

## Corporate Parenting Strategy 2024 – 2027

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## 1. Introduction

1.1. Welcome to Dorset's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2024 – 2027. The strategy aims to build on the successes of the previous Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategy 2020-2023. It has been developed with help from young people and is for all children and young people in our care and all our care leavers. It sets out how we plan to further improve the care we provide and is underpinned and informed by the vision outlined in Dorset's Children, Young People and Families Plan 2023-33.

## 2. Dorset's Children, Young People and Families Plan 2023 - 2033

2.1. Dorset's Children and Young People and Families Plan identifies seven priorities, as follows:

1. Best Start in Life
2. Young and Thriving
3. Good Care Provision
4. Best Education for All
5. Best Place to Live
6. Local Family Help (Delivering Locally)
7. Safe at Home and in the Community

2.2. This strategy for children in care and care experienced young people is most concerned with, and sets out, how we will deliver on Priority 3, above. Building on the work of the partnership so far and through the priorities in this plan, we intend to deliver '**Good Care Provision**' for all. We will focus on improving outcomes for all children and young people in care and all care experienced young people.

## 3. Our Vision for Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People

3.1. Our vision is for every child and young person in care or left care is to fulfil their full potential and to have a sense of belonging at school, home and in their community, while we support them to thrive and be the best they can be.

## 4. Our Values and Aims

4.1. Alongside our corporate parenting principles, there are a number of values and aims that underpin this strategy and the services that both ourselves and our partners provide to children and young people in our care. These are central to how we work as a partnership, providing the level of care and support that we would expect for our own children. They are as follows:

- We will strive to keep our children close to home and to be the best corporate parents that we can be. Our ambition is that more of our children

and young people, who need care, are cared for in Dorset. When a child or young person needs care, if they are closer to their home and community, the people and the services they already know will be able to continue to help them,

- Children have a right to family life and family networks play an important role in supporting children and their parents, and extended family and friends can offer a safe, stable and loving alternative to a child moving in with a stranger. Where we can, we want to support families to stay together, but where children and young people do need care, we want to make sure this is in family-based care where possible and that we support extended family networks to be able to raise their children. We will actively seek out and work with a child's direct and extended family and friends in considering the best forms of support.
- We will prioritise loving relationships for all children in care and care leavers and ensure we have a wide range of care options in place locally by ensuring we have the right number, type and quality of foster carers, residential homes and care leaver accommodation. Where children cannot return to birth family, we want to secure timely and successful permanence through adoption wherever this is assessed as the best plan for the child.
- We will strive to reduce inequalities for children in care and care leavers, ensuring we improve their health and wellbeing, and are ambitious for them to achieve their potential, recognising the important foundation that stability and consistency of relationships with care providers gives.
- Where alternative care is provided, we will ensure that it respects the child's gender, culture, language, religion and sexuality.

## **5. Our Priorities in this Strategy for Children in Care and Care Leavers**

**5.1.** We have identified five strategic priorities to deliver on to improve the experiences and outcomes of children in care and care experienced young people through this strategy. We have shaped our priorities by listening to our children and young people, foster carers, through our commitment to The Dorset Promise, and what we know about our children in care and care experienced young people. Through these priorities we believe that our vision for children in care and care experienced young people will be achieved.

**5.2.** They are:

**Priority 1 - Safety and Permanence – supporting children and young people to be and feel safe and for us all to be people they can trust.**

**Priority 2 – Education and Employment – supporting children and young people to have goals for the future and celebrating with them.**

**Priority 3 – Physical and Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing – supporting our children and young people’s physical and mental health.**

**Priority 4 – Identity – supporting children and young people to be themselves, to listen to them, include them, and work with them.**

**Priority 5 – Next steps towards adult life – supporting our young people to be safe and happy as adults.**

## **6. Dorset’s Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People**

**6.1.** In Dorset we have seen a reducing local child in care population. In the last year the numbers of older children have increased as we have welcomed unaccompanied children through the National Transfer Scheme.

**Our Family:** As of March 2024, there were 449 children in care. The Dorset rate of children in care 67.92 is lower than national average and good + statistical neighbours. We have a total of 539 care experienced young people (18 -25) of which 305 young people age are actively engaged with our care leavers service.

