



*Artwork by a child in our care titled: "You Let Me Go"*

**Cheshire West and Chester  
Corporate Parenting Strategy  
2023-27**

*Final Draft – Oct 2022*


## Foreword

We are proud to introduce this 2023 – 2027 strategy regarding our approach to corporate parenting across Cheshire West and Chester. This strategy seeks to outline the strategic direction and key priorities in ensuring as a whole council and partnership we are the '**best corporate parent we can possibly be**' for those children, young people and young adults to whom we hold corporate parenting responsibilities. The emphasis for this strategy being collaborative corporate parenting across Cheshire West and Chester to ensure that children and young people's holistic needs are met to a high standard as any child should expect from a good parent.

This document seeks to confirm our vision and response for our children in our care and care leavers within Cheshire West and Chester, alongside fundamentally seeking to confirm that for our children; care experience is included as a protected characteristic in all Council Equality Impact Assessments from 2023, in line with those defined in the Equality Act 2010. This will make Cheshire West and Chester one of the leaders in taking this forward as a local authority nationally (at the time of writing being one of only five local authorities to take this strong position). Furthermore, the output objective of our collaborative corporate parenting approach being a revised and robust Care Leaver and Children in Care offer, including Cheshire West and Chester becoming signatories of the Care Leaver Covenant.

This strategy will provide a blueprint for how we recognise our key responsibilities as a whole Council and Partnership, alongside providing an overview of our collaborative corporate parenting responsibilities. Our ambition of creating '*champions*' and '*pledges*' across the whole council and partnership reflects our corporate parenting commitment for our children in care and care leavers; this will seek to ensure they receive the best care, support and permanence planning to reach their full potential as children, adults and beyond.

This strategy has been written engaging and holding in high regard both our children in care and our care leavers voices and what is important to them; connecting closely with our partnership model of practice "Our Ways of Working", and engaging with stakeholders both within the council and across our partnership. Our Children in Care and Care Leavers will continue to shape our priorities and their direct feedback included in our dynamic corporate parenting action plan. Our corporate parenting should aspire for every child in our care sharing the following feedback:



*'The support and the feeling of family is defiantly here... I feel safe and loved.'*

*Andrew Lewis*  
*Chief Executive*

*Delyth Curtis*  
*Deputy Chief Executive*  
*(Health and Wellbeing)*

*Councillor Louise Gittins*  
*Leader of the Council*

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### Children’s Summary – what does this document mean?:

This is a document that asks all those who work with and support children in care and care leavers to make sure they give children the very best! It tells people who read the document that children in our care and leaving our care are very important and we need to all work together to look after you well, listen to you and show you that we care. This document also reminds everyone that just because you turn 18, that doesn’t mean you won’t need our support anymore – so as your wider family you can come back to us for support.

We also ask for two big things to happen: for the Council to sign a national document which shows how important care leavers are, and for the Council to agree that being a child in care in your life means you should be given extra priority in key Council decisions.

## 1) Purpose

This strategy seeks to strengthen both strategic and operational collaborative corporate parenting as a whole council and across the partnership in Cheshire West and Chester to be ***'the best corporate parent we can possibly be'***.

The strategy provides a framework within which corporate parenting pledges can be defined and the application of the corporate parenting principles as set out in section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 are clear in real terms. Subsequently defined within a revised Care Leaver and Children in Care Offer, with robust governance and accountability mechanisms.

Significantly this strategy proposes that two key decisions are endorsed as a whole council. Being that Cheshire West and Chester Council becomes signatories of the Care Leaver Covenant and that "care experience" (either being a child in our care or having previously been a child in the care of Cheshire West and Chester Council) is included as a protected characteristic in all Council Equality Impact Assessments from 2023, in line with other protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010. We are also ambitious that our key stakeholders and partner agencies will consider doing the same. The children and young people we are corporate parents for now, are our professionals, residents and parents of tomorrow. Collaborative corporate parenting will improve their outcomes and ensure a positive contribution towards the Borough's social and economic future, in addition to the value base and outcomes achieved for our children into adulthood.

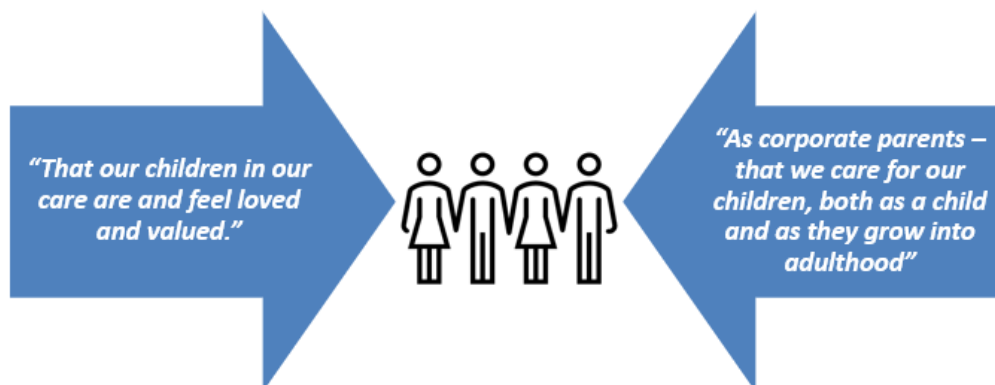
This is aligned to the Council Plan 2020- 2024 and council's key priorities, specifically the following:

- Support children and young people to make the best start in life and achieve their full potential'
- 'Enable more adults to live longer, healthier and happier lives'
- 'Make our neighbourhoods even better places to call home'

We hold strong aspirations for the children and young people in our care, taking seriously our responsibility as corporate parents and corporate grandparents in achieving our above vision together. These children, through no fault of their own, have required the local authority to step in and take forward corporate parenting responsibilities. We have an absolute duty to do all we can to offer them the very best start to life, support them to transition successfully in adulthood, and offer them recognition as our "family" throughout their lives.

