



Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

Corporate Parenting Board Strategy 2024-2027

Forewords:

The Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council Corporate Parenting Strategy is an important document which identifies, as defined by the Welsh Government, 'the collective responsibility across services and across local authorities.... to safeguard and promote the life chances of looked after children.'

All Councillors have a special responsibility as Corporate Parents to ensure that children within our county have the opportunity to live a safe, happy, healthy and fulfilling life. A good education and opportunities for social development are paramount to this and in this respect, Children Looked After are absolutely no different and must be afforded the same choices. The strategy sets out clearly a reference guide for Corporate Parents to follow and emphasises the key aspects of the role which include how to listen, learn, and question and act as advocates on behalf of this special group.

Our children looked after are some of the most vulnerable in society. It is crucial we as Corporate Parents work collaboratively with a range of partners to ensure that our children looked after and care leavers are supported in order for them to be safe, happy and thrive. Through consultation with our children looked after and care leavers across the county this Corporate Parenting Strategy outlines our commitments, challenges, and the key steps we shall take to ensure that our children have the best possible outcomes in life. Public services, the voluntary sector and the wider community all have their part to play. By working together, we can support our children and those leaving care to take advantage of the range of opportunities our Merthyr Tydfil can offer to help them to reach their full potential.

Councillor Geraint Thomas
Leader of Merthyr Tydfil Council

Children in care are among the most vulnerable in our society. As corporate parents we are charged with a responsibility to make sure that they are supported, safe, happy and thriving. The role of Corporate Parent is important, and one we take seriously and personally in Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council. We are parents, with our partners, to over 180 children and young people in care, and over 130 care experienced young people. We want to be the best parent we can. This strategy frames how we will achieve this, informed fundamentally by the voices of children and young people in care and care leavers. We know that children, young people and young adults will tell us when we're getting things right and when we aren't. We are determined to go on being better parents. This means many things, including enabling children in care to grow up in stable environments, without frequent changes of home, carer or social worker; ensuring as they grow that they get access to the right help and support, to good schools and opportunities to learn and to train; maintaining contact with important people in their lives, and having every possible opportunity and support to become independent, socially connected, economically active, safe, happy adults. We are committed to being the best we can be.

We have listened to our children and young people and what they have told us is central to the pledges we set out here. Through our partnerships and the Corporate Parenting Board we will support our children and young people to take advantage of the range of opportunities our county has to offer and help them realise their potential.

Ellis Cooper
Chief Executive Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

The role of the Corporate Parent for Looked After Children is arguably the most important role of a Council. We have a legal and moral duty to provide the level of support, care and protection any good parent would give to their children. This includes promoting their health, education, social and emotional needs. The term 'Corporate Parent' recognises that meeting the diverse needs of these young people requires co-operation between Council service areas and other organisations, such as health, education, the police, and partner agencies. This strategy has been developed in conjunction with our children looked after and care leavers to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our children.

This corporate responsibility remains with Elected Members and the Council even when young people are no longer being Looked After, in fact we support our care leavers up to the age of 25. The term "Corporate Parenting" recognises that meeting all the developmental needs of children and young people requires co-operation between Council departments and with partner agencies such as health and partners in the voluntary sector. As a Corporate Parent, when you consider the quality of care and opportunities Looked After Children and care leavers receive, you must always ask yourself, "would this be good enough for my child"?

Councillor Julia Jenkins
Cabinet Member for Social Services

Corporate Parenting:

Corporate parenting refers to the shared responsibility across the Council to ensure that children and young people in our care or leaving care are supported to thrive; they are 'our children'.

The role the Council plays in looking after children & young people is one of the most important things we do. The Local Authority has a unique responsibility to the children & young people we care for, as well as those leaving our care.

A good corporate parent should have the same aspirations for a child/young person in care, as a good parent would have for their own child. It means providing them with the stability and support they need to make progress; and helping them to set ambitious goals for themselves. It means celebrating their successes, but also recognising they will sometimes make mistakes and need help to get back on track. It also means supporting them to gain the skills and confidence to live independently, whilst letting them know they have someone to call on for help if the going gets tough.

Our strategy is produced to set out how we intend to challenge ourselves as corporate parents over the next three years. It provides the legal and local context in which we operate, our vision for children & young people in care, as well as those leaving our care and how we intend to deliver on the priorities which are set out in legislation.

Our Corporate Parenting Board are determined the right results can only be achieved by listening to children and young people to find out what really matters to them, and by all professionals working together. The voice of our children and young people shall drive the board's agenda and priorities.

The Corporate Parenting Board shall issue an annual report highlighting the progress being made, which will be available each April, commencing April 2025.

Children's Rights and Corporate Parenting:

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the rights that must be realised for children and young people to reach their full potential.

The Corporate Parenting Board recognises the Convention as a vision for every child and young person in their care. They recognise that every child looked after and care leaver is an individual and a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to their age. Our children and young people have the same human rights as adults but also specific rights that recognised their status as children who are dependent on adults to keep them safe.

We have set out in this strategy how the corporate parenting board and its partners recognise the fundamental dignity of all children and young people in our care and the urgency of ensuring their wellbeing and developmental milestones are supported. We wish to make clear the principle that a good quality of life is the right of every child and young person who is looked after, rather than a privilege enjoyed by a few.

