, and the increasing demand in the system. Some of our children in care have already started to benefit from the Lasting Links pilot work helping them contact family whom they had lost contact with, with heart-warming outcomes for these children.

Parenting and group work were postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions, but we will recommence when safe to do so. Our Family Time Contact service found it a challenge to provide the level of positive contact between looked after children and their family members due to restrictions. This has improved and we are trailing the use of other council buildings to facilitate these contacts.

Despite these challenges, placement stability performance was good, and we exceeded the target in not having more than 10% of children in care experiencing

more than three plus placements in a year. Good performance was also maintained in long term placement stability at 69% better than London and similar areas.

During COVID-19, ensuring stability of placements was a priority. Early on, as lockdown was beginning, we identified foster placements that may be more at risk of breakdown because of the foster carers' age or health condition to provide additional support if required. We are proud that no placements changed because of the pandemic and stability has been maintained.

We have a strong and well-regarded in-house fostering service that uses the Mockingbird programme to help keep children in their placements. The feedback from carers and children and the Fostering Network are extremely positive and our model is considered a national leader. There were no plans to increase the number of constellations in 2020/21 due to the pandemic, but in the latter part of 2021 a further two constellations are planned. Our Specialist Intervention Service is also impacting on placement stability positively.

We have reviewed our Children in Care and Care Leaver Sufficiency Statement and aim to have a refreshed sufficient statement presented and agreed by the autumn of 2021.

All unaccompanied asylum-seeking children enter the Corporate Parenting service to ensure expertise is utilised and we continue to provide a timely and effective service placing them in independent accommodation or foster care according to their assessed needs. As reported by Ofsted in the focused assurance visit published in July 2021, we make excellent use of interpreters and specialist support to ensure UASC get the help and support they need. We have increased the number of UASC placed in foster care placements, which is a positive outcome for those vulnerable young people. The number and proportion of UASC placed in semi-independent accommodation is lower at 42 (11%) compared to 62 (15%) at end of 2019/20. Although this is still high compared to London and national, we are pleased with our progress.

Our vulnerable children in care at risk of abuse, exploitation and going missing are reviewed regularly at MASE and CEG( Criminal exploitation group ). We continue to monitor missing children through the effective monthly multi-agency missing children operational panel (MCOP). This Panel has been further

strengthened and now also considers looked after children placed in the borough by other authorities on a quarterly basis. A daily missing children report is circulated to the DCS and other safeguarding partners and includes children placed in LBBB by other authorities who have been reported missing to police.

An area for improvement as set out by Ofsted is to ensure that children in care who go missing or who are vulnerable to exploitation, return home interviews are routinely completed. We need to work on ensuring that the level of risk is assessed, and safety planning is informed by this risk assessment. Actions to address this improvement area are set out in our improvement plan and work is underway to improve offer, take up and timeliness of return home interviews.

Barking and Dagenham no longer operates as an Adoption Agency. Adopt London East is our Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). The adoption functions of Tower Hamlets, Newham and Barking and Dagenham were delegated on the 1st of October 2019 to the London Borough of Havering within terms drawn up in a detailed partnership agreement. Adopt London East (ALE) formally commenced operational activity on this date. Adopt London East works in close collaboration with the 'Adopt London' adoption agencies who provide services for 23 Local Authorities in total. In this way, developing a London wide profile, economies of scale and sharing best practice are possible.

Feedback from Regional Adoption Agencies in operation for a year or more is positive. Adopters report on improved services and staff on improved job satisfaction. Ofsted reports on Local Authorities with adoption services delivered regionally have been universally positive. The government have noted the significant progress in cutting the time children wait to be placed with their adoptive parents and this is a positive outcome for children. However, both the number of registrations of interest and approved adopters nationally, regionally, and locally within East London have fallen in recent years. An increase in expressions of interest has been sustained since the service went live last October and we anticipate this will increase the number of adopters approved in 2020/21. The Adopt London East annual report 2020/21 sets out performance and progress and will be presented and discussed at MCPG and Assembly later in the year.