## 2) Our Corporate Parenting Vision in Cheshire West and Chester

Our vision in Cheshire West and Chester as Corporate Parents is seeking to build upon the principle ‘... *if this were my child* ...’ and champion the cause of looked after children. We need to also remember this duty remains clear beyond 18. In trying to give this greater clarity, our vision locally is this rests on two clear pillars of vision, as outlined below, and underpinned by this being a shared corporate parenting responsibility:



It is the collective responsibility of the whole council, **members** and **officers** alongside our **partner agencies** to ensure that looked after children and care leavers receive the **best care, support and permanence** planning to reach their full potential **as children and adults**.

Our strategy mission is to deliver a collaborative corporate parenting offer in which we are able to hold each other accountable to delivering this vision through our Corporate Parenting Panel and ensure we are the very best parent we can be.

The underpinning principle of our vision being that across Cheshire West and Chester as a whole council, partnership and community there is an embedded culture at both strategic and operational levels of what it means in real terms to be a corporate parent and how this translates into decision making, planning and outcomes for our children and young people. Leaders and practitioners should challenge themselves as to how wider service delivery could benefit children in care and always by asking the critical question '**would this be good enough for my own child**' when considering both strategic and operational decisions that impact those with care experience.

In line with our partnership practice model – Our Ways of Working, which is rooted in trauma informed practice, our ambition is that this approach will '**become who we are as corporate parents**' rather than being a conscious or time specific strategy and action plan. All council officers, members, leadership, stakeholders and community will aspire and work towards our children in care and care leavers having opportunities akin to our home-grown children.

Our whole council approach at Cheshire West and Chester will also seek to utilise the family business to nurture, raise and support our children/young people to thrive not only as children but as adults in our communities. Therefore, this strategy seeks to deliver a Care Leaver and Child in Care Offer where elected members, officers and

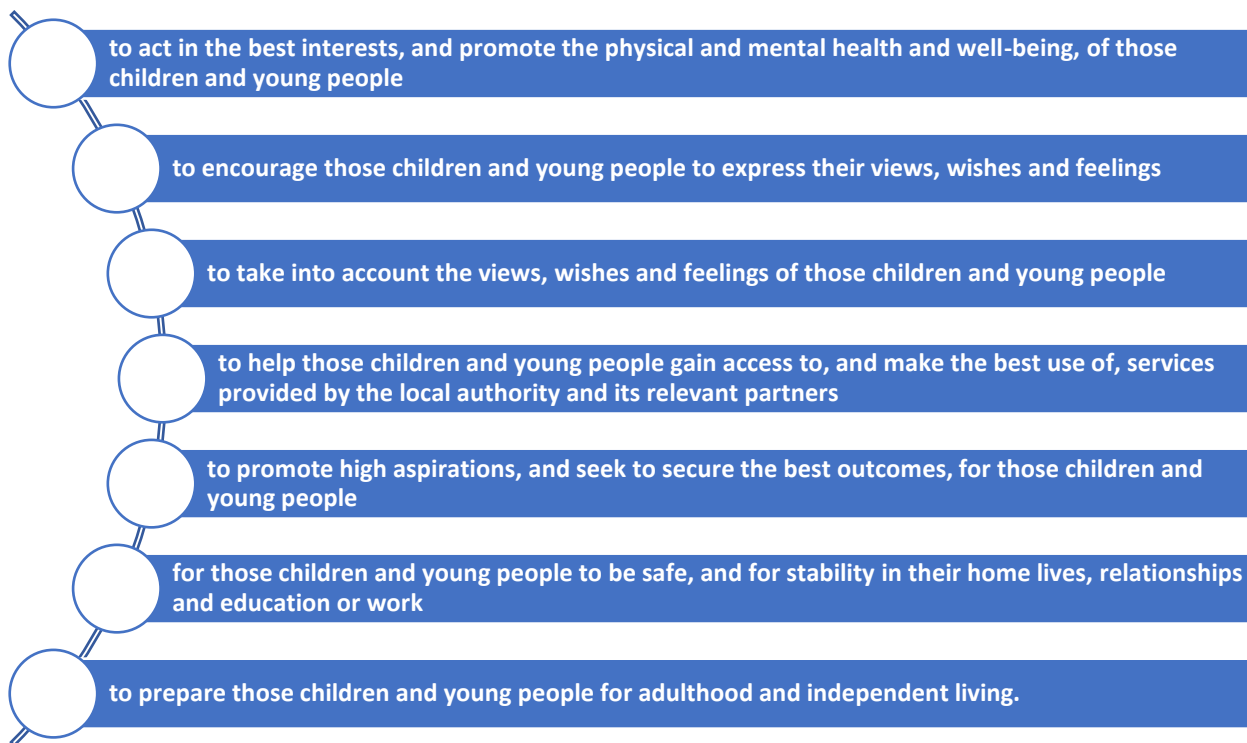
partner agencies have defined ***champions*** of corporate parenting to take forward our vision and be accountable for the service and care provided to our children. Including a defined ***whole council and partnership pledge*** for those who hold corporate parenting responsibilities.

And finally, we are seeking to ensure that we hold this priority clearly through confirming the motion proposal that care experienced children, young people, and adults are granted the tenth 'protected characteristic' status in line with those defined in the Equality Act 2010. We are also ambitious that our key stakeholder and partner agencies will consider doing the same, therefore demonstrating our clear view on their value.

