

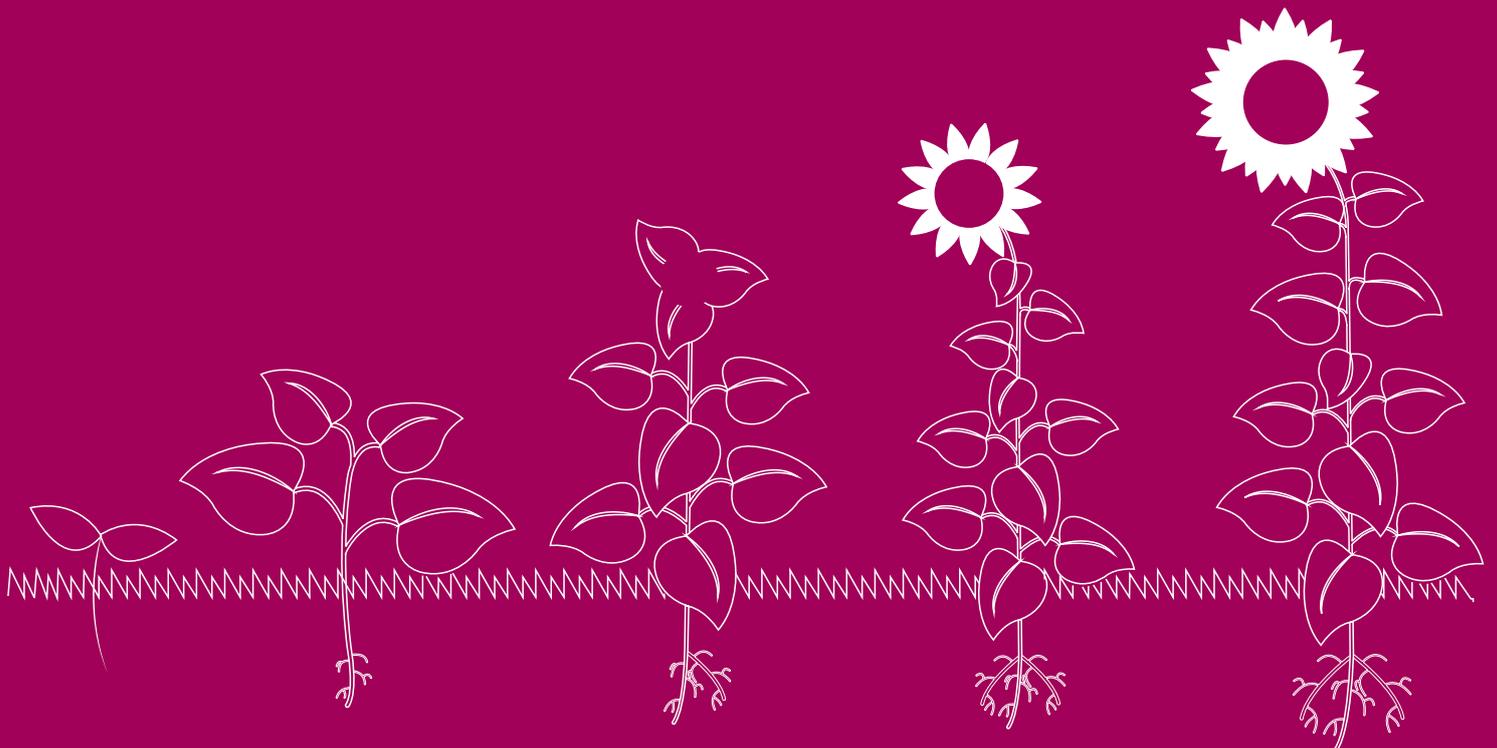


City of  
**Stoke-on-Trent**

Stoke-on-Trent

# 'Room to Grow'

Progress report 2021-2022





# FOREWORD

We are now halfway through Room to Grow, our four-year strategy for children, young people and families in Stoke-on-Trent. Our first year was all about laying the foundations for success and developing our partnership; our second year has focused on building on those foundations and turning them into action. With great pride I am able to share in this update how much activity has taken place to give our children and young people the best start in life, the best education and the best opportunities the city can offer. This report has been produced with colleagues from across our Children, Young People and Families Strategic Partnership and I would like to thank them for their contributions and their commitment to delivering our strategy over the past year.

Our award-winning fostering campaign is leading the way as the UK's first foster-friendly city. We have redesigned our early help service and remodelled our 0-19 health and wellbeing service to improve joint working. Over 70 new social workers have joined us as we work to embed the improvements we have made in social work practice. We have launched our inclusion strategy to support children and young people with special educational needs, and our young people's learning and skills strategy, making high quality learning, training and employment for young people an essential ingredient for local economic growth. Ofsted has recently recognised the improvement we have made, finding significant improvements and substantial progress in the quality of services.

We know there are still big challenges ahead. The number of children in care in the city remains high, with over 1,000 children currently being looked after. This means finding stable homes which meet their needs can be difficult. We also know too few of our youngest children are meeting their developmental milestones. Innovative projects, including Thrive at Five and Be The Future, are starting to provide our children and young people with unique support and opportunities.

The development and launch of our family hubs will provide an opportunity to come together on a local level, improving access and connections between families, professionals and services. We will continue to embed our new early help assessment tool, rolling out training across the partnership. And as a priority education investment area, we will continue to build on the excellent work of the Opportunity Area to improve educational outcomes for our children.

Alongside these exciting developments, we know we need to embed and stabilise the changes and good practice we have developed at such pace over the past year. We want to continue to develop the quality and consistency of the work we do to support children and their families, and ensure we have sufficient and sustainable services and provision in place.