During 2020/21, 14 children achieved permanence through adoption compared to 15 in 2019/20. This represented 7% of all children leaving care - above

London, but below the national and similar areas averages of 10% and 11% respectively. We have had no adoption disruptions for the eighth consecutive year. 20 children (10%) had become subject to special guardianship orders (SGOs), lower than the 2019/20 figure of 33 children (16%), but we remain higher than similar areas and the London average.

The latest published DfE adoption scorecard covering 2017-20 demonstrates continued improvement. The average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family including foster carer adoptions (A10) for children adopted decreased from a three-year average of 642 days to 465 days. This remains above the nationally set target of 426 days but reflects improving practice. Despite the improved timeliness, performance remains above London at 364 days, national at 367 days and similar areas at 381 days. For the year 2020/21, the average time for this measure further decreased to 435 days just 35 days off the DfE target but the adoption scorecard three yearly rolling average for 2018-21 once published next year will see an increase to 503 days because 2018/19 was higher at 586 days.

The average time between the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family remained also improved in 2017-20 decreasing to 246 days compared to 394 days in 2016-19. Performance has been improving on this indicator year on year since 2018, although remains 125 days above the DfE threshold of 121 days, and we remain above all comparators - national average (175 days); London average (205 days) and similar areas (232 days). Our performance for 2018-21 is also better with timeliness decreasing further to 218 days (97 days above DfE threshold).

We have worked hard to improve oversight and quality of Placement with parents' arrangements. Through doing so we have seen the numbers reduce with a corresponding increase in successful revocations of care orders.

The Permanence Taskforce continues to keep oversight of adoption and the adoption scorecard indicators tracking and understanding reasons for those children who have been awaiting matching for long periods. Those waiting the longest tend to have complex health needs and be in older sibling groups. Only one adoption was delayed due to COVID-19 and this delay was managed exceptionally well by our play therapist and we are pleased that the adoption has now been finalised.

Children who are privately fostered are assessed in a timely way, visited regularly, and are living in suitable care arrangements.

### Promise 3: To keep you healthy

#### ***Strengthened strategic oversight and leadership to improve health outcomes for children in care but still much to do especially for care leavers.***

An effective partnership and health led overhaul of our initial health assessment and reviews has led to significantly improved performance, as confirmed by Ofsted during the focused assurance visit in May 2021.

The multi-agency LAC health sub-group of the MCPG chaired by the CCG, and the health focused Zoning Meeting which tracks performance on IHAs and RHAs have both had a positive impact. We are pleased to report that the timeliness of initial health assessments further improved to 51% at the end of 2020/21, compared to 26% in 2019/20. Whilst an improvement, this is not good enough for our children and young people as reflected in the local target of over 70% for 2021/22.

92% of all children in care had an up to date medical at the end of 2020/21, 3% higher than the previous year. This is very good performance when considering the impact of the pandemic. Performance on eye checks dropped slightly to 71%, but it is in dental checks that the pandemic had the most significant negative impact. Overall, health check performance for children in care one year or more, therefore, dropped to 71% compared to 91% in 2019/20. With lockdown restrictions removed, we are reporting an improvement in dentist performance, and we expect our health review performance to recover in this financial year.

As part of health assessments, emotional issues are identified, and emotional wellbeing is monitored as part of the annual health check process. A good proportion of children in care return a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and the results of those SDQ scores show good performance. SDQ scores

reduced from 12.5 to 11.6 (the lower the better) and remain below London, similar areas, and England.

In 2020/21, we set up SDQ scoring on Liquid Logic for all children in care aged four or over and at the end of the year, a high proportion – 86% - had an SDQ recorded in the last 12 months. This means that changes in emotional health over time will also be more clearly tracked and appropriate provisions to support emotional wellbeing will be identified as part of the health assessment process.

Hot Clinics provided by CAMHS ensure children in care and foster carers receive the appropriate help and support, and during the pandemic, this was critical in preventing placement breakdowns. SDQs and CAMHS are both standing items on the LAC Health Subgroup and operational issues are picked up at LAC Zoning meetings held monthly.

A dedicated CAMHS looked after children specialist works directly with a small number of children to ensure their needs are addressed within local CAMHS services, liaising with services out of borough when necessary. This worker also offers support to foster carers and is developing alternative ways to engage children and young people with support for their emotional wellbeing.