### **Why is this our vision?**

It's our duty and privilege to be a parent to our incredible children in our care and those leaving our care. Our children, young people and adults are amazing and we believe in them! The children and young people we are corporate parents for now, are also our professionals, residents and parents of tomorrow. Collaborative corporate parenting will improve their outcomes and ensure a positive contribution towards the Borough's social and economic future. However, this privilege is also a statutory responsibility!

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 is clear in the direction that when a child or young person comes into the care of the local authority or is under 25 and was looked after by the authority for at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday, the authority becomes their corporate parent. In order to achieve our vision, it is essential that as a whole council, partnership and community the care and support provided to children, young people and young adults must deliver the following seven principles locally:



**(Corporate Parenting Principles - Department for Education Working Together Statutory Guidance 2018)**

The voice of our children in care and care leavers have been paramount to the development of this strategy, in particular seeking to understand what the children in our care and care leavers feel “corporate parenting” means to them – they shared the following key views which shape this vision and mission:

- *Ensuring equal opportunities to those who haven't been in care*
- *To not to feel any other different or standing out*
- *For the corporate parent to be “on the ball” as new things come through*
- *Having equal rights to health and support, even after turning 18*
- *People still being as bothered if I need help after 18*
- *Same opportunities to support in the community*
- *Knowing that I will be supported as any other child would be by their parent*
- *Pledge underpins everything*
- *That you can come back to your parent; as any parent would if you were unwell, struggling or sick.*
- *Believing in what we can achieve*
- *Opportunities to have a voice and that our experience can have influence*
- *Remember we all have our own stories don't paint us with the same brush*
- *Don't get caught up and listen to stigma regarding children in care or care leavers*

Critical to this strategy is the recognition of the vital role that all elected members, officers, stakeholders and partners hold as corporate parents to the children in our care, both as children and adults. This strategy builds upon the Councils Plan 2020-2024, the West Cheshire Children's Trust priority to support our Children in Care and Care Leavers to enable them to achieve their full potential, and our Children's Social Care vision of "Enable Practice, Empower People, Deliver Progress"; to give our children the very best start in life. A strong ethos of corporate parenting means a sense of vision and responsibility towards the children in our care and care leavers as a whole council and partnership.

We must be the strongest champions and advocates for our children in care and care leavers holding our vision at the forefront, listening to the powerful ask from our Children in Care Councils:

*'Support us as good normal parents do, set us up as other parents would, make sure we have a foundation to build the rest of our lives on, make sure we don't leave care worse than we came in.'*



### **3) What is Corporate Parenting?**

The term corporate parenting and emphasis of a collective responsibility was first laid out in the Children Act 1989. Subsequent government guidance emphasised the value base focused with the question of 'if this were my child' (DfES 2003) and emphasised a whole council responsibility in ensuring that children in care and care leavers receive a high standard of care giving, as can be expected of any good parent.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 outlined the seven corporate parenting principles (as given graphic page 6) which local authorities should have regard to when exercising their functions in relation to children in care and care leavers. Those principles detail the care and support a child should expect to receive from the council and its partners. Simply, being a corporate parent means providing care and/or support in line with a child or young person's holistic needs as any good parent would, ensuring continued care as they move into adulthood and support them to thrive. The corporate parenting principles are intended to inform how a local authority and its partners carries out those existing responsibilities, whether that is about assessing a child needs or listening to and taking account of the wishes and feelings of care leavers. The principles are intended to encourage local authorities and its relevant partners to be ambitious and aspirational for their children in care and care leavers, enabling them to become adults who can thrive in their community. (Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers - DfE 2018)

The Council maintains parental responsibility for children up to the age of 18 years, however the duty and responsibility towards care leavers continues to age 25 years. This fundamentally reflects this being a "family" responsibility for the Council and wider partners.

Children in care have the same needs as our home-grown children - to be loved, cared for and feel safe, with adults who they can trust to prioritise their needs above all else. However, our children in care and care leavers face unique challenges as a result of adverse childhood experiences and trauma, with many having experienced abuse, neglect, loss and separation at a young age. It is essential that together, our corporate parenting ethos recognises that the care system is not just about keeping children safe, but to be a parent on a full-time basis to our children, promote recovery, resilience and well-being through into adulthood.

#### **Who are Corporate Parents?**

Corporate parents are essentially all elected members, all council officers and all colleagues within partner agencies, at both strategic and operational levels. It is a shared responsibility and privilege.

While the legal duty to have regard to the seven corporate parenting principles within the 2018 DfE guidance applies only to local authorities, our partner agencies play a vital role in supporting the Council to carry out their responsibilities to be a good corporate parent. We recognise in Cheshire West and Chester, we all play a critical corporate parenting role across the key partners; local authority, health and police.

Local authorities are under a duty (section 10 of the Children Act 2004) to make arrangements to promote co-operation between ‘relevant partners’ with a view to improving the well-being of children in their area. This includes arrangements in relation to children in care and care leavers. Section 10(5) of the 2004 Act places a duty on relevant partners to co-operate with the local authority in the making of these arrangements, therefore promoting and ensuring a joined-up approach to being a corporate parent.

The publication ‘Putting Corporate Parenting into Practice’ (National Children’s Bureau 2008) identifies three levels of understanding and responsibility in relation to Corporate Parenting which remain relevant. We have shaped and developed this to fit with a local approach to corporate parenting responsibility which seeks to highlight it is a shared responsibility:

***Cheshire West and Chester Corporate Parenting Commitment Triangle:***

**Level 3 – Specialist Responsibility**



**Level 2 – Targeted Responsibility**



**Level 1 – Universal Responsibility**



**Level 1 - Universal Responsibility**

This is a minimum standard which requires all elected members and officers within the Council and partner agencies to have an understanding of:

- the needs of our children in care and why they need to be looked after.
- the local profile of children in care and the outcomes they are achieving compared with other local children.
- their responsibility for promoting/supporting the welfare of children in care and care leavers through into adulthood.