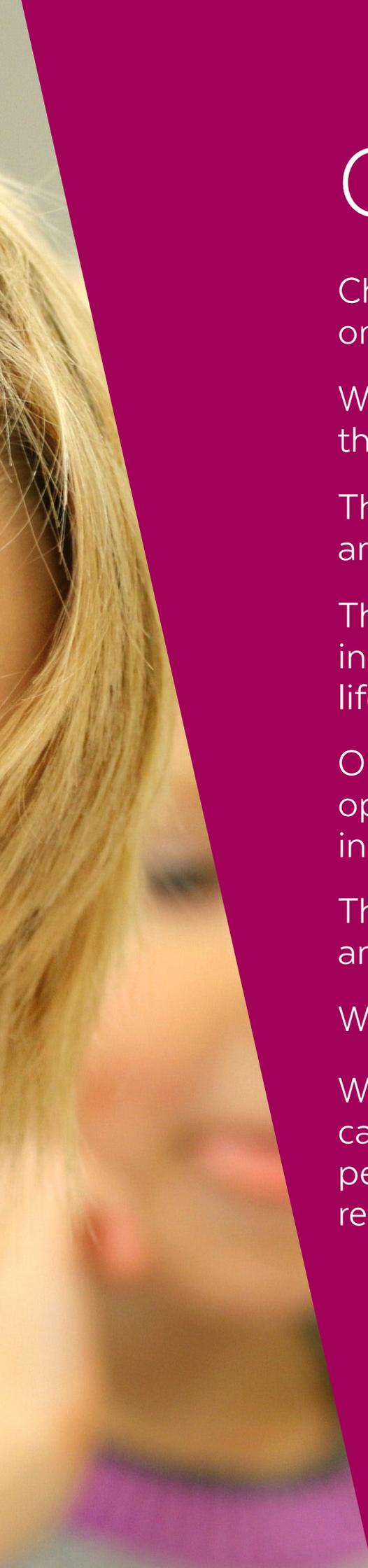
We have a strong record for children and young people in our city in recent years. Our relentless drive across the city to ensure children are our number one priority is evident to all. I hope you enjoy reading about the progress that has been made over the past year and share my excitement about future projects set out in this update. As always, we would love to hear from new partners who want to contribute to delivering Room to Grow or have any suggestions for how we can work together to support our children and young people to thrive.

**Councillor Dave Evans**

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Chair, Children, Young People and Families Strategic Partnership Board





# OUR VISION

Children and young people are the number one priority for the city of Stoke-on-Trent.

We want them to thrive and be the most that they can be.

They should be safe, healthy, nurtured and loved.

They should have the best possible start in life, the best education and the best life chances.

Our young people should be enthusiasts, optimists, creators, entrepreneurs and innovators.

They should be kind, empathetic and compassionate.

We want to hear their voice.

We need every adult in Stoke-on-Trent to care passionately about children and young people and express that through relationships, community and business life.

# OUR THREE AREAS OF FOCUS

In our strategy we set three particular areas of focus that we will obsess about because they are so important. Over the past year, each of our Children, Young People and Families Strategic Partnership Board meetings have focused on one of these obsessions to shape our collective direction, hear directly from young people and families, and learn from both local and national good practice.

## **Best start in life**

Giving our children the best start in life is crucial to set them up for healthy, happy and thriving lives. It includes reducing health inequalities, effective early intervention, and supporting families from conception and throughout the early years.

We're working in partnership with other forums, including the Early Help and Prevention Partnership Board and Health and Wellbeing Board, to set this as a top priority.

We have redesigned our early help service and launched a new early help assessment tool which we are rolling out across the partnership. We have launched Thrive at Five, a partnership initiative, in two of our most deprived wards to support school readiness.

## **Children in care**

The aim here is two-fold: to improve our partnership offer to children in care and care leavers, and secondly to provide effective early help to families so fewer children need to go into care. Our early help redesign and Catalyst project are designed to intervene early when families need support, while the extension of our family group conference service intends to enable more children to remain living with their family or friends.

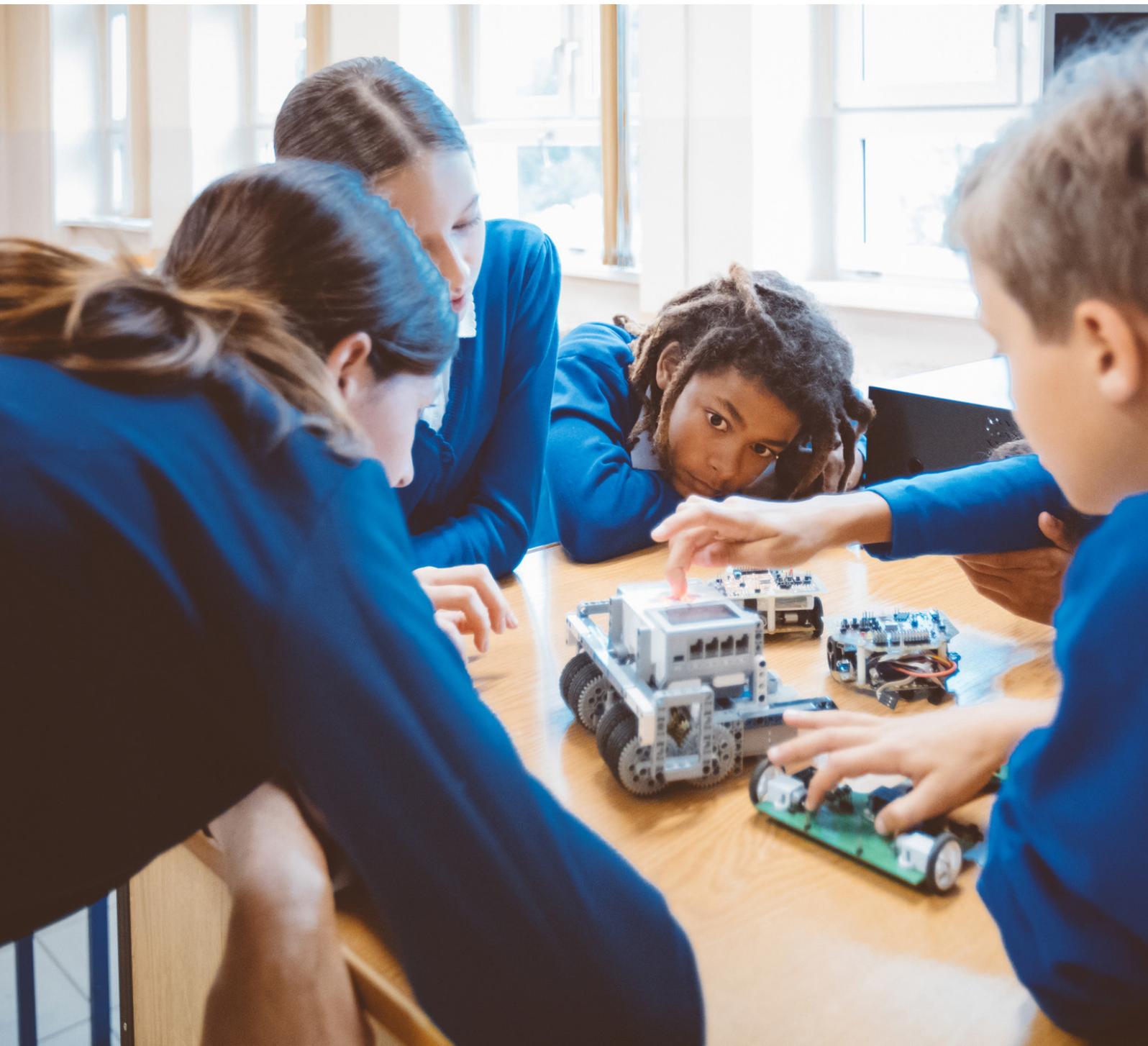
We continue our drive to recruit more in-house foster carers and are the first Fostering Friendly city, with eleven companies representing 13,000 employees signed up to support their staff to foster. We also launched our Be The Future opportunities taskforce, giving young people in care and care leavers work opportunities in the local community.