Achieving this aspiration shall require partnership and coproduction to create a place where the voice, needs, priorities and rights of our children and young people are at the heart of public policy, programmes, and decisions. This shall be facilitated through the role of board. Fundamental to that task shall be to acknowledge and respond to the following:

- Children and young people are individuals.
- Children start life as totally dependent beings.
- The actions, or inactions, of the Local Authority and partner organisations impact children for whom they are corporate parents more strongly than any other group in society.
- Children and young people's views should be heard and considered in the process that affects them.
- Many changes in society are having a disproportionate, and often negative, impact on children and young people.
- The health and development of children and young people is crucial to the future wellbeing of our society.

Corporate Parenting Charter:

In January 2024, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council proudly committed to the Corporate Parenting Charter: A Promise for Wales (Welsh Government). The charter is a set of principles and promises, developed in collaboration with care experienced young people, setting out the shared values that all bodies and their leaders should follow when providing services to care experienced children and young people. The overarching principles of the charter is that all people supporting care experienced children and young people must have regard to the characteristics, culture, and beliefs of the individual. You can view the full charter at: <https://www.merthyr.gov.uk/resident/social-services-and-well-being/childrens-services/?lang=en-GB&>

Shared Principles for Corporate Parents:

- **Equality** – We will support care-experienced children and young people to have the same life chances as every other young person in Wales. This is because all children have rights, no matter who they are (Article 1. UNCRC)
- **Eradicate Stigma** – We will recognise care-experienced children and young people for who they are, not just by their experience of being in care. This is because all children have a right not to be discriminated against (Article 2)
- **Togetherness** – We will work alongside care-experienced children and young people to ensure their views, feelings and ideas are integral to, influence and inform the services they receive and the way they receive those services. This is because all children have a right to be listened to and taken seriously (Article 12).
- **Support** – We will ensure professionals working with care-experienced young people understand their care experiences children and young people's needs and/or have access to information and training.
- **Ambition** – We will ensure every care-experienced child and young person reaches their potential and can enjoy a wide experience of leisure, cultural, sport and social activities. This is because all children have a right to be the best they can be (Article 3 and 29) and have the right to relax and play (Article 31).

- **Nurture** – We will make all care-experienced children and young people feel valued, respected, cared for and loved. This is because all children have a right to be safe and protected from harm (Article 19) and because all children who are not living with their families should be checked on regularly to make sure they are okay (Article 25).
- **Good Health** – We will provide support to access the right health care and advice needed to support the best physical, mental health and general well-being for all care-experienced children and young people. This is because all children have the right to the best possible health and support (Article 24 and 39).
- **A Stable Home** – We will seek out and provide stable places to live that are right for all care-experienced children and young people. This is because all children have a right to special protection if they don't live with their family (Article 20). This is because any adoption must be overseen by Government to make it supports the young person in their growth and development, is lawful and that it prioritises children's best interests (Article 21).
- **A Good Education** – We will provide opportunities and support for all care-experienced children and young people to learn/develop and help them become who they want to be. This is because all children have a right to an education (Article 28 and 29).
- **Thrive** – We will ensure all care-experienced children and young people are prepared for the future and are able make positive choices for independent living and adulthood. This is because all children have a right to reach their potential (Article 3 and 29).
- **Lifelong** – We will work to provide access to and raise awareness of the support and information available after leaving care. This is because adults have a duty to act in children's best interests (Article 3).

Inclusion and Safeguarding at the heart of every priority:

Safeguarding and inclusion are fundamental to Corporate Parenting. They are at the heart of our pledge to our children and young people and central to every priority in our strategy.

Safeguarding:

Our children and young people are some of the most vulnerable in society. It is the collective responsibility and legal duty of all public services to work together.

Local authorities must safeguard and promote the well-being of the child it looks after (S.78 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014) and this promotion of well-being should continue through a young person's development, which includes transition to adulthood.

In some families this need will be identified pre-birth, for others during childhood, or as a young person transitions into adulthood. We know that abuse and harm can be caused from within or outside their family and from a range of contexts. We know that as our children and young people develop, grow, and mature their behaviour and needs will also change.

The transition from young person to adulthood can be an unsettling and confusing time. It is important that agencies are able to adapt approaches in order to prepare young people in becoming adults.

We know that as young people grow up to adulthood they mature, and their behaviour will change. Feedback from young people was that they should be allowed to make mistakes and that these mistakes should not follow them into the future.

In January 2024, there were 52 young people in contact with Cwm Taff Youth Justice Service, with 12 of them being in receipt of care and support from Merthyr Children Services. Of the 12, only one young person is Looked After by the local authority. This evidences the incredible work being undertaken collaboratively to support our most vulnerable children.

Decriminalisation of our Children Looked After is a key element of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's Corporate duty and an element that requires all our partner agencies to understand the negative lifelong impact on our young people who become a part of the criminal justice system.

The National protocol on reducing the criminalisation of looked after children is a framework formulated by Welsh Government – November 2018, which places a duty on local authorities to work together with police, education, health and the voluntary sector to provide opportunities and activities that divert our young people from the path of criminal activity wherever possible and with each collectively giving consideration to the 7 key principles within that framework when formulating their individual strategies.