**Age:** Most of our young people in care are aged 11 years plus with the 11-15 age group being the largest cohort (40%).

**Gender:** 55% of our children in care population are male. This has been a consistent proportion over time ranging from 53%-55%.

**Ethnicity:** Most of our children in care are white British 73.42%, with 9.5% being from black mixed multiple ethnic groups.

**Education Attainment:** In 2022-2023 academic year 25% Dorset children in care were working at expected standard in maths and writing. In Key Stage 2, 58% are working at expected standard for maths and reading with 62% working at expected standard for writing.

**Education Attainment:** In 2023 GCSE results 28.57% of our cohort achieved a grade 4 or above in maths (13.64% in 2021/22) and 21.42% achieved a grade 4 or above in English (22.7% in 2021/22). More young people achieved 5 grade 4’s and above at 30.95% compared to 13.6% in 2021/22 with 16.67% achieving 5 grade 4s and above including English and maths (9.1% in 2021/22).

**Education Settings:** At the end of academic year 2022 – 2023 85.65% attend settings rated as Outstanding or Good.

**Emotional Wellbeing:** At the end of March 2024, the average SDQ score for children in care was 15.06, Throughout 2023-2024 this has remained consistently higher than National Average and Good + Statistical Neighbours.

**Family based care:** Dorset's proportion of children living with a foster family is 71% which is higher than the National Average and Good+ Statistical Neighbours.

**Children who left care:** 154 children ceased to be child in care in 2023. 41 (27%) had been in care for less than 6 months, and 84 (55%) had been in care for a year or more. 14.6 % children in this period left care to return home to live with parents, relatives or other person with parental responsibility as part of the care planning process. 11%, left care through a Special Guardianship Order and 10% left care to be adopted.

**Education, Employment and Training:** The percentage of Dorset care experienced young people in education, training or employment aged 19,20 and 2021 in 2023 – 2024 is 51.2% which is lower than National Average and Good+ Statistical Neighbours.

**Suitable Accommodation:** 97% active care experienced young people aged 17-25 are living in suitable accommodation.

## 7. What our children and young people have told us

7.1. As part of the development of the 2024 – 2027 Corporate Parenting Strategy we worked with children and young people to ensure that the strategy reflected what children and young people believed was important. We did this by listening to what our children and young people told us in through the 'Your Life, Your Care' and 'Your Life Beyond Care' surveys and through the work of our Youth Voice Service. This is what our children and young people told us.

- 89% children feel safe where they live compared to 61% young people and 82% general population.
- Nearly all children trust their carers and felt that their carers are interested in their education.
- Nearly all children and young people trusted their social worker and personal adviser and most had a say in decisions.
- Nearly all children had a trusted adult, spent time outdoors. and were taught life skills.
- Fewer children said they liked school and more reported feeling bullied.
- Older children were more likely to say they did not have a really good friend.
- Over half said they did not spend enough time with their siblings or parents.
- Adolescents more likely to report being unhappy with how they looked and felt their lives were not worthwhile.
- Nearly all children said they were taught life skills, although 27% young people said that they find it difficult to cope financially and 14% said they were lonely always or often.
- Having a pet was important and were felt to give emotional support.

- More children and young people would like a really good friend.
- More care experienced young people in Dorset reported that they had a long term health problem or disability.

## 8. The Dorset Promise to Children and Young People

**8.1.** The Dorset promise is our commitment to care experienced children and young people. As corporate parents, we want our children and young people to do their best and make a success of their lives. It takes a community to make a difference and in making this promise we share our responsibilities by working with people who can make this happen.

**8.2.** Corporate Parenting Board provides challenge and scrutiny to ensure the best outcomes are achieved and children in care experienced young people have opportunities to thrive and be the best they can be.

**8.3.** Being a good corporate parent means making sure children and young people have their own say in keeping themselves safe and making sure children and young people are not treated differently or unfairly because of being in, or from care.