## Young people achieving more

Our improving education strategy aims to close the attainment gap and allow every pupil to reach their full potential, whatever their circumstances.

We launched our inclusion strategy which includes our graduated approach, supporting children and young people with special educational needs to receive the right support at the right time in the right place. We are working in partnership with schools to prevent exclusions and bring more children back to mainstream education so they can achieve their potential.

Our Education Challenge Board has set its priorities – excellent leadership, resilient learners, English and maths excellence – and continues to work in partnership to tackle these key issues together.



# STRATEGIC IMPACT MEASURES



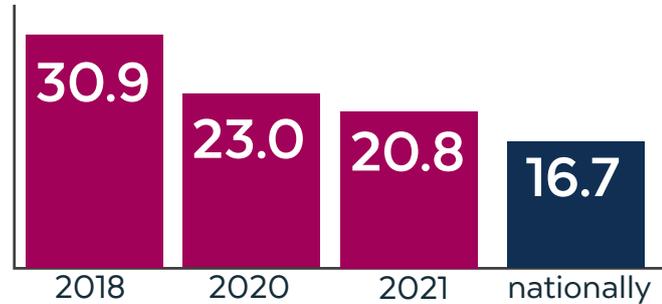
**15.8%**

of mothers smoked in pregnancy in 2021-22. This is a reduction from

**16.3%**

England avg 9.6%

Between 2018 - 21, under-18 conception rate was



In 2020/21

**3.6%**

of babies born at full-term had a low birthweight, a reduction from **4.3%** in 2019 but remaining above the national average (2.9%)



**20.2%**

of the contacts to Children's Social Care in 2021-22 were related to Domestic Abuse and Violence

this is a reduction of **4.8%** from 2020-21.

Between 2018-20 the infant mortality rate in the city was

**6.5**

deaths for every 1,000 live births,

which is a reduction from **7.5** in 2017-19. The England average is 3.9

There were

**455**

children

the subject of a

**child protection plan as at 31 March 2022**

a reduction of 49 from the previous year





There were

**1,022**

Children in Care as  
at 31 March 2022

(+18 from previous year – 1,004 children in 2021)



264 children entered care in 2021-22, an 8% decrease from 287 children the previous year.

**19.3%** of children who came into care were under the age of 1



**74** children gained permanence via **Adoption or Special Guardianship Orders** an increase from **68** children in 2020-21

✓ **21** foster carers recruited in 21/22

**251** children

ceased to be in care during 2021-22, an increase from **188** children the previous year.



**9.4%** 

of children in care had **3 or more placements** placements in the year ending March 2022 up from **8.2%** in 2021.



**60.4%**

of young people achieved a standard pass in English and Maths (9-4) at GCSE, a **3.4%** reduction on 2020

and the average Attainment 8 score at GCSE in 2022 was

**43.2**

a **2 point** reduction on 2021 (provisional data)

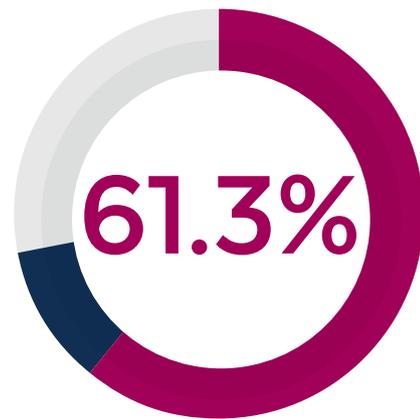
In 2020-2021

**79.7%** of children were achieving a good level of development at 2-2.5 years compared to **86.9%** in 2019-20.

In 2020/21

**85.5%** of children were achieving

the expected level in communication skills at 2-2½ years compared to **86.9%** in 2019/20



of children reached the expected level of development by the end of reception (age 5) in 2022. This is a reduction from 67% in 2019

In 2021



**48.4%**

of Care Leavers were in **Education, Employment or Training** an improvement from **42%** in 2021

Provisional permanent exclusion rate in 2021-22 was

**0.13%**

following the return of all children to school after pandemic related closures. The rate was previously **0.6%** in 2020/21

# OUR PRIORITIES FOR ACTION – PROGRESS UPDATE

Develop our early years offer so that more of our children meet their early developmental milestones and are school ready

## What we've achieved:



- Thrive at Five launched and working in the city
- Embedded good practice in early speech and language development

## Our priorities for the next year:



- Strengthen our Early Years board to offer the best quality support to our youngest children
- Deliver a best start and live well support for children, young people and their families through our family hubs including a focus on early language development, good physical and emotional health and help at the earliest opportunity

Providing our youngest children with the right support to help them be ready for school remains a priority across the partnership. There is a greater focus than ever on the importance of a child's first 1,001 days and supporting parents to provide great learning environments for their children.

Our Opportunity Area has come to an end after four years in which 42 schools benefitted from having a named speech and language therapist. The focus on closing the 'word gap' has resulted in increased confidence among practitioners and embedded good practice in schools to support early speech and language development with more children in those schools making good progress by the end of their reception year. Increased training for over 130 early years providers in teaching maths, science and literacy resulted in improved quality of support to pupils and access to high quality resources to support learning.

The speech and language therapy service has developed an early communication screening tool and delivered training to early years providers and other groups to support its use. Alongside the national Hungry Little Minds campaign, the service worked with parents locally to design over 50 activities which demonstrate small things parents can do with their baby from birth to make a

big difference to their development. The service has been engaged with the development of the Speech Language Communication Needs pathway including a website which will provide support and advice for parents and those working with children. There is a growing demand for speech and language therapy following the pandemic and its impact on children's development.

70% of eligible two-year-olds in the city take up their funded early education place, with almost all of them attending settings which have been assessed as good or outstanding. 88% of eligible three-and four-year olds take up their places, less than the regional and national average. We have produced a tool for professionals explaining eligibility for funded early education places, and why it is so important to encourage families to access their places, including improved social skills, help with speech and development and increased confidence and independence.