## **Elected members and council officers should:**

- be sure we are providing the best possible care for our children and care leavers asking the critical question ‘would this be good enough for my own child?’
- be aware of, and where relevant, implement ‘the pledge’ to children in care and care leavers.
- know what is most important to our children and young people and utilise this to shape service delivery and care.

## **Level 2 - Targeted Responsibility**

This standard relates to elected members with designated corporate parenting responsibilities (for example those who engage with our Children in Care Council, sit on Fostering or Adoption Panels, and members who carry out Corporate Parenting responsibilities through fulfilling a scrutiny function). This also fundamentally includes all members of the Corporate Parenting Panel in Cheshire West and Chester – which covers across Adults Services and our key partners, and senior officers within Children’s Services. It requires that they:

- are aware of relevant issues and know the expectations regarding services for children in care and care leavers.
- have access to qualitative and quantitative information about services and outcomes for children and young people and are able to evaluate this information.
- consider how they are going to hear the voice of the child / young person and act, in conjunction with leaders and other agencies, to improve service delivery.
- ensure, with senior leaders across the council and its partner agencies, that improving outcomes for children in care and care leavers is a consideration in all decision making across the council.
- ensure the council and partner agencies work together to improve service delivery and respond to changing needs.
- know what our children and care leavers think of the services provided for them.

## **Level 3 - Specialist Responsibility**

This specialist responsibility is for key senior roles within the Council - the Lead Member for Children’s Services and the Director of Children’s Services. In addition to the responsibilities detailed previously, they will:

- provide systematic leadership across the authority in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in care and care leavers.
- ensure arrangements are in place to implement any key policy decisions in this regard.
- ensure there is an in-depth understanding of the needs of the Council’s children in care and care leavers and that this informs service improvement.

- ensure that effective governance arrangements are in place to implement any decisions regarding children in care and care leavers across the partnership.
- ensure that the strategic plans of Children's Services and joint plans with partner agencies meet the needs of children in care and care leavers.
- ensure there are strong links with the Children in Care Council (CICC) and that they are supported to be effective.

#### **4) Our Pledge to our children in our care: [www.cicc.org.uk](http://www.cicc.org.uk)**

In 2021, the Pledge was updated and recognised the feedback of our children in care council input. This Pledge is a promise made by the Council and its partners to our children and young people in care and our care leavers about the quality of care and support that they will receive from us as their corporate parent.

We have committed to the children and young people in our care and our care leavers that we will be as passionate and committed to looking after them as we would our home-grown children – and want no less for them. *Being in care will not be a reason for our children to be missing out.*

This pledge has been drawn up by experts, namely those who have first-hand knowledge of growing up in care, and approved by Cabinet. Our aim is for all children in our care and leaving our care in Cheshire West and Chester to receive the best parenting possible based upon the 10 key pledges to them.

These 10 pledges are developed into more detailed commitments that require all corporate parents to hold our children in care and care leavers firmly in mind.

**[The Pledge | Children in Care Council \(cicc.org.uk\)](http://www.cicc.org.uk)**

#### **5) National Context**

The number and rate (per 10,000) of children in care on 31 March 2021 in England was 80,850. Comparable to the previous two years, an annual increase can be seen from 2019- 2021 of 5480 children entering care nationally. These children and young people also include unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC); however, it is important to note that official statistics for 2021- 2022 have not yet been published. The data for 2021- 2022 is predicted to show an upward trajectory of children entering care at a higher rate than previous years

Children in the care of local authorities and care leavers are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Many of the children in our care are there because they have suffered abuse or neglect, and it is not safe for them to remain with their birth families, which in turn has resulted in lasting trauma. With an upward trajectory of entrance to care, coupled with a national placement shortage, this means now more than ever we must work collaboratively and creatively to care, nurture and raise our children and

care leavers together. Central government indicators are that nationally figures could reach in excess of 100,000 children in care by 2025 (Independent Review of Children's Social Care – May 2022) This strategy is therefore closely aligned to Cheshire West and Chester Children in Care and Care Leaver Accommodation Strategy 2022-25. The above should also be considered in the context of both national and regional recovery from the COVID 19 pandemic which we know has impacted many of our most vulnerable children and families in a multitude of ways. Research is emerging around how the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and differences and created new ones, as well as exposing critical societal needs and strengths.

Nationally, it is recognised that children in care and care leavers are a vulnerable group, hence there are increasing calls to central government from key private and public bodies to make care experienced adults a protected characteristic in legislation. Often our care leavers leave 'home' at a younger age and have more abrupt transitions than their peers. The circumstances and experiences of children and young people in care mean that they can experience many disadvantages and hence have poorer outcomes than other children, across a range of measures, including health and education. When considering the national context and how this applies to this strategy the following key legislation remains relevant:

***The Children Act (1989)*** continues to be our key legislation with relation to our legal duty to children and young people who reside in our borough, which includes the legal remit of a child or young person entering local authority care.

***Working Together 2021*** is the key piece of national guidance that for the purpose of this strategy recognises the partnership responsibility for supporting children and families, including those children in our care.

***The Children and Social Work Act (2017)*** strengthened the role of local authorities as corporate parents and sets out what it means to be a good corporate parent and the seven principles for local authorities to be the best corporate parent it can be. It introduced the duty to publish on the council's local offer, including both the statutory entitlements for children in care and what else is on offer locally.

***The National Care Leavers Strategy (2013)*** is based on the principles for good corporate parenting and sets out the government's commitment to remove some of the practical barriers that care leavers face as they progress into adulthood.

