

Influencing systems across the leisure sector

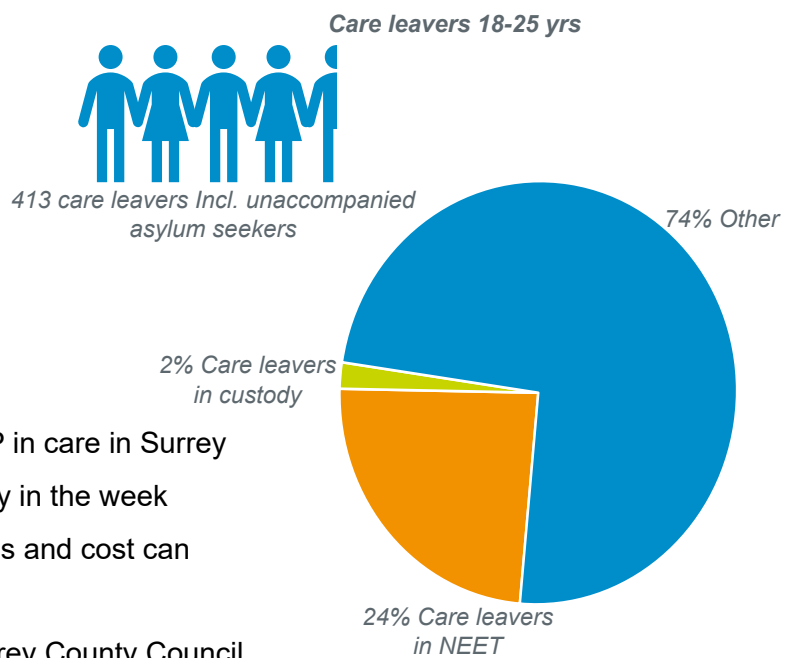
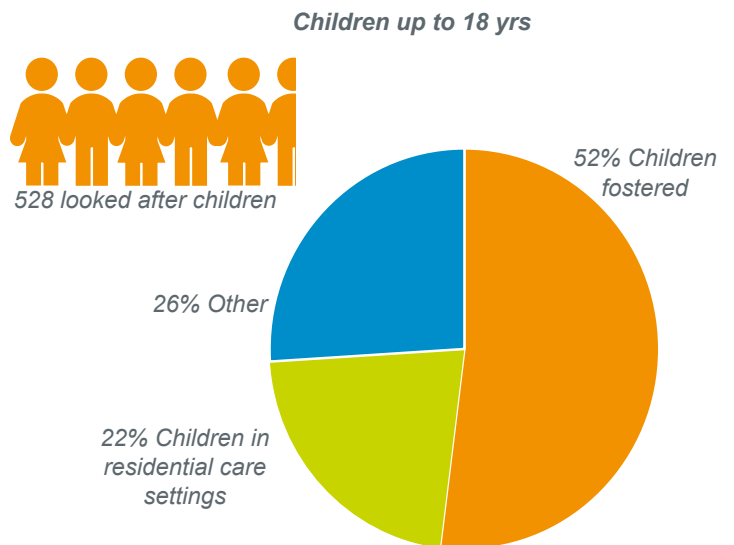
Background

Children and young people (CYP) in care often bring greater health risks and problems than their peers due to poverty, abuse and neglect. About 60% of children and young people in care have emotional and mental health problems including low self esteem, with a high proportion experiencing poor outcomes after leaving care. 92% of social workers in Surrey cited emotional and mental health as some of the main health needs of CYP in care, including trauma-related needs, self-harm and low self esteem. 189 clients who accessed a local substance misuse service during a 12 month period had 'looked after' status (44% of all those helped).

Activity levels

Previous research found that almost a fifth of CYP in care in Surrey did not undertake any effortful exercise on any day in the week before the survey. Awareness of local opportunities and cost can often be limiting factors.

Under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 Surrey County Council (SCC) must adhere to seven principles for CYP in care, including promoting their health and wellbeing and preparing them for independent living. Essentially, SCC and its local authority partners have a responsibility to ask **“Would this be good enough for my child?”**.



How we responded

One of the services within the remit of local authority partners (LAs) is their leisure centres. We worked across all 11 borough/district councils in Surrey to coordinate a universal leisure offer (discounted/free access) to council run leisure centres for looked after children, foster families and care leavers.