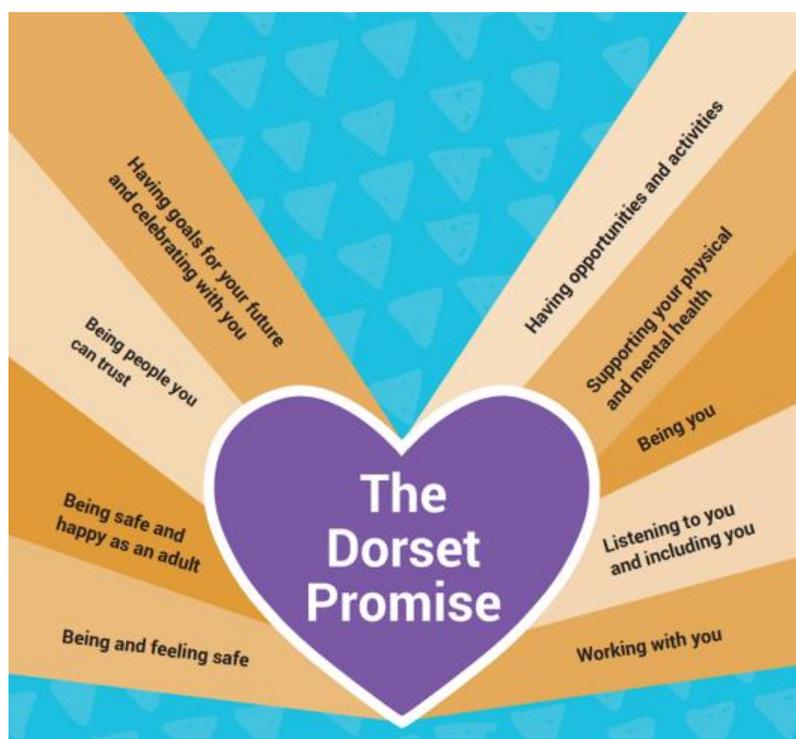


Fig 1. The Dorset Promise

## **9. Delivering on Our Strategic Priorities**

### **9.1. Priority 1 - Safety and Permanence – supporting children and young people to be and feel safe and to be with someone they can trust.**

All of our children will be safe from harm, with stability provided through secure placements and excellent carers.

Children and young people are best cared for wherever possible with their birth family or extended family. We know that if a child can be cared for within their family network, they have a network of support that will last their entire lives, at a level which any authority would struggle to achieve. However, if concerns persist, swift action is taken to ensure that the child has a safe and secure place to live. We know that moving children from their homes can have lasting effects, so we work hard to ensure that all of our children and young people experience stability provided through warm loving homes, kind, reliable carers and loving relationships. As corporate parents, we listen to and train our carers to have all the tools they need to be the best carers to our children and young people. We also understand the importance of support networks and make sure our children and young people have adults that they can rely on. We ensure that all people involved in the lives of our children and young people play a proactive part in Corporate and Community Parenting, doing everything they can to help children and young people to have great outcomes.

#### **We are committing to:**

- Strengthen family led decision making through family group conferences and Family Network Meetings – creating a culture of ‘family first’ to make a direct contribution to supporting more children to remain safely with their own families.
- Expand the capacity of our successful Harbour outreach model delivered from our Weymouth Hub and develop a second Harbour outreach Hub in the east of the county to support children and young people on the edge of care to remain safely at home.
- Provide young people with a safe home to live with carers who are suitable and well trained. Young people will thrive and only move again if absolutely necessary.
- Ensure that care plans are child focused, up to date and consider the perspectives of partners in health and education.
- We will give our young people all the information we can about their new home, carers and the area where they will be living.
- Continuing our work with Lifelong Links, supporting young people to identify significant people in their lives who can have an ongoing. We understand the importance of support networks and make sure our young

people have adults that they can rely on and provide as much stability as possible.