Merthyr Tydfil CBC has very strong links with our partner agencies and discussions are encouraged at a very early stage to offer the optimum opportunity for diversion from criminal activities via support to more meaningful way of our young people spending their time.

The 16+ team have qualified social workers and Personal Advisers who work closely with all of our care experienced young people, and some of our harder to reach young people respond well to the consistent support and advice offered through this forum.

The Pathway to Work is a proven scheme that offers many of our young people opportunities back into education or training and has provided some with access to employment following criminal activity, opening doors that had this scheme not been in place may have led to further criminal activity or incarceration.

It is recognised that the best outcomes for our young people are effectively achieved by working in a multi- agency way with shared goals and ambitions for the young people we are collectively responsible for and to ensure that our policies procedures and working practices reflect these are the learning taken from consultation with our children looked after and care experienced young people.

Inclusion:

All of our children have their own identity and factors that make them unique individuals. Some of our children and young people are more vulnerable than others and require additional support to be safe and thrive.

Children and young people with additional needs, including those who are disabled, unaccompanied asylum seekers, those from minority ethnic backgrounds, or have other protected characteristics such as race, religion, sexuality, gender, etc., may require additional consideration.

Opportunities, services and care planning must be inclusive, and person centred. The aims and aspirations we hold for these individuals must, as for all other children, be tailored through individual care plans to support all of our children to reach their full potential.

Legislative Framework:

We aim to support most of our children and young people within their own families and communities; however, for a small number, this is not possible, and they require alternative care arrangements (either in the short term or long term).

Children and young people are in our care either by virtue of a court order or with the agreement of their parent(s) or guardian(s). A child or a young person may come into care as a result of temporary or long-term difficulties faced by their parents, as a result of abuse, neglect or a range of difficulties. The delivery of our children is underpinned by a number of key pieces of legislation including:

- Social Services & Wellbeing (Wales) Act (2014)
- Children Act (1989)
- Leaving Care Act (2000)
- Children Act (2004)
- Children & Families Act (2014)
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Wales) Regulations 2015

Messages from our foster carers:

A consultation event was held with our in-house foster carers on 26th February 2024. Here is what they told us:

What currently works well?

- The Out of Hours service respond well to our calls.
- Consistency of social worker. Many been at Merthyr for years.
- The communication via WhatsApp with children's Social Worker, rather than us needing to phone the office.
- Family Time taking place in the community.
- Good level of support from the local authority and always having someone to talk to.
- Matching process in terms of children living alongside each other, and with the family.
- Support groups that allow carers to share experiences with each other.
- Appropriate planned move for children, where children are meeting and spending time with new carers as part of the transition.
- Outreach support from the Local Authority.

What could be improved?

- More opportunities for carers to get together to share knowledge and support each other.

- Respite when needed.
- Better transition when there is a change of Social Worker.
- Things to be completed in a quicker manner.
- Better interaction between children's Social Worker and fostering Supervising Social Worker.
- Funding for children with additional needs e.g. extra educational support.

If you had a magic wand, what would good support look like for you?

- Services to respond to mental health at the right time.
- Children's Social Worker to be more present.
- Extra respite – regular.
- Early intervention to prevent placement instability.
- Targeted training addressing specific issues.

Messages from our children and young people:

The following messages are from consultation with children and young people who are looked after by Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, aged between 10 to 16, from a range of backgrounds. The consultation took place in March 2024. These are direct quotes:

Feeling listened to by their Social Worker:

- *I don't feel that my social worker knows me, I cannot say if he listens to me as I haven't really spoke to him. I don't see him enough.*
- *I like my Social Worker. She's the best social worker I've ever had. I can speak to my social worker about anything and can always get hold of her.*
- *My social worker has always listened to me. I know she is listening because she looks at me.*
- *My social worker would wait for me to say how I felt, not rush me. She would always ask my opinion and what I wanted or how I was feeling.*
- *I don't get on with my new social worker, he doesn't understand me. He doesn't trust me, so I am not allowed to do anything. If you don't give me a chance, how can I show you?*
- *My previous social worker was one in a million, I felt like I had hit the jackpot. She would always listen to me and explain things to me. I felt happier.*

71.5% of the children asked they said that they felt listened to by their Social Worker.

Safe home:

- *I was involved in deciding where I was going to live. I was asked what I wanted. My social worker took me to visit my carers home before I agreed to go there.*
- *I trust my carer and know that he will be there for me.*
- *My social worker involved me in my move which was scary, but she showed me a picture of my carer and told me things like she used to be a chef and enjoys cooking and who lived at the house.*
- *When I am older, I want to live in an area that is safe and supported. Not in my house but support available.*
- *I feel safe where I live, it is calm, and I can talk to my carer.*
- *I didn't know where I was going to live it was scary, they should have told me something about it.*
- *I feel safe where I am living, I trust my foster carer to look after me. My home is clean, I have my own space. If anything, I have too many clothes now.*
- *My foster carer is great, and I can speak about anything with her.*

76.2% of the children asked said they had been involved in the decision of where they would live.

61.9% of the children asked said they could speak to their foster carer.