The DCS is Chair of the 3-borough child health transformation meeting providing greater opportunity for local oversight of CAMHS transformation work.

Improving health outcomes further remains a top priority. Whilst there have been improvements both strategically and operationally, there is still much to do.

#### ***Much more to be done on improving health for care leavers.***

We recognise that health arrangements and provision for care leavers still require improvement. During the pandemic, care leavers mental health and isolation was a priority. A good proportion of care leavers do return a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and these are tracked so we can ensure a holistic approach to our care leavers health needs. Our CAMHS Hot clinic did provide support to some of our care leavers, but as Ofsted reported in May 2021 “Timely mental health services for care leavers are not readily accessible”. Care leavers have to access services via their general practitioner, and waiting lists are long for adult services. Care leavers also do not have easy access to specialist

support with substance misuse, and their health histories are not available. This resulted in an improvement recommendation - **The quality and impact of services to support care leavers and to help them to prepare for adulthood, with a specific focus on their emotional and physical health and well-being.**

In 2021/22, a top priority is to address the Ofsted findings and an improvement plan is in place. We are developing a specific health offer for care leavers aged over 18. BHRCCG has agreed recurrent funding for a dedicated care Leaver practitioner to be hosted in the Corporate Parenting leaving care team to support the emotional wellbeing and mental health of our care leavers. Recruitment has commenced in September 2021. The care leaver practitioner role will work with the Adult MH TB (Mental Health Transformation Board) and with our LBBB Transition Subgroup to manage LAC / Care Leaver transitions post 18 with multi agency working and support in the transition from children to adults' mental health provisions.

The substance misuse worker in our Specialist Intervention Service is carrying out an initial assessment of care leavers with substance misuse issues to inform and refer on to appropriate specialist support.

We will ensure care leavers have access to their health histories, so that they understand their health needs and to access their information. Consultation and co-production are underway led by Skittlz to meet this improvement area.

All care leavers can access free annual membership to Barking and Dagenham leisure centres with opportunities to take a friend and have free membership for the Youth Zone.

The multi-agency looked after children and care leavers Health sub-group reporting into the Corporate Parenting Group has been tasked to drive forward improvements in this area.

### ***Effective Virtual School during the pandemic***

The Aspire Virtual School (AVS) continues to be strong, providing an effective service and response to children's learning with a clear identification and focus on our most vulnerable children and children placed out of borough during the pandemic. This was confirmed by Ofsted in the ILACS Focused Assurance Visit in May 2021 reporting that '*Staff at the virtual school have maintained effective oversight of children's learning during the pandemic, including of those who are more vulnerable. Staff have developed bespoke responses to meet individual needs, and progress has been reviewed more frequently for children where there is concern.*'

During the pandemic, the AVS held virtual Designated Teacher (DT) meetings, enabling out of borough colleagues to attend and hear first-hand the Virtual Schools offer of support. As a result, contact with out of borough colleagues increased considerably and this allowed the AVS to monitor safeguarding/keeping in touch arrangements as evidenced by the student voice in the PEPs. Resources were made available to all DTs and young people ensuring that our young people were well supported by their schools as demonstrated in the quality assurance of PEPs.

During the pandemic, 98% of ePEP meetings held via Microsoft Teams were attended by the Virtual School to provide support and address the needs of the young people. The PEP format was adapted to ensure that the student's voices were heard. Our students told us that they were learning new skills but missing their friends and that someone from school was keeping in touch with them. No safeguarding concerns were raised.

We ensured rapid PP+ core, blanket payment drop direct to schools to ensure schools and young people had the equipment they needed for online learning/or to purchase hard copies of resources if relevant. In April 2020, at the start of lockdown, the AVS ensured that the necessary ICT equipment was provided for our students. This was checked up on via the PEPs and all students had appropriate equipment. This allowed the AVS to creatively use the Government IT support to prioritise our care leavers. Additional PP+ were paid if additional resources were needed.

AVS attended fortnightly 'high needs' meetings with the inclusion, EHC, Social

## **Promise 4: To get the best education**

care, Health, Educational Psychology teams and the Director of Education to ensure our most vulnerable students were supported. This meeting ensured that students were placed in the most appropriate provision and help was available to prevent education placement breakdown. All education placements were sustained during the COVID period.

