

# Durham County Council

## Strategy for Children in Care and Care Leavers

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- 1. Contents**
- 2. Our Vision**
- 3. Part of Durham**
- 4. Our Children and Young People**
- 5. Learning from Care Experienced Young People**
- 6. Relationships**
- 7. Education Employment and Training**
- 8. The Local Offer**
- 9. Children and Young People's Voices**

## 2. Our Vision

In Durham Children's Services we want to make sure that children only come into our care when they must do so. When they cannot remain with their families because they are being harmed or the risk of them being harmed becomes too great. We will work relentlessly to support children to remain living with their families, and if a child needs to leave their parents care we will work with the child and their network to support the child to remain living with safe familiar adults.

When children are cared for within their networks, we will support the adults who care for them. We will work with the child and their family to gain a shared understanding of what has happened in their family and why the child has been cared for away from their parents.

We want any young person who is unable to live at home to live in a homely and comfortable environment. With care provided by foster carers, or staff teams who are committed to helping them enjoy their lives and grow with positive experiences of loving care by trusted and dependable adults. We want children in our care to have had consistent adult support with stable and positive social work relationships so that they don't feel the need to repeat their story. We want them to thrive with adults who have walked beside them during their care journey.



We are ambitious for the children in our care and care leavers and for the quality of service we seek to provide to them. We want children in our care and care leavers to be supported to achieve their potential with dedicated support continuing into adulthood.

We want children in our care and care leavers to be sure that their voices will be heard on an individual and collective basis. We want to make sure that regardless of communication challenges, language barriers, every care leaver is supported to share their views.

We want to provide children in our care and care leavers with safe boundaries and loving care provided by all corporate parents to make sure that the care we offer improves their circumstances now and in the future. We want to make sure that the communities in Durham work with us to help children in care and care leavers to feel they are valued as they grow.

### Areas for action

- We will only bring children into care when it cannot be made safe for them to stay at home.
- We will work with each child's network to try and keep every child within their network.
- We will support all adults who care for children to do so safely.
- We want all children to live in safe homely and comfortable homes.
- We want all children to be able to build enduring relationships with consistent adults.
- We want to walk alongside children who are unable to stay living at home to stop them having to tell their story over and over.
- We want all children to achieve their best in education, and will work with them and their school, college or workplace to support this.

### 3. Part of Durham

In Durham we believe that every child needs to be supported to develop relationships with people that sustain them through challenges in life and to share happy times.

We know, because they have told us, that the children we care for, and care leavers value the relationships they have with the people who care for them. Foster carers, social workers, children's home staff teams, teachers and nurses can all have a huge impact on a child or young person's life. It is our responsibility to make the impact positive. The children we have cared for have told us that this makes the difference to them as they have grown up.



These relationships need to be nurtured and acknowledged as special in supporting each child to understand their place in the world and to feel confident to learn and to grow.

The children in our care and care leavers have families and histories that we must respect. We must work cooperatively with each child's family as co-parents in the best interests of each child. We must allow the possibility for change and growth in families and with enduring supportive relationships help each child to maintain all positive relationships in their lives.

In Durham we do not believe that any person progresses to independence, as social beings' humans require loving supportive relationships throughout their lives to thrive. We want to support children and young people who are, or have been, in our care to develop and sustain these relationships.

#### Areas for action

We will always try to support children and young people to keep the relationships that matter to them.

- We will continue to improve the way we work with birth families.
- We will stick with children and young people through good and challenging times.

#### 4. Our Children and Young People

In Durham we currently care for around 960 children and support 300 young people with care leaver eligibility.

The children who come into our care do so because they have suffered loss and/or harm. They need to be supported by all the adults in their lives to understand what has happened in a way that makes sure they do not assume blame or shame for what has happened. As a result of the challenges the children in our care have faced, we need to be assured that being in our care makes things better for them.

Our children have amazing talents and skills, and it is our role to help them to explore these. We will provide the environment that supports each child to feel loved and confident to learn and to make mistakes. The children in our care will feel able to have all the opportunities their friends have, without being concerned that they are in our care. In doing this we work with all the services that are in contact with the children in our care and care leavers to seek to remove any barriers or prejudices them . The children in our care and care leavers will be aware that we are proud of their achievements and that we celebrate these with them.



Children are supported in having their achievements acknowledged in all manner of ways, linked to their choices. They are supported to participate in all celebration events in their school and colleges. Individual talents in arts and sports are supported alongside support for children and care leavers who choose an academic pathway into adulthood via university.