Education:

- *I used to have someone I could speak to in school, but she left. I was told that I would have someone new but that didn't happen.*
- *I enjoy school and am doing well.*
- *They didn't understand me. I went to school till year 8 and then had nothing. I don't think they knew what to do with me (**was not looked after at the time**)*
- *When I had to move, I had to move schools as well. I really didn't want to. It was frightening.*
- *I feel supported at school.*

- *I have someone I can speak to at school, she's lovely.*
- *I am called out of lessons to talk to someone, my friends ask why? I don't like this.*
- *I think it's embarrassing going on trips just for children in care. My friends don't go.*
- *I love school and feel good there. I don't mind someone coming to speak with me in school.*

85.8% of children asked said that they felt supported in school.

Training:

- *If I was to give advice to the boss in children's services about training. I would tell them to train their social workers to learn how to be there for us, get to know us and if you are busy make room to talk to us.*
- *Advice on training: If you say you're going to do something, please do it, I need to trust you.*
- *I think training is needed in mental health. Learn how to calm a situation, learn what not to say, be aware, look for signs and any differences in someone's mood, are they being overly happy. It would be better for staff if it came from a young person who goes through it.*
- *I think my social worker is very well trained. She could help me with my schoolwork.*

Hopes and dreams for the future:

- *I want a job that pays well when I am older so I can live in a safe home. I would like to go to college and do sports and public services.*
- *I want to live in an area that is safe, don't just put me anywhere. I don't want to live where the crime rates are high, I would not feel safe.*
- *I want to be a paediatric nurse when I am older. I need experience, so would like an apprenticeship.*
- *I want to have a good job when I'm older, I would like to be an apprentice, learn and earn.*

- *I have not had the education that I needed. The only option was a tutor, but I wanted to go to school. I want to be a social worker or zoologist when I am older and need to be supported to do this.*
- *I want to go to university when I am older, I dream of being a fashion designer. I think I could do it.*
- *I want to have my own home but would need someone to help me practice.*
- *I want to go to university when I am older, I enjoy school.*
- *I want to be a F1 driver when I leave school, so would like to go Go-karting to practice.*
- *I would like more money please.*

As Corporate Parents we will:

- Protect our children and young people from risk and vulnerability.
- Know our children and young people, their needs, talents and aspirations, and promote their interests.
- Hold high aspirations for their present and their future and expect the best for and from them.
- Take an interest in their successes/challenges and celebrate their achievements.
- Listen to their views and ensure these views influence practice, service and policy changes.
- Recognise, support, and respect their identity in all aspects.
- Support high academic and vocational achievement. Support their enterprise and creative contributions.
- Support their health, emotional wellbeing and resilience through access to the right services at the right time.
- Support them to be ethically informed citizens.
- Support their transition to adulthood by preparing them to become responsible citizens.
- Learn from compliments and complaints from children and young people.

Our Pledge to you:

We promise to:

Support you to have the same **life chances** as every other young person in Wales.

Recognise you for **who you are**, not just by your experience of being in care.

Work with you to ensure your views, feelings and **ideas are integral to, influence and inform the services you receive** and the way you receive those services.

Ensure professionals working with you **understand your needs** and have access to information, training, and support that helps them do this.

Ensure you **reach your potential** and enjoy a wide experience of leisure, cultural, sport and social activities.

Make sure you feel **valued, respected, cared for, and loved**.

Provide support to access the right health care and advice needed to support you to achieve the **best physical, mental health and general well-being**.

Seek out and provide **stable places to live** that are right for you.

Provide opportunities and support for you to learn/develop and **help you become who you want to be**.

Ensure you are **prepared for the future** and able to make positive choices for independent living and adulthood.

Provide access to the **support and information** available after **leaving care**.

To successfully deliver our pledge, we shall centre our activity on the following six priorities, developed from the messages our children and young people told us.

Priority 1: Voice, Choice and Control

This is important because...

All of our children have the right to be heard and it is important to us as a local authority that we are listening to our children and working with them in a way that promotes their wishes and feelings.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the 'Right to be Heard' and states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters that affect them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.

It is not enough to simply provide an opportunity for our children to express themselves, we must ensure that this forms the basis for our involvement and support and that our children can see that what they tell us is taken on board and used to shape the way we work with them.

Our current activity

- All of our children have the opportunity to complete consultation documents in respect of their Children Looked After review which asks them questions about their day-to-day life, including health, Education, and time with family as well as their aspirations for now and the future. This information is shared with their social worker and Independent Reviewing Officer and is used to lead conversations in the review. Merthyr Tydfil are developing an online process for the completion of the review consultations so more of our young people and children can access this through their own devices.
- Merthyr Tydfil have held consultations with our care experienced children and young people to gain their views around how we work with them and the language we use. This has brought about changes in terms of how Part 6 and Pathway plans are completed with these now being done collaboratively with the child/young person to ensure their wishes and feelings are captured directly and in the truest, most accurate way. Further consultations are to be held on an annual basis at different points through the year which will look at gathering information that will continually shape and evolve the way we engage.
- We have a young person panel where we have representatives across different age ranges who are consulted on changes in processes and their input is used to shape these changes to ensure it is in line with what they need from us.