- Further improve the therapeutic offer in Dorset so that children and young people who have experienced trauma get the help they need, when they need it.
- We will continue to help our children and young people find stability, build trust with professionals and identify risks early to avoid young people entering the criminal justice system.
- Introduce new models of assessment and support for kinship carers and wider family networks for children to return to family and not remain in care for longer than necessary if appropriate.
- Promote and support kinship carers to secure Special Guardianship Orders for children they are caring for, and post order, to improve the on-going support we provide to enable these arrangements to be sustained.
- Deliver the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Strategy and Sufficiency Strategy to ensure we have the right number of local foster carers and children's homes and other provision to meet the rights and needs of our children and young people.
- Continue to deliver a competitive and attractive foster carer offer and roll out further Mockingbird constellations.
- Develop a Reunification Strategy to support children to safely return to the care of their families at the right time so that children are in care only for as long is necessary.
- Consider adoption for all children who cannot return to birth family, and with Aspire, our Regional Adoption Agency partner, recruit a sufficient number and range of prospective adopters to secure adoption for all who need it.
- Develop and embed a new model of care and support for unaccompanied children and young people that supports them to come to Dorset.
- Develop a new model of care and support for children with complex needs.
- Ensure continuity of care for our young people so that they maintain a sense of stability and do not experience too many different professionals. Children and young people develop positive and stable relationships with those who support them. We do this through our commitment to the recruitment and retention of a knowledgeable, solution focused workforce, using targeted training to grow a multi-disciplinary skill base.
- We will continue to challenge ourselves to offer the best services and develop our approaches. We deliver high quality, innovative services and

will work in a transformational way to ensure they become even better. We will identify what we need to do to make lasting change for all children and young people who are in care. We will draw upon research and best practice whilst responding effectively to changes in national guidelines and statutory duties.

## **9.2. Priority 2 – Education and Employment – supporting children and young people to have goals for the future and celebrating with them**

We will champion our children and young people, help them to succeed in education and training, provide opportunities and activities and celebrate their achievements. We are ambitious for children and young people.

Ensuring that our children and young people are in good education, employment, apprenticeships and training will always be a priority for us as we know they offer the greatest opportunities for our young people to build a successful and steady adult life. All our young people are unique and have different interests and hobbies. These provide opportunities to improve mental wellbeing and feel connected to something they love. Therefore, we will always maintain high aspirations for our children and young people and help them to make the most of their talents, hobbies and interests.

### **We are committing to:**

- Continue our close partnership working with the Virtual School, which ensures monitoring, support, and advice for young people throughout the year.
- We will ensure all children and young people achieve their full academic potential and make the most of their talents.
- We will identify any Special Education Needs (SEN) and meet these needs through an Education Health Care Plan or other SEN support - helping our young people overcome barriers to education attainment.
- We will help all our young people to achieve their potential through education, training and good quality employment.
- Making sure children and young people have a place at a good school or college and attend regularly through daily Welfare Calls, same day follow up on concerns, maintaining weekly attendance data and investigation of the reasons for school absence.
- We will guarantee that every young person has access to digital devices, study resources, tuition, and a high-quality Personal Education Plan. They will also have excellent support from a Designated Teacher at their school.

- Ensuring our care experience young people have a Pathway Plan that has clear information about what support is available once they leave care, go to university, or undertake vocational training and apprenticeships.
- Ensuring that children and young people, particularly those from abroad, are ready to engage in learning. Providing emotional support and encouragement through mentoring.

### **9.3. Priority 3 - Physical and Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing – supporting our children and young people’s physical and mental health**

We will encourage our children and young people to have a settled and healthy lifestyle, making sure that professionals work together to ensure that all their health needs are met.

Young people have also told us that their physical, emotional and mental wellbeing is most important to them. Many of our children have experienced trauma of being separated from their families and communities. We also know that young people from global majority ethnicities have experienced systemic racism in society. Being happy and confident in identity is key to emotional and mental wellbeing, particularly when it comes to race, sexuality, disability and gender. It is crucial that we encourage our children and young people to be comfortable in who they are and demonstrate sensitivity and inclusivity of difference for our young people to thrive.

#### **We are committing to:**

- Ensure that no one misses out on health care, with regular assessments to help identify need. We will encourage all young people to attend their assessments by offering flexible arrangements and virtual appointments if preferred. Medical appointments will be kept even if young people live outside Dorset.
- Ensure all children and young people are registered with a GP and Dentist.
- Ensure all children and young people know how to access mental health services and support.
- Develop an Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Strategy
- Through the Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Children in Care Performance Group ensuring that people work together to support children and young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health and provide opportunities and learning that encourage a settled and healthy lifestyle.