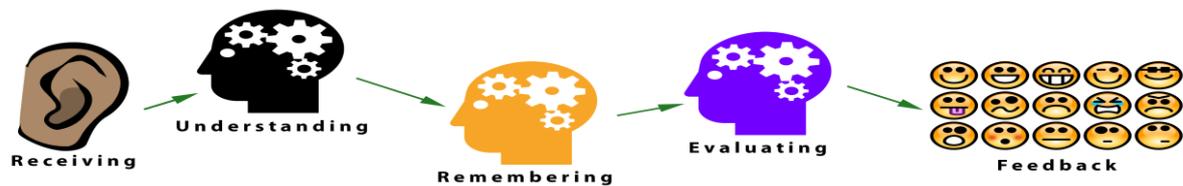
##### Areas for action

- We will hold annual celebration events for children in care and care leavers.
- We will always try to provide warm and loving care to children and young people.
- We will work with each child in care and care leaver to explore their potential and support them to continue to develop skills.

## 5. Learning from Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People

Children in our care and care leavers have told us that they are proud to be from Durham. The majority feel connected to and claimed by those adults who care for them. They do however at other times feel that their experience of being in care or leaving care creates a barrier for them and that they and their families are negatively perceived as a result.

We will continue to engage with the children in our care and care leavers to understand their experiences and improve individual and collectively the lived experiences of children and young people.



We will continue to participate in structured research where this is possible to gain insights into the positive experiences and challenges faced by children and young people to base any service developments on the outcomes identified.



We will work with local, regional, and national children in care and care leaver forums to learn for the experiences of wider groups of care experienced young people and drive practice improvements in Durham.

### Areas for Action

- We will participate in research with Care Leavers Transition from Care (CCTC) research with Reading university and the network community that supports that research.
- We will challenge discrimination towards any child in care or a care leaver.

## 6. Relationships

Without relationships human beings are unable to function. We are all social beings who require the interaction with others to thrive. In Durham we believe that the consistency of relationships is central to our ability to build trust and confidence in each other. We seek to provide this stability in carer and social worker, but acknowledge we have work to progress to recruit and retain foster carers, children's home staff and social workers to provide the stability of relationship the children and young people we care for require.

We have a clear expectation that the adults providing care to children and young people will do so with genuine affection. Our policies regarding physical contact and displays of affection include the need for this to build safe and sustaining relationships. We are working to consider the ways in which our organisation responds to trauma, not only with our children and young people but across the staff teams. This is acknowledged as hugely significant to the development of relationships of trust that support adults to be emotionally responsive to children's needs.

We have a large proportion of children in care who live in stable foster care homes. For most children and young people these homes sustain throughout the children and young people's lives with relationships that endure.

There are some children and young people who do not have this stability and we are working to increase our foster care offer so that we can provide a greater matching choice at the outset of coming into care. We acknowledge that we have too many children and young people who have moved in our care too many times. This prevents them from building the relationships that they need. We are seeking to establish smaller children's homes for children who may need care to be provided in this way. It is hoped that in doing this we will be better able to build relationships that can endure.



### Key points for action

- We will make sure that all policies, and processes will consider the need to support enduring positive relationships with children in care and care leavers.
- This will include the policies for foster carers and children's home staff as well as for children's social workers.
- We will support our staff to understand the impact of relationship-based working with dedicated training, and reflective supervision to support their capacity to build and sustain meaningful relationships with children in our care and care leavers.

## Education, Employment and Training.

The schools and colleges in Durham show strong performance in developing individual children to fulfil their academic and vocational potential. There is a wide range of school and colleges offering varied curriculums supporting children and young people's learning.

Children in care in Durham are further supported by the Virtual school which provides additional capacity to support the education of this group of children. This team co-ordinates a Personal Education Plan (PEP) which details support into schools and colleges, assistance in resolving any issues linked to education and attainment specific to each child or young person.

We recognise the importance of stability in education not only to promote learning but to aid children and young people to maintain friendships and support networks. We acknowledge the whole experience of being in education includes both the curriculum and extracurricular activities and seek to support all the children in our care to participate in activities linked to their interests and skills.

The school day involves the planning for school, the readiness for learning and the peer relationships and we seek to support young people to be able to engage with all aspects of this. Beginning with good routines of care in their living arrangements and including detail of their travel to and from school as well as their school day.

We seek to involve children's families in celebrating the successes in education wherever possible, with formal consultation evenings and school events forming part of the sharing of parental responsibility where this meets the child or young person's needs.



All young people in Durham are supported to remain in education to achieve their potential up to and including attending universities of choice and progressing post graduate careers.

Young People seeking support with employment in Durham are supported by dedicated advisors within Durham Works who seek to identify opportunities for children in care and care leavers to undertake work experience and training opportunities along with a range of ring-fenced apprenticeship and employment opportunities.