How we shall achieve our aims

This strategy is underpinned by a detailed action plan connected to each priority.

Key actions are:

- Continue to complete plans in a collaborative way to ensure our children's wishes and feelings are being captured
- Continue to hold consultation events
- Continue to have a young person's panel for active engagement in developing the service with our children
- Develop an online review consultation tool

Priority 2: Safe, stable homes

This is important because...

All our children and young people need and deserve a safe, comfortable, stable home. Home can be with parents, with a kinship carer, special guardian, foster carer, at a children's home, residential school, in supported accommodation or independently with floating support, and sometimes also includes secure accommodation or remand. This includes stable accommodation as an adult, including opportunities for home ownership.

No matter where a child lives, they must be supported to have positive outcomes and reach their full potential. Each setting must be chosen and matched to meet our children, young people, and care leavers' individual needs.

For most we hope this will be a positive, safe and comfortable experience, where new connections are formed with nurturing carers. But we understand that not every placement will go as expected, and our children and young people must have a positive and well planned alternative if things don't work out.

Our current activity

There is a plan in place for the recruitment of foster carers and supported housing provisions to enable more Merthyr Tydfil children and young people to be cared for locally and to meet their assessed needs in respect of disability, culture, ethnicity and language, religion and beliefs, sexuality and gender.

Where in-county placements are not possible, all requests for out of county placements must be made through the Multi-Agency Placement Panel which seeks to ensure all care, education and health needs are met.

Regardless of the location of the placements or age of the child or young person Independent Reviewing Officers, Independent Visitors and Advocates ensure the voice of our children and young people are heard and their wishes and rights are acted upon.

Merthyr Tydfil's Children's Services are committed to bringing children 'Closer to home' which looks at not only bringing them closer to Merthyr Tydfil but also closer to their support networks including family and social relationships, Education and health care.

Being closer to Merthyr Tydfil and identified support networks will ensure that there is a 'team around the child' close enough to offer that intensive support where needed.

Merthyr Tydfil's Closer to Home strategy looks at social workers completing annual assessments for all Children Looked After triggered by their Birth date which will determine if the care plan in place is the right one or if changes can be made. This assessment is completed in collaboration with the child, their parents/carers and all support services involved in the child's life to ensure a holistic approach. This assessment will look at things such as stepping a child down from a residential provision to a foster placement or carrying out a Special Guardianship assessment for those children where a care order is no longer required. It may also look to see if a child can return home to birth family or if already, such as under Placement with Parents to determine if the care order can now be discharged.

Merthyr Tydfil hold a monthly Closer to Home Panel where all of our children who are residing outside of Merthyr Tydfil in residential care are discussed to ensure they have the right plan in place or discuss any changes and how these will happen. Merthyr Tydfil also hold a Multi Agency Placement Panel (MAPP) on a monthly basis to discuss our children and young people where new placements are being made outside of Merthyr. This panel looks at all elements of the child's life including the placement, education, and health, to ensure the placement is appropriate in meeting the child's needs. This continues to be monitored through statutory visits and the Children Looked After review process to ensure that the placement continues to meet our child/young person's needs and whether there could be a plan to bring them closer to home. This could be in terms of them residing in Merthyr Tydfil or within an area close to Merthyr that would bring them closer to their support network in preparation for independence.

This process ensures that the care plan is evolving and doesn't remain stagnant as well as the right decisions being made at the right time for the child.

Merthyr Tydfil is working hard to ensure all of our children have stability and with the impending changes around Not for Profit coming into force as of 2026/2027 there is work with the carers and children who will be affected by this to ensure this has a minimal impact.

Foster Wales Merthyr Tydfil are working hard to promote fostering services and support as well as recruiting new carers. There are regular events across the Cwm Taff Morgannwg consortium to promote what support and incentives are on offer for those wishing to become foster carers as well as opportunities for training and development as an approved carer.

Merthyr Tydfil have identified the importance of support for foster carers to ensure they are able to continue to support our children. In order to ensure stability for our children the fostering service are in the process of developing a systemic arm which looks at providing support for foster carers in understanding a child's behaviour and responses and appropriate responses. The systemic practitioners will support the foster carers in feeling confident in

their role through creating a greater understanding of care experienced children and their experiences.

Foster Wales Merthyr Tydfil hold regular 'foster carer' events which allows them time together to share experiences and ideas and to provide that sense of support from 'someone who understands' the importance and responsibility of the role. This is in addition to specific supervising social workers which undertake regular visits and complete supervision with all carers.

How we shall achieve our aims

This strategy is underpinned by a detailed action plan connected to each priority.

Key actions are:

- Ensuring there is appropriate support for placements to prevent breakdown.
- Continue to work in partnership so that a placement move does not adversely impact on to education, training, or health outcomes.
- Continue to work with Foster Wales nationally and regionally to increase the numbers of foster carers to meet the diverse needs of our children.
- Continue to undertake annual assessments to ensure the right plan is in place at the right time
- Closer to home panel / strategy to discuss all of our children living outside of Merthyr Tydfil
- Systemic practitioners to directly support foster carers
- Foster carer events
- Fostering Supervision and support through the allocated supervising social worker
- Work to be completed on ensuring children feel listened to and building relationships with carers and children

Priority 3: Good physical & mental health

This is important because...