***In 2016, the Keep on Caring strategy*** laid out a vision and aims for supporting young people from care to independence. The strategy identified five outcomes for care leavers to: be better prepared and supported to live independently, have improved access to education, training and employment, be experiencing stability and feeling safe and secure, have improved access to health support, and be achieving financial stability. Through provision of accommodation, these outcomes can be supported by providing a safe and stable place to live.

***The implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014, part 5 (98)*** means that local authorities in England are required to facilitate, monitor and support staying put arrangements for fostered young people until age 21, where this is what they and their foster carers want and it is in line with the welfare of the young person.

**The National Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (May 2022)** - led by Josh McAlister and **The Research in Practice strategic briefing paper (2017)** found that care leavers often have to leave their homes and move to semi-independent accommodation before they are ready. Continuity of relationships, sustainable accommodation and the development of skills to live independently can all help to ease this transition for young people. Additionally, the role of the multi-agency partnerships in providing children in care and care leavers with robust care and support packages is strongly emphasised in both papers.

The National Independent Review of Children’s Social Care- May 2022 concluded: *‘Five ambitious missions are needed so that care experienced people secure: loving relationships; quality education; a decent home; fulfilling work and good health as the foundations for a good life. Central government and local authorities, employers, the NHS, schools, colleges and universities must step up to secure these foundations for all care experienced people. This will require a wider range of organisations to act as corporate parents for looked after children, and the UK should be the first country in the world to recognise the care experience as a protected characteristic’*

This leads to critical consideration for this strategy of our current and future population of children in care and care leavers, emphasising the need to develop our corporate parenting priorities and progress how we can be the best corporate parent we can possibly be across Cheshire West and Chester.

## **6) Local Context**

The **Council Plan (2020-24)** commits to playing a part to support young people to get the best start in life and achieve their full potential. This applies in abundance to those children and young people to whom we hold corporate parenting responsibilities. Priority 3 in the Council Plan is to *Support children and young people to make the best start in life and achieve their full potential: ‘Our borough is a great place to grow up for many but not for all. Our vision is for more children and young people to feel included, listened to and to live in safe communities. We will also do everything we can to support children, young people and families to go on to lead fulfilling lives whatever their circumstances’*. Priority 4 *Enable more adults to live longer, healthier and happier lives* and Priority 5 *Make our neighbourhoods even better places to call home*. The Council Plan demonstrates a commitment to improving the outcomes for children and adults across Cheshire West and Chester, including those who are vulnerable, such as children in care and care leavers for whom we hold parental responsibility.

This strategy aligns closely with the Council Plan as it sets out a strategic vision and priorities, which will be supported by a detailed action plan, of how children in care and care leavers are raised, cared for and supported across Cheshire West and Chester.

The **Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategy (2019-23)** set out five priorities; being a good corporate parent, quality care experience, good health and wellbeing, to achieve potential, and successful transitions to adulthood. This Strategy builds upon this as it seeks to consider our local context and develop a robust action plan to further strengthen our corporate parenting offer across Cheshire West and Chester.

**Children in Care and Care Leavers Accommodation Strategy 2022- 2025** is closely aligned to this strategy as the sufficiency of homes for our children in care and care leavers is a fundamental element of our corporate parenting responsibility.

***Current Children in Care and Care Leavers context in Cheshire West and Chester:***

As of the end of August 2022, Cheshire West and Chester held corporate parenting responsibility for 560 children in our care. Of these 560 children, this can be broken down into 330 children living within borough and 230 children living out of our borough (noting some of these children are purposefully placed outside of borough with connected people or to meet specific complex needs). 37 Young People aged 16 - 17 years currently live in Semi Independent settings.

107 of the 560 children are young people between the ages of 16 - 18 years, including 15 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Additionally, we hold corporate parenting responsibilities to 212 carer leavers over the age of 18 years. Totalling 772 children, young people or young adults to whom we are corporate parents.

Since 2018/19, the number of children in our care has gradually increased, with a noted rise since January 2021, which is expected to continue in the future. Demand on all services has intensified not only numerically, but in complexity as children and young people are presenting with multiple and complex needs.

We continue to have more children in our care than the national average, and we are seeing this grow at a higher rate than has been seen over the last 4 years, alongside costs of placements for children increasingly difficult to locate and increasingly expensive. We have also reflected upon the impact of the pandemic upon our carer workforce.

As our children in care numbers have grown, so has the pressure upon children's social care and our partners to develop and deliver robust care plans which meet children's holistic needs and provide them the best offer of homes, care and support as their corporate parent. This needs to continue into adulthood as this strategy firmly recognises the corporate parenting responsibility that extends beyond the age of 18 years.

There are two critical opportunities which this strategy seeks to confirm to demonstrate our local commitment to our children in care and our care leavers in Cheshire West and Chester:

***Care Leaver Covenant signatory:***

The Care Leaver Covenant was established in 2016, run by Spectra on behalf of the Department for Education. It was formed in response to the Keep on Caring Strategy 2016. The Care Leaver Covenant is a national inclusion programme which supports care experienced young people to live independently and promotes a whole council, partnership and community ethos in relation to corporate parenting responsibilities. The covenant utilises various media mechanisms in which care leavers and

organisations can access shared information of opportunities both nationally and locally. The Care Leavers Covenant is accessible to the private, public and voluntary sector, where a commitment to providing opportunities to care experienced young adults are made. These opportunities are then published by the covenant, allowing care leavers to access all relevant opportunities within their local area. Whilst we have a really strong Care Leaver offer locally, becoming a signatory would demonstrate clear commitment to seeking to continue to be a good corporate parent to our Care Leavers and seeking to ensure we continually review our Care Leaver offer to be the best corporate parent we can be.