The 0-19 health and wellbeing service continues to support parents and carers to understand child development through the Healthy Child Programme. In the past year the service expanded its Chat Health text service for young people to include a text service for parents of children of all ages, offering an alternative way of accessing support, advice and information. In the coming year both Chat Health services will be promoted through schools, youth groups, clinics and libraries to increase use.

“We have delivered ‘Time to Talk’ and the ‘More Time to Talk’ sessions. These have made a great impact as our children have made good progress in their speech and language development. We have implemented lots of vocabulary into the learning environment, we now have more story sessions and circle times to help support children's development, the ideas have come from the training our team have attended over the year which has been amazing and very useful.”

Praise from a school for Opportunity Area activities





Our Thrive at Five programme is now active in two wards in the city and this summer saw over 400 children attend two Big Play events with their parents, with activities provided by organisations including the BBC, National Literacy Trust, Lego and Stoke City Football Club. A summer holiday programme offered at least one activity each week to children about to start nursery or school, run in collaboration with schools in each ward and supported by the Hubb Foundation. The first Community Champions, parents who will be an important part of peer-to-peer support, have been recruited and are now delivering regular Duplo Club sessions for parents and children. Nurseries and schools have begun coming together to share learning and improve practice.

Since September Thrive at Five has continued to support schools in the wards to enhance their parent engagement, through Mouse Club and “stay and play” activities. By strengthening relationships between parents and schools and building parents’ confidence and skills, the aim is to enrich home learning environments.

Our next step is to strengthen our Early Years board, working with key partners to share the best practice from these and other programmes at work in the city, and continuing to develop the quality and reach of the support we offer to our youngest children and their families.

Develop an early help offer that gives parents and families the best chance to adapt and thrive when they are struggling to cope and supports older children that have had adverse childhood experiences

**What we've achieved:**



- Redesigned our early help service and launched new group courses for parents and carers
- Launched a new early help assessment tool and framework and began rolling out training

**Our priorities for the next year:**



- Launch our first family hubs
- Embedding Outcome Star, our early help assessment model, and rolling it out to partners

We have adopted the Thrive framework as a way of working internally and re-designed our supporting families service to align teams and posts with the support our families need. Over the past year almost 2,200 early help assessments were initiated, with both city council early intervention family support teams and partners taking the lead practitioner role. We have conducted a review of our early help voluntary and community offer to identify gaps in locality provision which we will work with partners to address. We have started to roll out Outcome Star, a shared assessment framework for all partners to use with early help cases. We have also launched Family by Family, an initiative to connect seeking families with sharing families to provide peer to peer support, with 15 sharing families and 14 seeking families signed up.



“We have been so, so grateful for everything our family support worker has done. Thank you doesn't really seem a big enough word, but a massive THANK YOU for granting us the support of this service and allowing us to have the chance to meet someone so thorough, kind and understanding, helping me to find me and to rebuild our family foundations”. - Compliment from a parent for the family support service

Stoke-on-Trent has been chosen as one of the first areas to develop family hubs. Family hubs improve access and connections between families, professionals and services with a core Start for Life offer including:

- infant feeding support;
- early language and support to develop the home learning environment;
- parenting support; and
- perinatal mental health support.

We will work closely with families to develop our family hubs, involving children, young people and parents in their design and drawing on the knowledge and strength in our voluntary, community and faith sector.

The perinatal mental health workforce has been increased to enable more women and their partners to access support. Through the Better Mental Health fund, over 150 parents have accessed group sessions to provide support and social opportunities based on five key activities which promote healthy brain development, attachment and bonding. A further 30 parents experiencing mental health difficulties received targeted support through the Enjoy Your Baby programme. A number of parents have since become peer supporters to other parent and baby groups. We recently launched DadPad, an app for fathers to promote bonding and how they can support their partners in early parenthood. It includes information on topics such as feeding, coping with crying, safe sleep, awareness of mental health and knowing when, how and where to seek help locally.

Staffordshire Commissioner's Office for Police, Fire and Rescue and Crime secured funding to provide educational resources to primary and secondary schools raising awareness of violence against women and girls and the support services available. This covered issues such as name calling, personal space, photo sharing and peer pressure, as well as a virtual reality experience for secondary school pupils highlighting the consequence of different choices.

The Commissioner has also developed resources to identify and support young people presenting with harmful sexual behaviours, and continues to work with the Youth Offending Service to support young people at risk of offending. It has appointed two PSHE coordinators to help schools deliver good quality, effective lessons dealing with personal safety and behaviour, so children can make informed, positive and safe choices. Staffordshire Police worked closely with the coordinators to deliver lessons relating to exploitation and knife crime.

The Commissioner has committed to three further years funding for the Space programme, which identifies areas particularly affected by youth related crime and antisocial behaviour and offers a programme of activities to be provided in those locations during holiday periods. In 2021, over 6,000 young people accessed 1,400 activities and since the programme relaunched in 2015, there has been a 77% reduction in antisocial behaviour during the summer holidays.



We have continued to provide our Holiday Activities and Food programme, ensuring children receive positive activities alongside a meal each day during school holidays. A successful Christmas and Easter programme run in partnership between the city council and The Hubb Foundation saw almost 7,500 children accessing activities and healthy meals at over 60 different venues in the city.

Our Virtual School, which supports children in care, care leavers and other children with a social worker to achieve in education, launched our 'attachment aware, trauma informed' network in May, with training for our pilot schools beginning in the summer term. Schools will be supported to lead the project and will share practice with others, developing a whole-school approach to trauma and attachment and promoting a restorative approach to support children, help them to remain in school and improve their educational outcomes.

We are developing a directory of services for children and families in the city to launch soon and we are also supporting local voluntary and community sector organisations to bid for Youth Investment Funding to create, expand and improve local youth facilities. Following a recent inspection of our youth offending services, we will continue to deliver our annual youth justice plan and respond to inspection feedback especially around partnership working and preventative work to reduce disproportionality. Evidence suggests our rate of first-time entry to the youth justice system is reducing, and our reoffending rate is one of the lowest in the country.