Our children and young people have the same core health needs as all children, but their backgrounds and experiences mean they may be particularly vulnerable to poorer health outcomes. This is because children who enter our care may have unaddressed or current health issues which have arisen through poverty, neglect or abuse.

We also know children and young people who have experienced disrupted childhoods, trauma and inconsistent relationships with their parents and families are more likely to struggle with their emotional wellbeing. Young people can experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), these are stressful events occurring in childhood such as being a victim of neglect and child abuse, growing up in a household with adults experiencing substance misuse, mental health conditions or domestic violence.

The transitional period when care leavers experience during and after they leave care can present particular challenges to their emotional well-being.

Our current activity

The health of our children is overseen by a Medical Lead and Designated Nurse for Children Looked After. They ensure our children have an annual assessment of their health needs and individual action plan.

All our children must be registered with a GP, dentist and optician by their carers and be supported to have their health needs met. Our children have access to Paediatricians if required to ensure physical health needs are met.

In relation to emotional wellbeing, there are a range of therapeutic Psychology and Mental Health services provided by the University Health Board, including;

- **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)**
- **Multi-Agency Permanency Support Service**

Trauma informed training has been offered to all Merthyr Tydfil schools. All foster carers have been offered access, alongside schools, to trauma informed schools training and feelings focused training delivered by care experienced individuals. Each school has a designated member of staff for children looked after, they act as a champion for all CLA pupils, and ensure that there is a whole school commitment to supporting high expectations. Welsh Government Pupil Development grant (PDG) funding has supported our schools to develop whole school approaches to supporting CLA and formerly CLA pupils.

How we shall achieve our aims

This strategy is underpinned by a detailed action plan connected to each priority.

Key actions are:

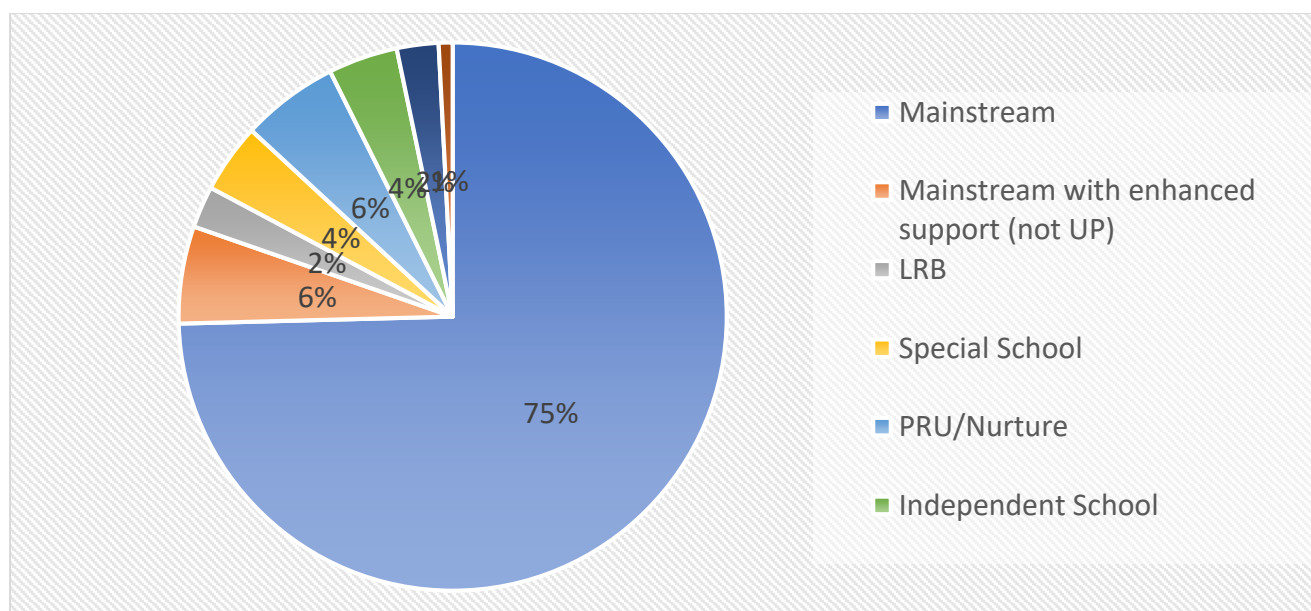
- Ensure that life story work is completed with our children and young people.
- Develop ways to increase the resilience of our children, young people, and care leavers.
- Work with the learning department to develop whole school approaches to trauma informed practice across our schools.

Priority 4: Fulfilled ambitions.

This is important because...

Children and young people in care are all individuals, coming from all walks of life and have different aspirations and ambitions. We value their unique identity and characteristics and will ensure they are not disadvantaged or discriminated against in any way in respect of their cultural heritage, ethnicity, faith and beliefs, sexuality, disability or gender.

123 of our children looked after population are of statutory school age, 63 of these pupils are of primary age and 60 are of secondary. 64 attend education provision in other Local Authority areas. The majority of our pupils access mainstream schools.