Should Cheshire West and Chester become a signatory, this would display a 'whole council approach' in supporting the needs and progress of the young adults we are corporate parent for. ***This means the whole of Cheshire West and Chester Council will accept responsibility for its support provided to our young adults who are care leavers.***

***For Care Experience to become Protected Characteristic status:***

Should Cheshire West and Chester Council take the bold decision to grant care leaver status of 'protected characteristic' this would mean we would be the fifth Council in England to make this important decision and display a clear message to our young people that we will protect and prioritise them as a whole council as any good parent would.

For Care Experience to become a protected characteristic within Cheshire West and Chester Council, this would mean the following:

***“Care experience” (either being a child in our care or having previously been a child in the care of Cheshire West and Chester Council) is included as a protected characteristic in all Council Equality Impact Assessments from 2023.***

***This would mean that our young people would be entitled to the benefits of anti-discrimination and equality measures applied locally.***

It would also mean that any public bodies who endorse this decision would be required by law to consider how their policies and practices affect care experienced people and take steps to remove disadvantages they face, as is currently the case for the nine protected characteristics. Decision-makers across the Council would have an obligation to consider the needs of care experienced people, when making key policy, procedures and service decisions.

As of 31<sup>st</sup> August 2022, we have 322 care leavers aged 16-25 years, 212 of these being over 18 years old who would all benefit from this commitment impacting and demonstrating our “family” commitment to them.



## 7) Voice of our children in care and care leavers

We have consulted with our children in care and care leavers throughout the development of this strategy. This consultation has included engagement via our children in care council and care leavers forum (both a younger age and older age children in care council) alongside building upon the results of our 2021 Children in Care and Care Leaver Surveys.

In addition to the feedback provided at page 4 of this strategy, the below quotes from our children in care and care leavers summarises the powerful feedback from those who are care experienced upon which this strategy has been shaped:

*You build the outside rim of my jigsaw with support, I become more stable with more spaces full and love fills in the middle.*

*Don't give up on us when things are tough*

*Understand our decisions, even if you don't agree*

*We need choice and a say in our own lives*

*Remember we all have our own stories*

*Set us up as other parents would, make sure we have a foundation to the build the rest of our lives on, make sure we don't leave care worse than we came in*

*Support as normal parents support their kids*

*Treat me like a real person and care about me*

*Make sure every child has the right support, remember we are all individuals not a group, you can't expect the same thing to work for everyone*

*Fight our corner, don't just tick a box - go the extra mile*

*If you live in Cheshire West and have been the care of Cheshire West and Chester, you should have priority*

*Don't be afraid to challenge us and our decisions*

## 8) Our Key Priorities:

Whilst set out as a four year strategy, the aim is for this strategy to be a blueprint upon which delivery will be supported through a series of live action plans that are driven within specific priority workstreams led by senior officers/partners and supported by the scrutiny of leadership and members at Corporate Parenting Board and the Safeguarding Children Partnership.

The strategic priorities have been determined by both local and national priorities for children in care and care leavers and through consultation with children and young people.

The implementation and success of this strategy will be unpinned by **two key decisions** we are asking the Council to take and are ambitious our partners will consider in the near future.

**Three key objectives** have also been identified which will be embedded into each strategic priority as a 'golden thread' which will filter into a revised Children in Care and Care Leaver Offer providing an overarching Cheshire West and Chester Corporate Parenting offer.

### Key Decisions to this strategy:

1. Care experienced young people and adults being granted '**Protected Characteristic**' status in Cheshire West and Chester, making this the tenth characteristic that applies in our borough, alongside those already defined in the Equality Act 2010. This would make care experience a 'protected characteristic' in the same way as the law treats discrimination against age, disability, race, religion, gender reassignment, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy, maternity, marriage and civil partnerships.
2. Cheshire West and Chester Council becoming signatories to the Care Leaver Covenant, ensuring a whole council approach to corporate parenting, utilising our social value to ensure that our young people have access to a range of opportunities across our borough. Our ambition is that are Cheshire West and Chester stakeholders, and local business will also become signatories.

### Key objectives/ golden thread:

1. To develop a robust, collaborate corporate parenting approach, shared as a whole council and across the partnership, ensuring a clear link for each priority area between targeted, universal and specialist officers/ agencies to execute our corporate parenting responsibilities.

2. Each priority will have a dedicated action plan developed in consultation with children, young people, partners and nominated champions for each directorate and partner agency.
3. Our partnership practice model, being 'Our Ways of Working' will be woven into each priority workstream to ensure that our approach to corporate parenting across Cheshire West and Chester is rooted in trauma informed care and recovery.

### **Priority One:**

**For our children in care and care leavers to feel safe and loved in stable homes, with secure lifelong support networks.**

*Our children and young people need safe and stable homes, with a strong support network of key adults. Those adults should be ambitious to deliver the highest standard of care and support using trauma informed practice, in line with our partnership practice model. Our corporate parenting responsibilities means that we must be able to tolerate, display resilience and commitment to our children at times of difficulty, or when they are finding it tricky to understand things that are happening for them, just as any good parent should.*

*Home can be in a variety of places including with foster carers, a kinship carer, special guardian, at a children's home, residential school, with a parent, in supported accommodation or independently with support. We are ambitious that our young people can move into adulthood with stable homes, ensuring support as corporate grandparents when they have children of their own, and including opportunities for home ownership by supporting our young adults to thrive.*

*The support that we as corporate parents wrap around our children and young people should feel safe and nurturing, where lifelong support networks are nurtured, just like in all families. Being a parent does not end when our home-grown children reach 18 years old, and the same duty is clear in legislation that our care leavers as adults require ongoing care and support as young adults learning to navigate the world around them.*

### **Priority Two:**

**We celebrate and hear our children, young people, and care leavers, which in turn will help us to develop a clear and shared picture of our corporate parenting approach across Cheshire West and Chester.**