The Virtual School involved more professionals at PEP meetings for students with EHC to give a more robust support to students, such as CAMHs, the Educational Psychology service, SENCOs. EHC team colleagues and mentors also attended as many annual review meetings as possible

We supported carers whose young people were struggling to engage with online learning. For a few students (during the first lockdown) we had to insist that the students went back into school as they were not engaging at home, others ended with a more blended approach of part time school and part time home learning. One huge impact of our support for carers was that there were no foster placement breakdowns due to COVID-19.

We continued to deliver designated teacher training (virtually) with an emphasis on mental health support for young people and staff. We found that the take up for our meetings was excellent, with a 40% increase on our usual attendance, and DTs commented how well supported they felt with the advice and guidance we offered. As they had a Virtual School member of staff at the PEPs, they were able to ask for advice/support directly. In some cases, this resulted in commissioning a mentor for students or some online training for staff (we used AC Education for our online training)

We commissioned tuition for students not in education, for example those who had a placement move. This was delivered virtually. In addition, we also supported the Social Worker with school applications.

The AVS commissioned the Goblin's Chest to work with four of our year 6 students who had been identified as needing additional support with the transition to secondary school. These students all transitioned successfully to secondary school. We also ensured virtual careers interviews for year 10 and 11 to support KS5 choices continued throughout the pandemic and achieved a very high uptake from our students.

During the pandemic, the AVS identified 13 young people who were struggling

emotionally and academically. We commissioned a School Enrichment Program delivered online which was open to in and out of borough students. This was a blend of group tutoring to address emotional, social, and mental health needs and soft skills to prepare to reintegrate into school post Covid. The feedback was very positive from both staff and students. One student said, 'I really enjoyed the sessions and am learning new skills and a staff member commented 'students were fully engaged throughout'.

The Virtual School has worked successfully with The Transformed You mentoring service – bespoke for Looked after Children. The company staff, who were all previously looked after themselves, and therefore uniquely placed to understand and support our students, continued to mentor several of our students during lockdown.

### ***Strong Virtual School achieving good outcomes.***

The Aspire Virtual School (AVS) continues to demonstrate robust outcomes in terms of attainment, attendance, exclusions, PEP quality and timeliness. Most children in care make good progress and attainment for our children in care remains above national children in care average. The most recent data shows that we remain in the top quartile for all attainment data and for unauthorised and overall absence and for fixed term exclusions. Most of our children in care are in good or outstanding schools.

Due to COVID-19, there is no data at KS1 or KS2 for 2020. At KS4 in 2020, based on teacher assessments, 41.4% of children in care achieved 9-4 pass in English and maths compared to 27.2% in 2019. Performance remains way above the national average at Key Stage 4 and performance is in the top quartile for KS4 Average Attainment 8 Score and KS4 Average Progress 8 score, also above national average.

The AVS has worked hard to improve the Personal Education Plan (PEP) completion rate and in 2020/21, 86% of children in care had an up to date compared to 82% in 2019/20. This has further improved to 90% as at the end of Q1 2021/22. The quality of PEPs has also improved and during the recent OFSTED focused assurance visit, positive feedback was provided by the Education HMI describing the 'love and care' shown in the PEPs sampled.



The AVS Awards have been created with the winners receiving a trophy or medal, a gift card, and a certificate. These were posted due to COVID-19 but will be given as part of the children in care and care leavers awards later this year. These are inclusive awards and not simply for academic excellence.

The AVS Management Committee is now functional, providing an extra layer of challenge and support to the Virtual School. It is comprised of an Independent Chair, 7 members and a clerk to record minutes. We have had two meetings so far and are currently preparing a review of our SEND cohort for the next meeting.

Our training for schools has focussed on SEMH of students and staff to try and meet the growing need for mental health support.

The Aim Higher Program is an exciting initiative of the Virtual School to raise aspiration. The program is organised in collaboration with local universities and the Careers team in the council for an identified group of young people from Year 4 to Year 12. Different events will be organised for the different year groups to ensure that they are inspired to focus on higher education and subsequently supported to achieve this goal.

apprenticeships already in our local offer, but a recommendation was made for us to set a ringfenced amount as a target. Our leisure offer, and Council Tax Exemption for care leavers were also viewed as very good.