We want our children and care leavers to achieve the best possible educational and employment outcomes so that they can lead fulfilled and successful lives. Our children and young people told us this is their aspiration. Having a good job with a good income was seen as a means to obtaining their own home, income, fulfilment and to have the things they never had.

But we also know that due to the circumstances which led our children and young people into care, some will feel disenfranchised or have disengaged from school. Some will have changed school when entering or changing placement. *In 2022-2023 13.72% of our statutory school aged pupils experienced non transitional school moves.*

This disruption means that some young people may need additional assistance to achieve, or they may achieve their accomplishments later than others. Research suggests that children looked after and young people are more likely to have additional learning needs, to be

excluded from school, and to leave school with reduced qualifications compared with children in the general population.

In 2022-2023, 19 CLA pupils received fixed term exclusions, 9/19 (47%) of those excluded were primary aged pupils and 10 out of the 19 (53%) pupils had a Local Authority maintained IDP or Statement of SEN.

It is important to ensure that Education is considered fully when a change of placement is necessary, to ensure there is as little disruption to relationships and learning as possible. This can be particularly challenging when young people are placed outside Merthyr Tydfil where provision may not be comparable.

We want to provide the best possible opportunities for all our children and young people, where all have the right to access a quality, broad and balanced education, in line with their needs, and wherever possible in a mainstream school.

Our current activity

Within Merthyr Tydfil we have a Children Looked After (CLA) Education Service (LACES). Arranged in a cluster model, there is an allocated officer for every statutory school aged pupil. We recognise the impact of trauma on learning and all CLA Education Service officers hold the level 5 Diploma in Trauma Informed schools and communities. The team is able to offer a range of school-based interventions to support outcomes and plays a key role in working with the team around the child/young person to ensure that pupils are making expected progress against individual targets, and that a graduated response is in place where necessary.

Every child looked after has an effective and high-quality Personal Education Plan (PEP) that forms part of their part 6 Care and Support Plan. Individual targets are SMART, and there is appropriate challenge and support offered to schools where targets are not being met. PEP quality assurance audits are carried out through the supervision model, this work is supported by Independent Reviewing Officer's via the CLA review process.

In 2020 we launched our Pathway to work service, supporting care experienced young people to develop the necessary skills required for success within the job market, and assisting opportunities for engagement in intermediate labour market (ILM) pathways, apprenticeships, further/higher education and sustainable employment. 49 care experienced individuals are currently being actively supported through the Pathway to Work, and we currently have 9 individuals accessing ILM's through the Pathway to Work.

Quotes from young people with previous barriers to engaging with education, training and employment highlight its success.

"I'm loving it. Every day I look forward to starting work".

"I have really gained so much more confidence in my placement; I'm really enjoying working here"

The Ewch Amdani! Go for it! Pathway to Work project launched in January 2024. The project, designed specifically for secondary aged CLA pupils includes employment and training taster opportunities, access to inspirational guest speakers, team building opportunities, mock interview and CV writing workshops.

How we shall achieve our aims

This strategy is underpinned by a detailed action plan connected to each priority.

Key actions are:

- Ensure our children and young people placed out of area or move placements have their educational needs met and with minimal disruption as possible through the Multi-Agency Permanence Panel.
- Ensuring all our children have access to the IT resources they require to support their education at home.
- Through the Pathway to Work, ensure that the Corporate Parent roles and responsibilities are understood by all Local Authority departments and that this translates into increase education, training and employment opportunities for care experienced individuals.
- Develop an integrated Personal Education Plan and IDP that allows us to better track and monitor the progression of our learners.
- Consult with our children and young people to better understand how we can support them with regards to this priority.

Priority 5: Preparation for independence and adulthood

This is important because...

Transitioning to adulthood can be a scary yet exciting time. Here at Merthyr Tydfil we want all of our young people to be fully supported to enter adulthood feeling prepared, in control, and feeling positive about their future.

In Wales, the average age of young people leaving their family home to transition into independence is 24. Sadly, care experienced young people don't often get the opportunity to remain with their care giver until this age, with many leaving care at the age of 18, despite a range of opportunities such as When I'm Ready and Supported Lodgings, which enables young people to remain with their care givers until the age of 21, or longer if in education.

With this in mind, it is absolutely essential that care experienced young people are given the opportunity to develop their skills for independence at an early age and be supported to have good physical and emotional health, a good standard of education, and lots of opportunities to explore and pursue their hobbies, interests, and to develop their support networks.

Our current activity

Merthyr Tydfil are committed to our care experienced young people. So much so that in November 2023, we created our new 16+ Team; a dedicated team to support care leavers with their transition into adulthood. The team is made up of Social Workers and Personal Advisors, who support our young people from the age of 15.9 years, up to the age of 25. Every young person within the team will have a Social Worker until the age of 18, and a Personal Advisor from the age of 16 to 25. When young people transition to the 16+ Team, a comprehensive assessment of need is undertaken, which focuses upon the here and now but also their hopes and dreams for their future. Each young person then coproduces a Pathway Plan with their Social Worker, with input from all of the people who are important to the young person. Being the young persons plan, it details all of the goals they wish to achieve along with the steps they will take to achieve them, and the support around them to do this. We know that sometimes in life our plans change, and we may wish to pursue other ventures, which is ok, and for this reason together we review plans at a minimum of 6-monthly to ensure the goals set are still the goals the young person wishes to achieve.