*We are incredibly proud of our children and young people, and we celebrate their achievements regularly and more formally during our 'Celebration of Achievement*

*Awards'. Our ambition is that celebration of their achievements at all levels is embedded into 'who we are as corporate parents' across the council and partnership, and this is reflected in all we do; offering praise and rewards as any good parent should when we are proud of our children. Our ambition is that corporate parenting champions across the whole council and partnership will embed this culture at both strategic and operational level.*

*We know our children and young people are all unique, with their own life experiences. They are the experts in their daily lived experience, and therefore in order to truly develop a collaborative corporate parenting approach we must engage them in both strategic and operational service development. It is essential to the effective delivery of this strategy that we hear and act upon their experiences of daily life so we can be confident that all officers, partners and adults who have corporate parenting responsibilities understand in real terms what is expected of them and what this 'looks like' to our children and young people, most importantly in the plans implemented for their care.*

### **Priority Three**

**We have aspiration for our education, training, and employment offer to be excellent for our children in care and care leavers.**

*We want our children and care leavers to feel safe and happy in their experiences and achieve their full educational and employment potential so they can transition into adulthood in the strongest position. Our children and young people have aspirations and our ambition is that a collaborative corporate parenting approach will ensure that as parents we nurture their dreams and are relentless in our pursuit for them to achieve their full potential.*

*We will continue to grow, strengthen and broaden our education, training and employment offer; with learning for life also built into the support provided to our children and young people. An example of this in practice may be for some of our young people who are not engaged in education there is an increased risk of criminal exploitation or involvement with peers/adults who do not have their best interests at heart, a good parent would seek to offer their child advice, support, nurture and a positive anchor to their potential, reducing the 'pull' factors. It is therefore essential that as a partnership we advocate in the strongest terms what our children and young people need to ensure their welfare and outcomes are a priority.*

*We also know that due to trauma and adverse life experiences some children and young people find it difficult to engage or have disengaged from their education setting. Some may have experienced disruption in their education settings as a result of their life experiences and this means that as corporate parents additional support, patience*

*and creative thinking is needed to ensure they can achieve in education or employment.*

*We know from many years of research and national context that children in care and care leavers are more likely to have a statement of special educational needs, to be excluded from school, and to leave school with no qualifications compared with children in the general population. It is therefore essential that as corporate parents there is a collaborative partnership approach to being trauma informed in our expectations of our children, and applying flexibility, nurture and parental regard for the care plans surrounding our children and young people. Our children in care are the professionals and parents of tomorrow and it is our absolute shared duty to aspire and achieve for them in line with our home-grown children.*

#### **Priority Four**

**Improve physical and emotional wellbeing for our children in care and care leavers, including recovery from adverse childhood experiences.**

*Legislation which created the corporate parenting responsibility also creates a duty for relevant partners to cooperate with local authorities to improve the well-being of children in their local area. This includes children in care and care leavers emotional and physical health and well-being to be supported in line with corporate parenting responsibilities.*

*Our children and young people have the same health needs as all children, however; often neglectful care, abuse, trauma and adverse childhood experiences mean they are particularly vulnerable to poorer health outcomes. Children who enter our care may have unaddressed or current health issues which have arisen owing to the above factors, and this can have a detrimental impact on their capacity to progress in their recovery journey. In order to achieve both physical and psychological permanence in a safe home environment, ensuring our children's routine health needs are met, and priority access to specialist services is essential.*

*When considering our care leavers, the period during and after they leave care can also present challenges to their emotional well-being, and engagement in routine healthcare. Often at a younger age than their peers our care leavers take on the responsibility for their own accommodation and navigating the responsibilities that come with this as a young adult. Research indicates the care leavers are 6 times more likely than their peers to suffer mental ill health. We know that entering the care system can be traumatic for children, and how their trauma is responded to, and recovery secured is vital. As corporate parents, our children's physical and mental wellbeing must be an absolute priority and planning for them should always be from a trauma and preventative lens.*

## Priority five

**Strengthen our care leavers transition to adulthood with a highly effective Care Leavers offer across the Council in which our young people can return to us as adults when they need parental support and guidance.**

*It is vital that our care leavers transition to adulthood in suitable and stable homes where they feel safe and well supported as they embark upon this key developmental transition. As corporate parents we must support care leavers to progress into adulthood in a planned way, with the skills to; manage their own homes, self-care, daily routines, their community and being able to earn a living or continue in education. This transition is one of the most vital in any young person's life. As corporate parents it is our core duty to ensure our care leavers feel well prepared and positive about their future and can trust that we will be there for them as young adults too.*

*Preparing all children for moving towards independence is a developmental process which takes time, and all young people develop at different paces. We do not stop being good parents when our children reach 18 years old and the same applies to corporate parenting. We must consider our care leavers emotional resilience, financial management and independence skills to ensure they are able to maintain a property and how to become a responsible and thriving adults in our communities.*

*When supporting our care leavers as a collaborative corporate parent we must be mindful that moving onto independence can be a daunting experience for any young people. However, when considered in the context of young people who have experienced abuse or neglect this may trigger feelings of loss, rejection and uncertainty. It is therefore essential that as a whole council and partnership we are committed to 'wrap around' our young adults and tolerate parenting challenges, guiding our children and young people to navigate the world around them, giving them more than one opportunity to achieve a certain ambition/ aim, particularly when they are experiencing challenges in their transition.*

*Some of our care leavers may have children of their own, and we are ambitious to ensure our grandparent corporate parenting approach is also clearly defined and part of 'who we are as corporate parents'.*