The visit confirmed that our leaving care model is operationally good but that the model could be stronger with specialist workers based in the leaving care team such as a dedicated housing officer resource in the team, an emotional wellbeing/mental health practitioner and an EET officer. Caseloads were at an acceptable level, although our Leaving Care Personal Advisors covered many areas, tasks and processes that sometimes made them feel out of their depth.

A key recommendation was to review and strengthen our 'whole council' offer by organising an event with each partner agency so that they can set out their local offer and *"for the test to be applied 'is this good enough for my child' and with a particular focus on: A health offer to care leavers from 18yrs to 25yrs; and a Probation offer to care leavers entering and leaving custody up to 25yrs"*. Several other recommendations have been made and these have been incorporated into our improvement plan enabling us to reach our ambition of being 'the best corporate parents' we can be.

2020/21 has been an exceptionally difficult year for young people due to the pandemic impact on education, employment, and training. So as corporate parents, we were pleased that for the second consecutive year running, over 60% of care leavers were in education, employment, or training, above London, similar areas, and England averages by 6% and 8% respectively. This has further improved this year to 63%. This is testament to senior leaders and managers across the Council and partnership working hard to support and improve young people's education, employment, and training outcomes through internships, in-house apprenticeships, and traineeships. The multi-agency EET Panel, comprising representatives from the Virtual School, Job Shop, Apprenticeships and Careers Advisors, also continues to have a positive impact.

We were very proud when two of our care leavers obtained an apprenticeship position in Children Care and Support in 2020, and one of them has been successful in obtaining a permanent position in the Business Improvement team in the service.

## Promise 5: To be successful in life

### ***Ambitious, aspirational, and passionate Council investment to Care Leavers, an improved enhanced Local Offer, and improved outcomes***

Our ambition, investment and progress were confirmed by the positive feedback from the two-day DfE improvement visit, undertaken in November 2020 by Mark Riddell, the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers. The visit and feedback endorsed our rapid improvement and progress to have a better offer for care leavers across the whole service area. It also confirmed the strengthened leadership in this area and the significant progress we have made in our approach to Corporate Parenting, our enhanced local offer and the extended duties that apply to care leavers up to 25 years.

Our housing offer to care leavers was considered as very positive especially given the challenges with supply and demand in the borough. We have care leaver

Our Virtual School also supports care leavers well and has focused on three key areas: Robust Support for Care Leavers with More Complex Needs, Raising Aspiration, Creating Partnership for employment and training opportunities. The AVS has also been successful in securing additional funding for a part time post 16 role, to ensure that no young people are excluded from education, employment, or training. This will impact positively on improving outcomes further for older care leavers in 2021/22 and beyond.

From the beginning of May 2020, to facilitate the Department for Education's scheme to provide digital devices to vulnerable young people, we identified care leavers who required laptops, and facilitated these being delivered and supported with set up.

In 2020, we had the highest number of students (10), progress to higher education. In this academic year we have four care leavers who are at University and eight care leavers graduated. This can be attributed to the support provided by the Virtual School through organising events like the University Support Network Meeting, commissioning careers interviews, interventions regarding transitions to Higher Education and working closely with social workers to support transition to Higher Education.

The AVS has also led on the Inspire Project in partnership with the London School of Management Education, aimed at tackling barriers preventing progression into higher education. This is done through tutoring to support younger students, year 10-13, in their areas of low attainment in Maths and English with one-to-one support, mentoring and tuition. This has enabled the Virtual School to provide support to post 16 who are not eligible for funding from the Virtual School.

The Vulnerable Housing Panel continues to improve housing options for care leavers with dedicated staff to support young people paying their rent and preventing evictions. Joint work with housing colleagues is taking place to increase options for care leavers and signing up young people to tenancy arrangements and tenancy sustainment. Care leavers are also included in the Council's Inclusive Growth and Vulnerable Housing strategy. Suitable accommodation for care leavers, therefore, has improved further despite the pressure of the pandemic and the supply challenges faced in the borough. At the end of 2020/21, 88% of care leavers were living in suitable accommodation,

up by 4% on 2019/20 and up by 7% on 2018/19. Performance is above London, similar areas, and England averages.