Working closely with young people and care givers, our Personal Advisors are currently in the process of developing a Skills for Independence programme that, when live, will ensure that our young people are fully supported to learn and develop the skills they need for adulthood, at a pace that works for them.

For many young people, they may wish to remain living at home with their care givers past the age of 18, which we fully support and promote. We are currently in the process of reviewing our When I'm Ready policy to make this option more available to our young people by offering better financial support to foster carers. This review is anticipated to complete in April 2024.

We are also exploring how we can develop a Supported Lodgings scheme in Merthyr, which will allow young people to live in a supportive family environment, should they wish, instead of transitioning to supported accommodation. Currently, the Local Authority have no Supported Lodgings providers.

We are also in the process of developing our own supported accommodation in Merthyr Tydfil for our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, which will ensure that all of our young people, irrespective of their nationality, are fully integrated and feel a valued member of our community.

The 16+ Team has a strong ethos that every young person matters, and we will strive to ensure that all of our young people have the best support possible to enable them to enter adulthood feeling in full control of their lives and possessing all of the skills they require to reach their full potential.

Working closely with our partners, Merthyr Tydfil has developed a range of supported living projects, allowing our young people the opportunity to take the first steps on their journey to independence, whilst ensuring that around them they have all of the support they need to make this a success.

We know that setting up your first home can be expensive and stressful so to help alleviate some of these pressures, we have significantly increased the Setting Up Home Allowance available to our young people, commencing April 2024. Our 16+ Team and Housing Department work closely together to ensure our young people have the smoothest transition possible into their new home, to include support to help them manage their finances and setting budgeting plans.

How we shall achieve our aims

This strategy is underpinned by a detailed action plan connected to each priority.

Key actions are:

- Continue the expansion and development of 'When I'm Ready' to enable more of our young people to remain in their foster homes post 18, if this is what they desire.
- Recruit Supported Lodgings providers and develop 16+ supported accommodation so that young people have a range of housing options available to them.
- Roll out a Skills for Independence programme to give our young people all of the skills they need to promote a successful transition to adulthood.
- Develop UASC specific accommodation and support to integrate into the community.
- Continue to coproduce Pathway Plans with young people, clearly evidencing the goals they wish to achieve and how they will be supported to do this.
- Ensure assessments and Pathway Plans are completed within timescales and evidences the young person's coproduction.
- Continue to bed-in and develop our 16+ team to ensure it is meeting the needs of our young people.
- Continue strengthening partnership working between Children's Services, Housing, and our partner agencies.

Priority 6: Well trained, well supported staff to support our children.

This is important because...

Staff who are well trained and therefore informed and confident in their role will provide the best service for our children.

The world of social work is ever evolving and therefore it is vital that there are opportunities for staff to continue their professional development through training opportunities.

Our children want to feel confident that their social worker has the knowledge and confidence to support them and understands what they need and how to achieve this through working together.

We believe that when social workers feel confident in their ability to undertake their role, they provide the best service to our children and young people and their families.

We also believe that feeling confident and supported in your role can prevent burnout which will in turn create a stable work force with positive staff retention.

After having considered all the processes that we have in place we wanted to create easy to follow training sessions that would incorporate these as well as any paperwork that would be needed as part of this to create a consistent approach and shared understanding.

The Social Services and Wellbeing Act has a clear focus on personal outcomes and there has been lots of consultation across the service around how to achieve this as part of a co-productive approach. The Part 6 and Pathway Plans have been audited through a focus group and changes made to ensure that they are coproduced, the information contained is outcome focused, completed in the first person, and are shared within a timely manner. All staff have received specific training in terms of the completion of these plans.

Our current activity

Merthyr Tydfil have taken the time to gather feedback from practitioners around what they would like to see as part of training and development and have created a training programme that looks at all of the processes across the service and developed training sessions and materials for these. The training programme can be accessed by everyone with a specific focus for those who are newly qualified as part of their induction as well as those who are new to the authority.

Merthyr Tydfil also has an annual training calendar through the training department that identifies areas across social work that would benefit practitioners.

Merthyr Tydfil has been delivering systemic practice across the service.

How we shall achieve our aims

This strategy is underpinned by a detailed action plan connected to each priority.

Key actions are:

- Roll out the processes training programme for all practitioners.
- Continue with the systemic training programme.
- Continue to create the annual training calendar.
- Continue to consult with practitioners around their needs for training and development.
- Systemic practitioner within the fostering team to provide advice and support for supervising social worker to ensure they are able to actively support their foster carers to meet the needs of the children in their care.
- Systemic practitioner within the fostering team to provide advice and support directly for foster carers to ensure they understand the needs of the children they are caring for and can support and respond appropriately and at the right time.

- All of our children and young people are offered advocacy support to ensure that they have someone independent to voice their wishes and feelings and this can be used in terms of ensuring their foster carer understands how they are feeling and can support and respond appropriately.
- All of our children and young people have an Independent Reviewing officer who they can talk to and share their wishes and feeling with as well as completing the consultation booklets for their reviews which can be shared with the foster carer to ensure they understand how they are feeling and can support and respond appropriately.