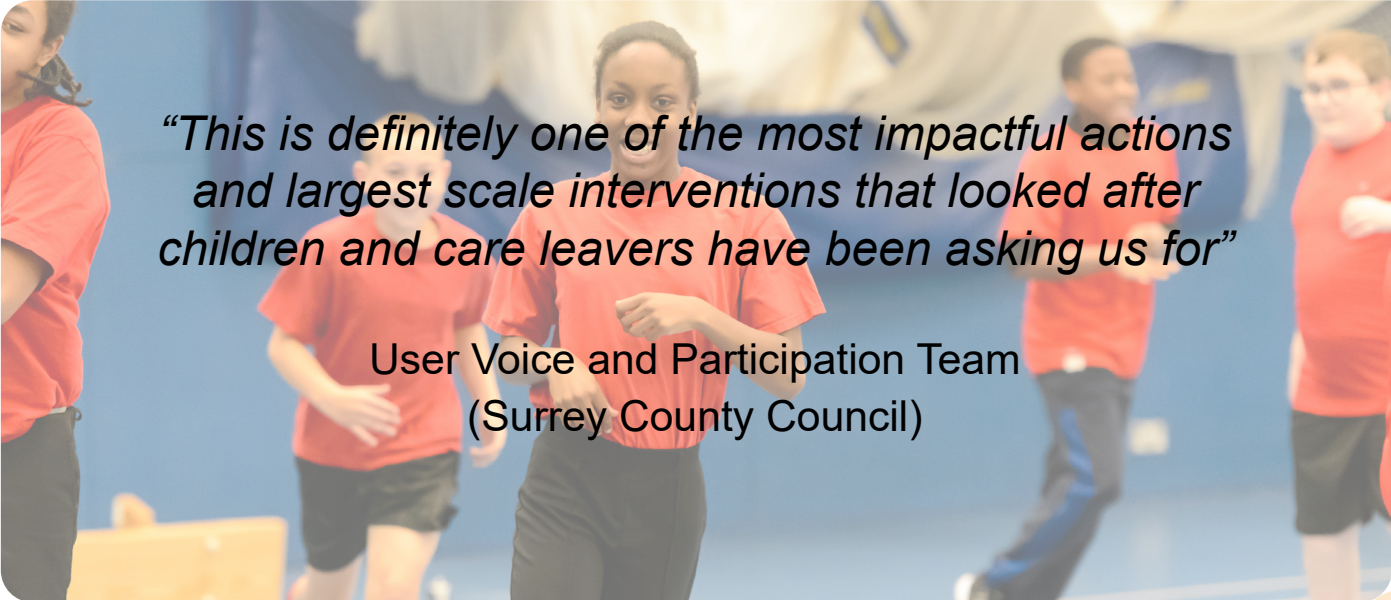
This topic has been 'live' for over 10 years, but a consensus has never been reached. At the outset, five out of 11 LAs had different concessions, while six had no offer at all. Of the offers in place, very few young people or foster families are aware of them.

Active Surrey engaged with the new Corporate Parenting Manager at SCC and established a task and finish group mid 2021, raising the issue formally with the LAs once again. At the same time consultation took place with service managers and representatives of foster families, as well as young people with lived experience.

The Task and Finish Group escalated the issue with the motion passed at full (County) Council and unanimously adopted.

Another LA body (Chief Executives Forum) were positive, although had further questions relating to practicalities and bottom-line impact.

We worked with an SCC Cabinet Member who wrote to all LA Leisure Portfolio Holders to make them aware of these discussions, while another Executive Director attended a more specific discussion with Chief Leisure Officers to allay any concerns.



“This is definitely one of the most impactful actions and largest scale interventions that looked after children and care leavers have been asking us for”

User Voice and Participation Team
(Surrey County Council)

What we achieved

All 11 local councils have now agreed in-principle support for the scheme. As part of the deal we offered to fund an SCC administrator to support the operation of the scheme at a county level. We are aiming to launch in June 2022.

Moving this issue out of the ‘too difficult’ box means all parties can have a genuine impact on some of the most disadvantaged young people in the county.



What we learned

Initially some LAs felt this was a county responsibility and there was some uncertainty between the different tiers of authority concerned. We also had to balance the views of the different parties involved in a way which overcame their concerns but still delivered on the ultimate goal.

Overall, cost and / or lost revenue was the biggest perceived barrier. Yet spending on leisure is not something that the target audience generally prioritises - with a consequent impact on their physical and mental health.



What next?

The next priority is to increase awareness and up take of this offer amongst looked after children, foster families and care leavers. To address this, a joint comms campaign is being planned between local authority partners.

We have also begun work on a bike scheme for the same cohort, funded from our remaining CYP budget. This is a significant investment into young people’s wellbeing, giving them a means to have fun, travel further and gain greater independence. It also opens up potential employment opportunities for care leavers.