## Improving health outcomes for all children and young people empowering them to make good choices and ensuring they receive the right support

### What we've achieved:



- Remodelled our health visiting and school nursing service to improve joined-up working
- Extended our support to children to promote positive mental health

### Our priorities for the next year:



- Improve our children in care and care leavers' access to routine health appointments, including seeing a dentist and optician.
- Continue to work in partnership as part of the Health and Wellbeing Board to give all children the healthiest start in life

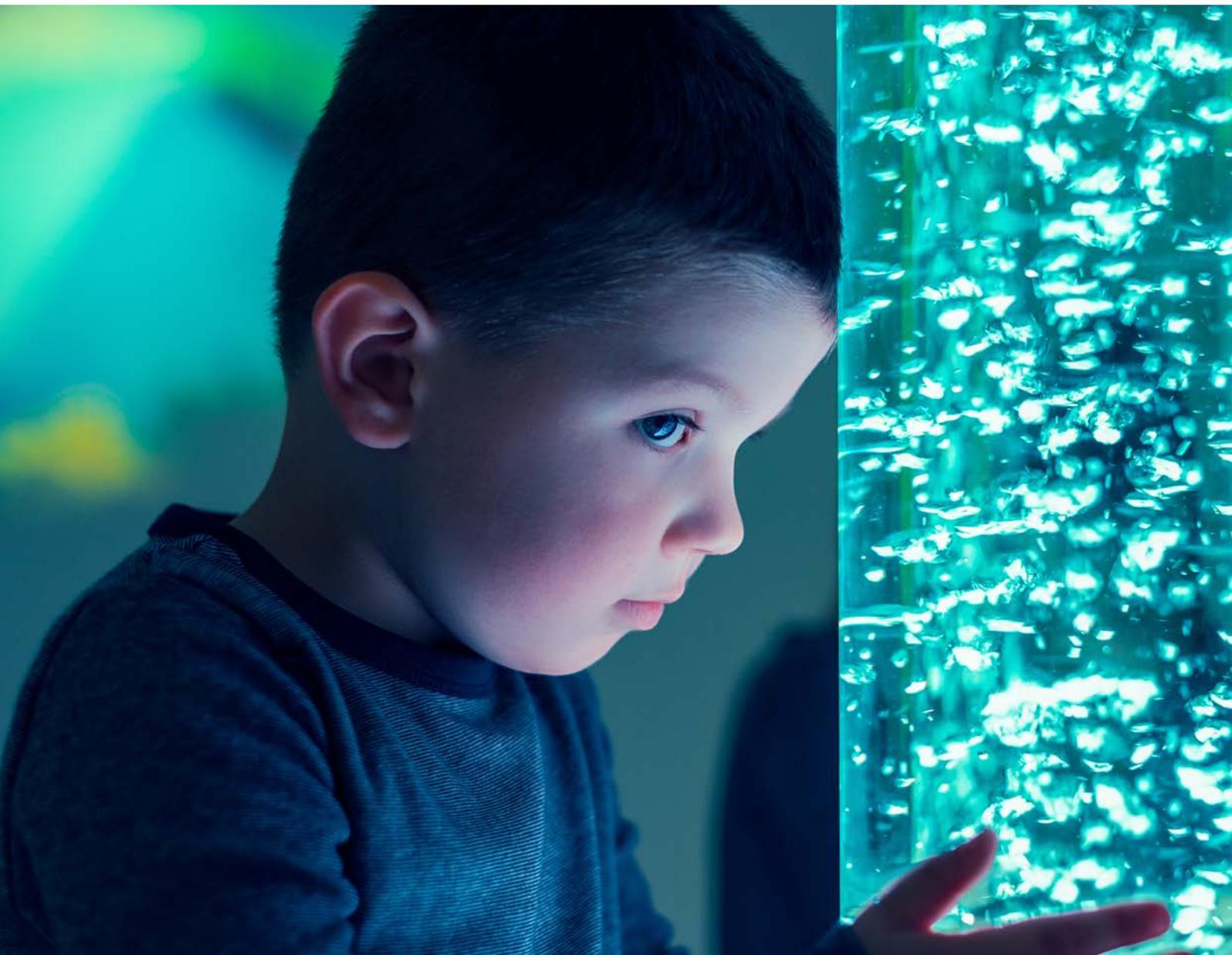
Our work to improve health outcomes for children begins before they are born. Work continues by public health to reduce the rates of women smoking in pregnancy through a targeted stop smoking service which also supports their family members. Partnership work is also underway to address difficulties with access to Healthy Start vitamins, and trialling universal provision to pregnant women in the city.

The 0-19 health and wellbeing service continues to support breastfeeding across the city including through weekly virtual support groups and working alongside our breastfeeding peer support service to increase the availability of community support for breastfeeding. Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust retained its UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative Gold Award, demonstrating a high standard of practice in supporting breastfeeding.

The 0-19 health and wellbeing service has been remodelled so health visitors and school nurses now work in integrated teams arranged in the same localities as the city council's children's services to improve joint working. School nurses have delivered fortnightly drop-ins for young people in all high schools in the city and rolled out a 'health for teens' website. The service continues to support schools with health promotion activities including undertaking CALMNESS (Comforting, Acceptance, Listened to, Mindfulness) with all Year 7 pupils to promote positive mental wellbeing and transition to high school.

Specialist community services for children have also offered enhanced support over the past year. The community diabetes team has worked with a local autism service to develop strategies to improve communication and therapeutic relationships, resulting in changes to practice. The community epilepsy service now offers a joint adult and paediatric clinic to enhance partnership working and smooth the transition for young people and families. For children and young people with asthma, developing 'asthma friendly' schools, increased training for staff and greater information and signposting for parents and carers will drive improvements in their care.

Community paediatrics has developed a specialist nurse-led sleep clinic which supports children with neurodiversity and sleep difficulties, alongside an online sleep resource for professionals and parents. The number of children with autism receiving prescription medication for sleep difficulties has reduced significantly. The service is looking to pilot offering initial advice and support through group workshops, to make the service available to a greater number of children, and offer peer support to parents. The service has also dramatically reduced waiting times for new patient appointments and close working with the early years intervention team has resulted in more children being assessed. Earlier diagnosis has enabled parents and professionals supporting children to understand and meet their needs better.





Mental health support teams linked to 32 schools in the city continue to prove successful, leading to closer collaboration between education and health services including working together to develop wellbeing and mental health policies. Over the next year the service is due to expand to more schools, resulting in thousands of young people in the city having access to support. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has seen a 32% increase in contacts. It has developed its digital services, collaborating with children to transform access to information and advice through a unique online portal resulting in reduced waiting times for services. It has also offered advice about healthy eating and exercise through its physical health clinics; and has upskilled its staff to meet a growing demand for its eating disorder service. The service continues to offer flexibility through virtual appointments. It has also recruited to a Preparing for Adulthood role, working closely with the city council, to support transition at key points of care.

A new confidential drug and alcohol support service for young people, We Are With You, is increasing its work in the city. It works closely with the teenage vulnerability team, schools and the youth offending service, attending youth groups and offering drop-ins for young people at risk.