## 9) How will we achieve this?

Our five key priorities are wide ranging and will cover a vast amount of strategic and operational elements. Our ambition is that our children and young people's care experience will improve as we implement our plans, however we also anticipate new challenges, potentially arising from the continued increase in children entering our care, increased complexity and mental health needs, alongside the social and economic impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic and other global factors. For this reason, our strategy must be considered a dynamic strategy that will continually evolve. In order to achieve our collaborative corporate parenting vision and be the '**best corporate parents we can possibly be**', the following actions will be taken forward:

- A Corporate Parenting Strategy launch will be developed to ensure that across Cheshire West and Chester the visions and aspirations as defined in this strategy are clearly understood, and a whole council and partnership approach is taken forward collectively.
- A strategic action plan will be defined for each priority area, incorporating all elements of our vision, values, objectives, corporate parenting principles and our key priorities.
- Each priority will have its own dedicated workstream that meets quarterly and feeds into the Children in Care and Care Leavers Sub Group of the Children's Trust for drive and oversight; with a nominated officer for each council service area and partner agency relevant to the priority. We will also ensure that children and young people's voices are central to the action plans and workstreams.
- Each partner agency and council directorate will define a clear pledge to our children in care and care leavers, which will be incorporated into the collaborative corporate parenting offer.
- Each directorate and partner agency will identify a Children in Care and Care Leaver Champion, those champions will drive forward our corporate parenting strategy in their respective service areas / organisations.
- Champions will be accountable to Corporate Parenting Board and woven into the recently revised annual reporting plan to board alongside assurance to the Safeguarding Children Partnership.
- Responsibility for the strategy's implementation will be delegated to the Corporate Parenting Board. This will ensure we are fully equipped to deliver our ambition.

## 10) What “Success” would look like?

How we measure the success of our strategy will be key to its successful implementation. Holding each other accountable is going to be key to keep our children in care and care leavers at the forefront of our mind.

Our children in care and our care leavers will tell us how we are doing and their voice needs to be central.

Both qualitative and quantitative data will be utilised to measure our success as the strategy develops, alongside governance arrangements, scrutiny and most importantly evidence of improved daily lives experiences and feedback from our children and young people.

We will use several key measures mapped against the strategy priorities as follows:

- Our children and young people will tell us they feel valued, loved and safe in homes where they have achieved permanence and a sense of belonging.
- Our children and young people will tell us they feel they can trust in us as their corporate parent and are happy with their care and support plans with strong support networks evident as both children and adults.
- The annual CICC survey will demonstrate our progress if children and young people report they are happy, safe, loved and have a full understanding of our corporate parenting offer to them.
- Children and young people will achieve permanence and experience less placement moves.
- Key Performance Indicators in terms of outcomes for children in care and care leavers will display consistently good performance in comparison to national context and our statistical neighbours. This will include the following:
  - Improved outcomes in physical, emotional and mental health.
  - Improved outcomes in education, training and employment into adulthood
  - Improved housing opportunities and stability in sustaining a tenancy.
  - Less children requiring specialist or residential care settings.
- Our care leavers will tell us and show us that they are fully prepared for their transition to adulthood by thriving and achieving improved outcomes.
- Our children in care and care leavers will have a developed support network of corporate parents across the partnership, and this will be evident in their multi agency care and/or pathway plans.
- A refreshed and extended collaborative corporate parenting offer, with clear pathways will be published in our Care Leaver Local Offer, alongside Care Leaver Covenant signatories across the partnership.
- We will successfully embed our care experienced young people as a ‘protected characteristic’ and the opportunities this provides for them will be a key measure.



## **11) Governance**

### **Corporate Parenting Board:**

In response to the Corporate Parenting Principles placed in statute by the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the Corporate Parenting Panel has revised its Terms of Reference and this was launched in September 2022; now named by our Children in Care Council as our **Corporate Parenting Board Guidebook**. It seeks to be more robust in holding partner agencies and the Council itself to account in the execution of their Corporate Parenting Responsibilities.

The responsibility for the effective strategic oversight of the delivery of this strategy will be delegated to Corporate Parenting Panel, which is chaired by the Lead Member for Children and Young People. Panel will scrutinise reports in line with the key priorities and ensure that as corporate parents a whole council and partnership approach is being delivered.

### **Children in Care and Care Leavers Sub Group of the Children's Trust:**

The dedicated multi-agency sub group will oversee the setting of the action plan to deliver the strategy. Each priority will have its own dedicated workstream that meets quarterly and feeds into the Children in Care and Care Leavers Sub Group of the Children's Trust for drive and oversight.

### **Cheshire West and Chester Children's Safeguarding Partnership:**

Cheshire West and Chester Safeguarding Children Partnership (SCP) is a key mechanism for agreeing how agencies and organisations in the local area will cooperate to safeguard and In line with our collaborative corporate parenting strategy it is proposed that the SCP will receive annual updates to demonstrate shared partnership accountability and scrutinise the implementation of this strategy across the partnership.

### **Children In Care Councils (CICC) and Care Leaver Forum:**

Within Cheshire West and Chester we are privileged to have two Children in Care Council's (CICC's); a younger group and an older group, plus a Care Leaver Forum. A CICC is a group of young people who are all cared for by Cheshire West and Chester Council and gives children and young people the chance to shape and influence the parenting that they receive at every level; it gives young people a chance to have a say about the things that really matter in their lives, helping to shape the overall strategy for cared for children and young people in Cheshire West and Chester.

We as their corporate parents should be accountable to our children for the care and service they receive. In this instance we believe that scrutiny should also be applied by CICC as a group in relation to the progress of this strategy. Through Corporate Parenting Panel our young people will be able to shape how they wish for Council officers and partner agency representatives to attend CICC meetings and be accountable to the children themselves, however all reports to Corporate Parenting Board to demonstrate assurance are asked to have clear summaries to enable our children and young people to understand and challenge any aspects to ensure their voice remains central to all decisions made about them or for them.