- Ensure that care planning considers physical, social, emotional and mental health needs. We will encourage children and young people to have healthy and active lifestyle, providing free access to leisure facilities. We will maintain an open dialogue about all aspects of their health, from healthy eating, exercising and staying safe, to sexual health, smoking, alcohol and substance misuse.
- Identify young people with substance misuse issues and intervening early to provide all the support they need.
- Work to understand the effects of race and identity on mental health and wellbeing ensuring a trauma informed approach. All unaccompanied children will have access to a psychologist in recognition of the trauma they may have experienced in the country they have travelled from, during their journey and settling in a new country, and receive the right local support that is sensitive to their cultural needs.
- Develop a pilot via health services so that an emotional wellbeing practitioner has contact with a child within first 20 days of being in care, to ensure that any emerging mental health difficulties are identified early. Those children with specific needs will be offered support from CAMHS.
- Ensure that multi-disciplinary assessments of need are undertaken, and appropriate and timely psychological and therapeutic support is provided to those children and young people who need it.
- Ensure that information about our young people's health is kept confidential and only shared with the people who need to know.
- Use health evidence to inform commissioned services.

#### **9.4. Priority 4 - Identity – supporting children and young people to be themselves, to listen to them, include them, and work with them**

Our children and young people will feel confident and assured in who they are, have their voices heard and be empowered to make a difference.

Identity, including race, gender, sexuality, religion and disability, are fundamental considerations when safeguarding our young people's health and wellbeing. In Dorset we seek to ensure that all our young people can voice their concerns, be their best selves and feel confident in who they are. Every child must be able to make a success of their lives regardless of their personal characteristics. We will support children and young people to be who they are, to feel confident and assured, working with them, listening to them,

and including them, ensuring they are in touch with the people and places that are important to them. We will take action to tackle racial disparities and deliver our ambition to become an anti-racist service. We know how important it is to support our young people who identify as LGTBQ+ and we are working to improve our data collection and tailor support so that every child feels comfortable and assured in who they are. We also recognise the clear links between deprivation and those who come into care, and vow to tackle inequalities and disproportionality in all their forms.

**We are committing to:**

- Improve our equality data collection and monitoring, address the gaps and develop better understanding of our children in care and care experienced young people.
- Support our young people who identify as LGTBQ+ and understand the intersections with race, gender, disability and sexuality. We commit to be active allies and remove barriers so that all our young people can feel safe and thrive.
- Embed a trauma-informed working practice whereby our colleagues and partners are trained to address the specific needs of our children from a global majority and unaccompanied children. Our workforce will actively address race and challenge their own biases when working with young people.
- Create safe spaces for young people to speak freely, without prejudice. Promoting strong relationships with people that understand them.
- Understand the difference in outcomes for our young people based on their characteristics and provide interventions to avoid negative pathways. This includes having a focus on identity throughout all work and priorities.
- Give our young people the opportunity to have their voices heard and make decisions about their care, including helping to interview and train social work staff. Children and young people will be given information and guidance on their rights are, what support services are available and how to get help from an advocate or make a complaint.
- Be sensitive to the cultural needs of unaccompanied children and help them to settle. We will work with the Red Cross to support safe contact with their family and friends both in the UK and in the country from which they have travelled.
- Recruitment of foster carers from different ethnic backgrounds to reflect the diversity of our children in care.

**9.5. Priority 5 - Next Steps towards Adult Life – Being safe and Happy as an Adult**

We will help our young people to have goals for their future, to be prepared for the world of enterprise and work, and to become active citizens of their community. They will be prepared for next steps in the best possible way.

We understand the importance of retaining our parenting responsibility beyond when a young person leaves care. We are determined to help children and young people to overcome gaps in their early care and support their next steps towards adulthood. With the growing awareness of contextual safeguarding risks for children in care, we recognise that they do not disappear when young people become 18 yrs old. Therefore, we have worked closely with colleagues in adult services to develop our approach to transitional safeguarding. We also recognise the additional vulnerability of our unaccompanied young people and the need to target specific support. In Dorset we listen carefully to our care experienced young people and assess their needs to make sure they have all the services required to take the next steps into adult life. This includes making sure they have suitable accommodation.