### Areas for action

All children and young people in Durham will have a Personal Education Plan.

All children and young people in Durham will be supported to remain in education to fulfil their personal ambitions

Young People in Durham will be supported into employment with dedicated support from Durham Works

## The Local Offer to Care Leavers

We have published a Local Offer to care leavers in Durham which is available on our website and details the support available to young people who have been in care.

The Local Offer is divided into 5 headings covering

- Support to you
- Where can I live?
- Money
- Education Training and Employment
- Looking After Yourself



Each of these areas provides information to help guide young people to support that is available with all and any aspects of their lives as they progress into adulthood.

We want to Care Leavers in Durham to understand all the ways that we can provide help and support. We want them to be able to move into their adult lives with confidence, able to plan a future and learn from mistakes as they mature with certainty that our care for them continues.

We are committed to continuing to review and improve our offer seeking to provide as much care and support as we can to young people. We work in partnership with young people to co-produce service improvements and develop ideas linked to young people's priorities.

We seek to offer services in an inclusive way, led by young people. Every care leaver has access to a Young Person's Advisor who will work with them to produce their own plan for their future and the steps needed to help to make progress.

### Areas for Action

- We will provide a dedicated personal assistant to all young people who are eligible for leaving care services.
- We will have clear mechanisms for determining leaving care status and will explain this to care leavers and their families.
- We are committed to supporting care leavers to engage in education and employment.
- We respect the right of all care experienced people to retain the positive relationships they have established throughout their lives and accept that there may be periods of time when care leavers choose to have no communication with us, and times in their lives when they wish to do so.
- We encourage all care leavers to share their experiences, achievements, and challenges with the people they have the most positive relationships with regardless of work role.
- We retain relationships with children and young people for as long as the young person wants to. While the Local Authority is not resourced to provide financial support to care leavers over 25, we always provide emotional support and sign posting to services regardless of age.

## Children and Young People's Voices

To make sure that everything we do has children's voices at the centre we have several ways that we engage with children and young people. All social workers, young people's advisors, independent reviewing officers, will work directly with individual children and young people to build relationships and help to understand what is important to children.



In addition to direct work and fun time to build relationships all young people are supported to access the Mind of My Own app to aid them to share their views, successes, and challenges. This allows messages to be sent to the person a child or young person wishes to communicate this with.

We commit to listening to children and young people's views and responding to these or explaining why we are not able to and seeking shared ways forward. This will be supported by each child's IRO who will monitor the plan for each child and their involvement with this.

The impact of really listening and considering the views of each child will need to be monitored on an individual basis. We have small social work teams to support increased oversight and support to social worker and Young People's Advisors. This will enable managers to monitor this in supervision with social workers and support genuine reflection on the extent to which the child's wishes are included in the plan and the difference they make.

There will be times when we are not able to do what a child wants us to do, either because it is not safe, or we cannot support the risk involved. In these circumstances the child's allocated social worker will explain this to the child. If we can, we will find a negotiated way forward, often with the support of an independent advocate. All children in Care have access to independent advocacy services through the National Youth Advocacy Service.



We also work with Investors in Children who provide non directed support to individual and groups of children to express their views. This supports the Children in Care Council to participate in local, regional, and national work to identify the needs of children in care and care leavers and hold services to account for the provision of this support.

## Key points for action

- Make sure that young people in our care are routinely engaged, consulted and have a real say in their own lives;
- We will support children to explore how they make choices and express their views.
- We accept that this involves a degree of risk-taking behaviour and will work with children and young people to support this within age appropriate limits.
- We will make sure that we explain decisions to them and that we challenge any preconceived views about children in care.
- We will listen to each child's views and avoid a one size fits all service that doesn't allow space for individual choices and experiences.
- Make sure that young people in our care are routinely engaged, consulted and have a real say in their own lives;
- We will support children to explore how they make choices and express their views.
- We accept that this involves a degree of risk-taking behaviour and will work with children and young people to support this within age-appropriate limits.
- Ensure that young people in our care are properly and fully informed of their rights and offer advocacy to ensure they receive them; and
- Every child in the care of Durham Council has the right to access advocacy support and we commit to promoting this right to all children who come into our care.
- Listen to the voice of children in care and care experience people of all ages and always consult them about changes to services and support.
- We continue to work with the Children in Care Council (CiCC) to understand the care experience of children in Durham. We are committed to the views of the CiCC being presented regularly to the Corporate Parenting Forum to direct the work of the service.
- The active role of the CiCC in the region and nationally is acknowledged as a significant strength and we are keen to continue to work together to improve services.