We know some of our looked after children have not had access to routine health appointments such as dentists and opticians. We will develop a tracker for all health checks for our children in care and care leavers with the goal that all appointments are carried out without delay. We will also introduce digital health passports for all children in care and care leavers.

## Reform our Children's Services 'Front Door' so that children and families receive the right multi-agency response at the right time in the right way

### What we've achieved:



- Our new 'front door' is well established and generating conversations between professionals and families requesting or in need of a service

### Our priorities for the next year:



- Further improve our partnership working for children who go missing from home or care
- Implement a new model for our out-of-hours service

Our remodelled child protection front door (CHADS) has led to more conversations between multi-agency professionals and social workers, focused on children's needs instead of paper-based referrals.

We reviewed the service after its first year and found children and families are increasingly receiving the right help at the right time. Less children find themselves in need of statutory intervention as their needs are being met earlier, through universal services or early intervention. Organisations across the partnership have embraced the new way of working, ensuring timely information is available so staff at the front door can make informed decisions about how best to support children and families.

Recently, referrals to our front door service have increased. This reflects a national trend following increased need following the pandemic. However, the number of children being referred repeatedly has reduced and is in line with the national average. We continue to work as a partnership to raise awareness of the right services to support children at the earliest stage. Our next priority is to complete the reforms to our out-of-hours service, which are currently underway and based on a restorative approach.

Domestic abuse remains the most common reasons for contacts and referrals made to the front door. New Era, which provides a support service to victims of domestic abuse, worked with over 650 children and young people over the past year. All schools in the city have adopted Operation Encompass to provide immediate support for children and young people exposed to domestic abuse. Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce continues to provide training to domestic abuse champions in the city as part of the domestic abuse in the workplace scheme, supporting staff who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

In the 12 months to July 2022, 480 children had at least one episode of going missing from home or care. We know young people in adolescence make up the majority of children who go missing from home and care and are at highest risk of being exploited. A child exploitation and missing from care coordinator works closely with the front door team and missing children are monitored daily by a senior officer. The exploitation and missing service provided by Catch22 supported over 90% of the young people referred to it to reduce their risk-taking behaviours. The service has a growing number of volunteer mentors providing a range of support. Our Safeguarding Children Partnership is examining how effectively we are supporting missing children as part of its assurance activities.

Staffordshire Police launched its Voice of the Child campaign to ensure the child is at the forefront of officers' minds resulting in better quality initial investigations and engagement with children. It has revised its missing persons policy placing more focus on high-risk missing children and training all officers to improve the response to missing children. The police have built their relationships with local residential children's homes and report better engagement with children in care who go missing.

The police also introduced a violence reduction team, looking to reduce the risk to children from serious violence and exploitation, which is working with over 70 individuals and their families to divert them away from harm and risk. This has led to children returning to education, families being supported to move home, exploitation being identified and offenders being brought to justice.

Staffordshire Police has a detailed children protection improvement plan in place. It is promoting a 'child first, offender second' approach in custody, listening to the experiences of children who are in conflict with the criminal justice system. The force has also increased the number of officers tackling online child abuse. In the coming year, Staffordshire Police aims to increase young people's trust and confidence in the police, enhance training for staff to recognise the personal difficulties faced by children who interact with the police, and to ensure children who come into contact with the police are not disproportionately criminalised.

"We are extremely pleased with the response we get when we contact CHADS, specifically your response to our recent concern. You were very professional and listened to our concerns. We received an outcome extremely quickly with excellent advice for the family and us to follow."

Compliment from a school to CHADS

Improve the quality of social work practice so that we are confident all of our children and young people are safe and have excellent plans for progression

**What we've achieved:**



- Recruited over 70 social workers to join the council, including newly qualified and international social workers
- Delivering children's improvement plan in response to Ofsted inspection feedback and monitoring visits

**Our priorities for the next year:**



- Sustain and embed the improvements in our practice and prepare a new children's improvement plan for the coming years
- Improve the recruitment and retention of our workforce

Following a series of monitoring visits which continued to demonstrate we were moving in the right direction, Ofsted recently completed a full inspection of the council's children's services. The inspection found the experiences and progress for children in care and care leavers was good and while other areas required improvement, none were found to be inadequate. Ofsted noted the 'coordinated and relentless drive' to improve children's experiences, significant progress in the 'front door' service and in achieving permanence for children in care. The Children's Improvement Board continues to meet regularly to monitor the delivery of our improvement plan and ensure these changes are sustained.

We have launched our practice hub for children and family services staff, and our learning and development academy to support staff at every stage from newly-qualified to experienced practitioners. Our practice development forum and festival of practice week provide opportunities for learning and for staff to engage in continuous professional development, as well as celebrating the work they do. We are offering diverse career pathways with 17 staff currently undertaking a social work degree apprenticeship. Recruiting and retaining staff is a national challenge but we are developing our offer locally to make the city council an employer of choice.

We are rolling out the 'graded care profile' as a tool to improve our work with children who are at risk of neglect, and we have secured funding from the Department for Education to improve the quality of our plans for children subject to child protection plans. Another area we will be looking to improve is the transition between children and adult services for those young people who continue to need support beyond 18.

We recently brought our family group conference service back in-house to support more children being able to stay with their parents and carers or wider family and friends' network. The service also supports children to return to their families after a period of time being looked after if this is in their best interests. Using Department for Education funding, we are expanding the service to allow more families to access it.

The Safeguarding Children Partnership has set its practice and assurance priorities for the coming years which include child exploitation, neglect and missing children. It has developed a multi-agency training programme and launched its new website. We have reinvigorated the Children, Young People and Families Strategic Partnership Board and Early Help and Prevention Partnership Board to better engage partners in decision making, and we are looking at how we can improve the governance and join-up between our key partnership boards.

Our vision is for all our practice to be restorative and strengths-based with an unrelenting focus on quality. We continue to strengthen our approach to quality assurance so we know how we are doing and can use the information to drive further improvements. We will continue to work with our partners in practice, Leeds City Council, as well as taking the best practice from other local authorities to enhance our services to children and families.



Develop the best possible offer for our children in care that means they are cared for by the right people in the right home, maximising the opportunity for permanency

**What we've achieved:**



- Becoming the UK's first Fostering Friendly city
- Redesigned our Virtual School, offering holistic support for children in care's education

**Our priorities for the next year:**



- Launch our Catalyst Project pilot to support children on the edge of care
- Increase the range of placements available to our looked after children

Over the past year we have continued to look for new and innovative ways to recruit foster carers, so more children and young people can stay in the city. In July, we became the first Fostering Friendly city in the UK and eleven organisations in the city have so far signed up to the Fostering Friendly initiative, representing 13,000 employees. Following a targeted campaign we successfully recruited therapeutic, short break and emergency foster carers.