**We are committed to:**

- Delivery of Corporate Parenting Strategy for care leavers tracked through Care Leavers Delivery Group.
- Make every effort to help young people remain living with their foster carer after 18 and up to the age of 21 through “staying put” if they wish to do so.
- Enable young people to maintain a relationship with carers as well as foster carers through ‘Staying Close’ when they move from residential or semi-supported arrangements to living in the community. Maintaining relationships with trusted adults, friends and peers is a key aim of our staying close offer and can include practical and emotional support.
- Help young people to make the most of their opportunities in training, further education and employment. From the age of 16, they will have a personal advisor who alongside their social worker will work together prepare for next steps at 18 yrs. Care leavers can continue with support from the Care Leavers Service up until the age of 25 if they wish to do so.
- Develop a multi-agency approach to address challenges related to poor mental health, substance use, and domestic abuse within our care leaver cohort, based on the Safeguarding Families Together model
- Increased opportunities for employment, education, and training through our pathway to employment, apprenticeship schemes & strong links with local and national businesses.
- A care leaver covenant, employment and training pathway through NHS.

- Joint work with housing colleagues and through our Housing Strategy increase sufficiency and availability of affordable housing for our young people.
- Helping our young people to learn the practical skills needed to live independently, such as managing budgets and applying for jobs.
- Develop and deliver our new DfE funded mentoring scheme in partnership with the voluntary and community sector
- Develop lifelong links and important connections to build young people's networks and belonging in their community.

## **10. Measures of success**

**10.1.** Each corporate Parenting Board will be presented with the Corporate Parenting Data Set which will set out key performance indicators and commentary linked to our priorities and progress in achieving these.

**10.2.** In addition, the Board will receive a range of reports at formal board meetings and updates at informal board meetings to give them insights on the support provided to our children and young people and its impact. This will ensure the Board is assured that the partnership is delivering the best possible support for young people, highlighting any specific areas for additional focus. Young people's experience will always remain at the heart of this process.

**10.3.** Annual reports received include:

- Corporate Parenting Annual Report
- Fostering Service Annual Report
- Fostering Panel Chair Annual Report
- Aspire Adoption Annual Report
- Youth Voice Strategy for Care Experienced Children and Young People Annual Report
- Care Leavers Annual Report
- Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer Annual Report
- Local Authority Designated Officer Annual Report
- Health and Wellbeing Annual Report

- Youth Justice Annual Report
- Virtual Head Annual Report

## 11. Governance

**11.1.** The Children in Care Partnership Delivery Group will operationalise the Corporate Parenting Strategy through membership of representatives of associated groups and boards and build on the offer to optimise our resources and improve outcomes for our children in care (Fig 2).

**11.2.** The Children in Care Partnership Delivery Group will act as a problem-solving space to work collaboratively in unblocking issues.

**11.3.** The work of the Children in Care Partnership Delivery Group will be coordinated through the delivery of the Children in Care Partnership Delivery Plan which underpins the Corporate Parenting Strategy and will be reported to the Corporate Parenting Board for scrutiny and support of Board Members and informed by Voices of The Network.

**11.4.**

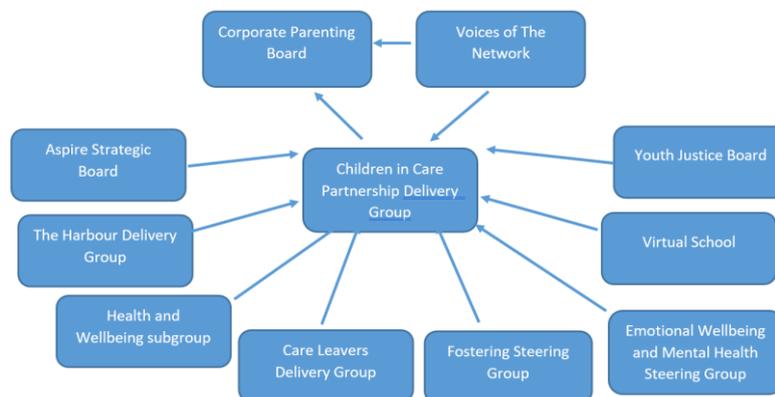


Fig 2. Children in Care Delivery Group