Care leavers continue to be supported in a range of semi-independent provision secured through commissioned framework, and includes shared houses rented from the private sector with bespoke support packages if required. This framework ensures an appropriate service that delivers excellent outcomes for young people and ensures consistency in the quality of accommodation.

Our Brokerage service has created additional resources to quality assure providers in both Adult's and Children's Care and Support. The sourcing of placements now sits in the Brokerage service to ensure we are better at finding the right placements for children and young people.

We have extended the Independent Visitors offer to include care leavers and currently three Members have been mentoring three of our young people, offering them inspiration, guidance, and support.

We have high aspirations for our care leavers, and they are involved in their services and their achievements are celebrated. We ensure that the Local Offer to care leavers is available to all eligible young people in various formats. A text messaging service to keep young people updated on events, jobs and opportunities is now live.

We usually celebrate our children's achievements at an annual awards ceremony but last year, due to the pandemic, workers visited young people to deliver trophies, certificates and took pictures to mark the occasion.

The DfE introduced a 'care leaver covenant' that will enable organisations to make commitments to care leavers within the spirit of the corporate parenting principles: we have signed up to this covenant. We believe that with our Council ethos of 'no one left behind', our strong partnerships and inclusive growth ambitions, we are well placed to become a truly 'universal family' to our care leavers.

## Our headline plans for the next 12 months – 2021/22

Leading and managing the recovery and legacy and new ways of working because of the pandemic.

Implement the DfE Care Leavers Improvement plan post the two-day visit in November 2020.

Improve the offer and take-up of return home interviews to children in care who go missing, so that information is gathered and used to minimise risk and to inform safety planning (Ofsted recommendation).

Improve the quality and impact of services to support care leavers and to help them to prepare for adulthood, with a specific focus on their emotional and physical health and well-being (Ofsted recommendation).

All Elected Members to continue to be ambitious and passionate corporate parents.

Enhance the Corporate Parenting and Permanence Service, further strengthening Corporate Parenting, permanence and outcomes for LAC and Care Leavers.

Refresh the Corporate Parenting Strategy by the end of the year.

Consult with a larger cohort of children in care and care leavers, including those placed further away. This is a top priority for the year ahead.

Strengthening participation in Reviews.

Implement Virtual School Peer Review opportunities and continue to ensure education outcomes improve for children in care.

Maintain or further improve performance on placement stability.

Ongoing focus on edge of care work and rehabilitation home to ensure the right children are in care.

A focus on unregulated 16+ placements; maintain fostering post 16 when placements can become fragile and increase foster care options for UASC.

Our new fostering recruitment campaign is planned to recruit more foster carers who are willing to consider adolescents and UASC placements.

Improve and sustain performance on health assessments. The foundations of improvement have already been laid.

Continue to improve the offer to support children and young people's emotional wellbeing. Integrate the use of SDQs more holistically into the health assessments so emotional wellbeing is considered.

Listen to our Black and Asian children to understand their experiences of care in the context of our ambition to drive forward Black Lives Matter.

Elected Members to continue to hold all partners to account and champion the needs of our care leavers, unlocking the full potential that the council, voluntary services, and businesses offer to improve the lives of our care leavers. This includes signing up to the Care Leavers Covenant and the whole Council celebrating National Care Leavers week.

Continue improvements for Care Leavers in Employment, Education and Training, with a focus on older care leavers using cross-Council support and opportunities in challenging COVID-19 times.

Develop a preparation for apprenticeship scheme where care leavers can experience extended work experience placements.

Continue to develop the housing offer to care leavers and the support they need to manage independent living.

Extend the use of mentors/independent visitors for care leavers who have no or limited contact with family.

Review the Pathway Plan with care leavers to make it more meaningful to young people.

Pause programme offered for care leavers who have lost a child to the care system and improved joint working needed between LCA's and Pre-birth team.

Deliver Lasting Links working with care leavers supporting them in securing lifelong positive links to support their transitions beyond 25.