We have established our Mockingbird model, which provides sleepovers and short breaks, peer support, training and social activities for foster children, foster carers and their birth children. The programme improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.

9.4% of our looked after children experienced three or more placement moves in the past year. We continue to invest in good quality, stable and loving homes for our children in care, including bidding for funding to expand our children's home provision for children with complex health and care needs so they can stay in the city near their school and family.

"I would like to nominate her as she has made amazing progress. She is making some real good choices and decisions and her participation was excellent for her review. She was able to consider her future in a very considered manner coming up with a great plan for the next twelve months".

Nomination for our children in care awards



We are refreshing some of our key strategies, including our corporate parenting and sufficiency strategies. We have examined best practice from other areas and successfully bid for funding to develop our Catalyst Project. This will be a multi-agency service for children on the edge of care and adolescents with multiple and complex needs, offering support for the whole family including residential short breaks and emergency care for the shortest time necessary.

We are reviewing all children in care to look for opportunities for them to return home or to the care of wider family or friends. We have a renewed focus on permanency from the earliest stage which has led to more children being placed in foster to adopt placements, being adopted or living with special guardians. More children have been long-term matched with their foster carers. We are tackling delays in care proceedings, appointing a dedicated officer to move cases along and ensure children achieve permanence sooner.

Our Virtual School has now returned to the council and a new team is in post. Improvements to our personal education plans (PEPs) have ensured we are getting better outcomes for our young people. By the Spring term 2022, 87% of PEPs were considered to be of good quality, compared with just 33% in Summer 2021. We have launched a new electronic PEP system for young people aged over 16 to allow all agencies supporting them to have a centralised document to track and support them through their education so they achieve the best outcomes possible.

Young people on our children in care councils, B Heard and Vision, have been involved in the recruitment of new foster carers, and members have also begun attending the corporate parenting panel and interview panels for key staff members. We continue to promote the use of the Mind of My Own app which helps children and young people to participate and express their views on the services they use. Significantly more children are attending their statutory review meetings to share their views, with almost two-thirds of reviews attended by children this year, compared with just half the previous year.



The 0-19 health and wellbeing service provides a vital link to foster carers and parents for advice and support in relation to health needs. The speech and language therapy service has provided ‘Communicating with Confidence’ training for foster carers. CAMHS own looked after children team has recruited additional staff to increase the range of therapeutic interventions for children at risk of placement breakdown, as well as contributing a mental health perspective to placement planning and transition to adoption.

“She has been a brilliant role model to the two younger residents she has shared the home with. She will be leaving us at the end of May and we will all miss her as she has been a joy to look after”.

Nomination for our children in care awards

## Develop the best possible offer with and for our care leavers that gives them the best chance to fulfil their ambitions in life

### What we've achieved:



- Launched our Be the Future campaign, offering employment opportunities to our city's care leavers
- Held our awards to recognise the achievements of children in care and care leavers

### Our priorities for the next year:



- Work together to identify improved support for care leavers entering employment

More children in care means more care leavers, with over 400 young people being supported by our Next Steps service. We know not all of them have plans to help them achieve their aspirations and make a successful transition to adulthood, and we are working to ensure these are in place.

The 'Be The Future' pledge was launched in April, inviting businesses to commit to help young people in care and care leavers take their first steps into the world of work. 15 businesses are already supporting the pledge offering 30 work experience opportunities and we continue to identify further apprenticeship and paid work opportunities for our care leavers. We are also engaging with the uniformed services to develop bespoke career pathways for our care leavers.

In July we held our awards for children in care and care leavers, welcoming over 50 children, young people and those who are special to them for an afternoon of food, entertainment, music and celebration of their achievements.

Care leavers have told us lack of access to technology and the internet can be a barrier to accessing education and employment. Through recent government schemes we have been able to provide laptops to all care leavers who needed one. As part of our pledge to care leavers, we have secured access to free local sport and leisure activities. Our care leavers' local offer has been relaunched setting out the services and support available in the city.

More of our young people are being supported to remain with their foster carer after the age of 18 under our Staying Put arrangements. Our House Project continues to work successfully with care leavers to support them with the transition to living independently, with 39 young people successfully gaining and maintain a tenancy since the project began, and there are plans to develop the service so more young people can benefit. Specialist housing officers also support care leavers who may find it difficult to manage their own tenancy, to reduce their risk of eviction and homelessness, and a number of other young people are living successfully in supported tenancies.

Our care leavers' charity, Equal Chances, goes from strength to strength, providing experiences and opportunities including a Christmas meal and disco, and a welcome package of home and personal essentials for care leavers moving into their first home.

More of our care leavers are in education, employment and training than in previous years, but our Virtual School, Next Steps service and a specialised careers advisor continue working together to identify improved support for care leavers entering employment.





Develop and implement an inclusion strategy that makes sure all children and young people with additional needs can fulfil their potential

**What we've achieved:**



- Improved our timeliness in issuing education, health and care plans within 20 weeks
- Revised our annual review process including new documentation to encourage preparation for adulthood from Year 9 onwards
- Co-produced and launched our SEND travel assistance policy
- Held a Making Inclusion Work event to support embedding inclusion and the graduated approach

**Our priorities for the next year:**



- Revise our Local Offer
- Develop a joint commissioning strategy and plan, and work with parents, children and partners to develop a co-production charter
- Implement a quality assurance process for our education, health and care plans and annual reviews

The central theme of our new inclusion strategy is supporting young people to be the best they can be and live their lives to the fullest. The strategy was developed with partners and stakeholders, including experts by experience, and sets out how we will improve inclusion and outcomes for children and young people across Stoke-on-Trent by focusing on the areas they told us are important to them. The Inclusion Partnership Board, jointly chaired by the city council and the Integrated Care Board, will oversee implementation of the strategy. As part of our 'people first' ethos we will continue to work with families and use co-production so that we deliver the best services for our children, young people and families.

To make sure that we have a quality offer that identifies and meets needs proactively we have developed a graduated approach to support young people to stay with their peers in mainstream education as far as possible. Our aim is to have the majority of needs met using SEN support and use education, health and care plans when specialist provision is required. The graduated approach has been launched in schools and other educational settings to help identify tools and strategies that can support young people to get the most of their education. We have held a Making Inclusion Work event to help embed use of the graduated approach with further workshops planned.

We have reduced the number of education, health and care plans waiting to be issued and issued more plans on time, out-performing the national average. We were successful in bidding for additional funding from the Department for Education to develop additional school provision in Stoke-on-Trent. A new specialist unit opened in September to serve up to 25 children with autism and communication difficulties and work is beginning on the Watermill Satellite site which will eventually offer a further 70 specialist spaces. We published our new travel assistance policy, making better use of personal budgets, travel training and available fleet to increase young people's independence in travelling to school.

We are improving how we approach transitions and preparation for adulthood to capture young people's long-term aims and aspirations so that the right support can be put in place to help them achieve their goals. We want young people to have the skills and independence they need to move forwards to the next stage of their life confidently. Young people need to have choices so that they are able to acquire the right education and life and vocational skills to take their next steps and be prepared for adulthood. We are working with young people, their families and education settings to identify what barriers there are to accessing local further education provision and how those barriers can be addressed. We have scoped the current supported employment pathway landscape for SEND learners. We are working in partnership to utilise the new national Internships Work initiative.

To make sure we have the right support at the right time and place we are focusing on commissioning the right support locally, so that more children can have their needs met closer to home. We are making best use of our resources by focusing on developing our systems to support improving outcomes for children and young people and developing and supporting our workforce so that they have the skills required to support inclusion.

The city's portage service doubled the number playgroups offered, which now run weekly and in more locations. Referrals to the service have increased by over 40% over the past year, partly due to the portage offer now being made to children under 18 months which is enabling more children's needs to be identified earlier. The 0-19 health and wellbeing service supports early identification of need through developmental reviews, while a network of SEND champions has been developed to improve practice and awareness among professionals, including training to improve the quality of reports contributing to education, health and care plans and annual reviews. A learning disability and autism key worker service has also been established to support those most at risk of hospital admission.

Our all-age autism strategy will be published later this year, following consultation with families. The strategy commits to mandatory autism awareness training for health and social care staff and improved preparation for adulthood. The CAMHS ASD team has been involved in the local Autism in Schools pilot, working with three schools in the city for the benefit of children with autism, improving awareness of autism in schools and how to adapt the school environment to the needs of the child. This has resulted in school staff more readily contacting the team to request support and advice, earlier identification of children who may benefit from an assessment and developing strategies to support young people in school. Over the coming year, the service will review the referral pathway for assessment and develop support for families awaiting assessment.

**“It has been great to speak with you, thank you for all your help. Our new SENCO will undoubtedly appreciate your ongoing support next academic year”.**

Feedback from a school to the Autism in Schools pilot



## Develop and implement an educational improvement plan that uses the power of collective action and mutual support to raise standards across our provision

### What we've achieved:



- Established our Education Challenge Board
- Selected by the Department for Education as a priority education investment area

### Our priorities for the next year:



- Focus on vulnerable learners including children missing education and those in alternative provision

We have continued to deliver our Improving Education strategy, including launching the Education Challenge Board, a forum with multi-academy trusts, maintained schools, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Department for Education. This takes an innovative approach to improving education outcomes and standards in the city. The Board has agreed its priorities: maths and English excellence, leadership and resilient learners. It is also focusing on the cross-cutting themes of data, quality assurance, inclusion and transition at all stages of education. The board has engaged national leaders of education to examine local strengths and weaknesses and national best practice to inform an action plan to raise standards in the city.

The Department for Education has recognised the importance of continuing the work carried out by the Opportunity Area and designated the city as one of 24 priority education investment areas. This will bring additional investment to the city to provide targeted support to schools and meet local needs.

We are reviewing our governance arrangements with schools, ensuring education providers' views are well represented on our boards and are an integral part of our decision-making processes. The Safeguarding Children Partnership will also be launching its safeguarding in education sub-group, underlining the vital role education settings play in keeping children safe.

Some of our children are not currently taking up their places at mainstream schools and are placed in alternative provision. We are working closely with alternative providers to ensure children are receiving the education they are entitled to and with schools to reintegrate children wherever possible. We are also looking at our support for children missing education, and for those who are electively home educated. We are also improving our approach to school place planning to ensure the right places are available and better understand demand for school places in the city.

## Significantly improve our education, training and work offer for 16-25s including quality of further education

### What we've achieved:



- Engaged a range of partners to develop our 14-25 learning and skills strategy
- Careers Hub offering preparation and inspiration for the world of work

### Our priorities for the next year:



- Publish our 14-25 strategy and delivery plan
- Broaden Be The Future to support more young people including those with disabilities and those in contact with the youth justice system

We have developed a young people's learning and skills strategy with partners to shape further education and training options to meet business demand in the city and design clear pathways to access provision.

Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Careers Hub continues to bring employers and educators together, training and supporting careers leaders and sharing practical tools and resources. Its Hub Fund has delivered innovative projects tackling persistent absence, challenging stereotypes in STEM, health, social care and the arts and making links between the national curriculum and industry. Almost all secondary schools in the city are engaged in the Careers Hub. Each is linked to at least one local or national business as their enterprise adviser who helps develop their careers and enterprise plan and link them into the changing landscape of the world of work. Cornerstone Employers including the city council, Integrated Care Board, University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust and Stoke City Football Club work with the Careers Hub to ensure young people have the opportunities they need to be prepared and inspired for their future careers.



“He hasn't stopped smiling since his first day!”

Feedback from a foster carer after a young person's work placement began through Be The Future



Staffordshire Commissioner's Office for Police, Fire and Rescue and Crime commissioned The Prince's Trust to engage young people at risk of offending and victims of crime to improve their health and wellbeing, lifestyles, confidence and employment prospects. Over the past 12 months, the Trust supported 205 young people, with around half achieving a positive outcome.

Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Enterprise Partnership launched a range of publications and informational webinars to promote T-Levels to young people and organisations in the area.

Our all-age autism strategy also commits to strengthening and promoting pathways to employment for young people aged 14-25 with autism. This includes supported internships, traineeships and apprenticeships.

We recently hosted our Aspiration Summit. This offered a chance for job seeking adults and those still in school to meet with local employers and find out about their vacancies in the city. Large employers including the Home Office, Integrated Care Service and Willmott Dixon attended to discuss the skills landscape and how to access their industries. A dedicated section for Be The Future involving careers advisors, personal advisors and social workers promoted opportunities exclusively to care leavers and other vulnerable young people. Over the coming year we aim to broaden our Be The Future pledge to include other young people who experience barriers to entering the workforce, including those with special educational needs.

# OUR PARTNERS

This report was produced as a partnership and we wish to thank the following organisations for their contributions:

- Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board
- University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust
- Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
- North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust
- Staffordshire Police
- Staffordshire Police, Fire and Rescue and Crime Commissioner
- Staffordshire University
- Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Enterprise Partnership
- Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Careers Hub
- Thrive at Five

