

Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children in Care and Care Leavers 2022-24

UPDATE

Presentation to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

7th January 2025



Introduction

- Durham’s strategic approach to securing sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of our looked after children and care leavers.
- Sufficiency Duty: “as stated in section 22G of the Children Act 1989, to take steps to secure, as far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for looked after children within their local authority area”.
- Outlined the sufficiency position at a point in time – using local intelligence, data and emerging priorities.
- 2-year period (2022-2024) focusing on our current offer, challenges, gaps in services / provision and the actions identified to address these.
- Update report focuses on the achievements and progress made against the actions within the current strategy, our current position and the work we are carrying out to help shape and inform our new Sufficiency Strategy

Context

- Since the development of our last strategy in 2022, the children’s social landscape has changed
- Increasing demand and pressure on councils to meet their sufficiency duty and significant pressure on council budgets, which is replicated across the country
- A series of national reviews looking at the needs, experiences and outcomes of children supported by social care and the expansion of the for-profit sector to meet children’s accommodation needs (Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, Competitions & Markets Authority Children’s Social Care Market Study)
- DfE’s new policy paper – ‘Keeping children safe, helping families thrive’ published in Nov 2024, sets out key principles for reform, including:
 - Children should remain with their families and be safely prevented from entering care in the first place
 - Support children to live with kinship or foster carers rather than residential care
 - Fix the broken care market – improving competition, regulation, commissioning and challenge the levels of profit being made
- National reform is being initiated, resulting in new legislation – “Children’s Wellbeing Bill” – supporting a range of improvement measures

Challenges

- CIC numbers continue to increase (by 62% between 2015 and 2022; 1,034 October 2022; 1,192 in November 2024)
- Increasing number of older teenagers coming into care, difficulties finding suitable provision
- Complexity of needs – specialist provision
- Use of external children’s homes has increased
- Reduction in foster carers
- Increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)
- Placement stability – breakdowns and placement moves
- Increasing children in care budget pressures (£30m CIC in 2020 increasing to a forecast of £74m in 2024)

Key Priorities within the current strategy

1. Grow our in-house foster carers, support retention of carer and work with Independent Fostering Agencies to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it's in their interests to do so
2. Increase the number of adopters
3. Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer
4. Develop access to a diverse range of appropriate accommodated for care leavers
5. Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC
6. Broaden our short breaks offer for disabled children and their families

Achievements and Progress

- Governance strengthened through the development of the Corporate Sufficiency Board (now the Durham Care Board)
- Thematic workstreams to drive forward a range of work programmes

Fostering

- 25 new foster care households in 2023/24
- Recruitment and retention continues to be a significant focus
- Fostering North-East – working collaboratively to recruit foster carers (12% increase in enquiries in Durham)
- Mockingbird Model in the Fostering Service developed – improved support offer (3rd constellation developed, with 4th constellation being recruited to)
- Recommissioned our regional Fostering Framework in 2023 – encourage new providers to join

Achievements and Progress

In-house Children's Homes

- New smaller homes, given the increase in demand, increasing use of external children's homes and rising external placement costs
- 3 x new smaller homes created over the last year, creating accommodation for up to 6 CYP. A fourth home is due to open in March 2025
- Edge of Care home – all works complete – to open by March 2025. DfE funding secured
- Home for young children to support transition into foster care – open June 2025
- Acquisition of a new property – to re-provide our Moorside Children's Home
- Home for CYP with learning disabilities – to open later in 2025

Achievements and Progress

- Design work has commenced to support us to re-open our Framwellgate Moor Home – operational in later 2025
- New short breaks home for CYP with disabilities – feasibility study complete in January 2025
- Staying Close – pilot programme that offers support to YP as they transition from their children’s home – 14 YP supported. DfE funding secured

Independent Children’s Homes

- Durham First – working closely with private children’s homes in Durham to give us better access to local homes (40 beds of which 30 are used by Durham CYP)
- Residential Provider Forum – well attended, open conversations and promoting partnership working

Achievements and Progress

Supported Accommodation and UASC developments

- Supported Accommodation provider Panel extended to give us time to consider the new regulatory requirements
- Working closely with providers to ensure they take the necessary steps to regulate their services with Ofsted
- Continued to work closely with providers to grow and expand services so they can meet our needs
- We have the largest proportion of UASC in the region. Developed new provision with providers, including block arrangements to guarantee access
- Creation of a dedicated team to case manage our UASC. Work of the new team has been externally validated by Ofsted and described as high quality and culturally sensitive

Achievements and Progress

Short Breaks for disabled children and families

- Short Breaks Strategy and action plan developed
- Additional resources invested to improve capacity within the work programme
- Improved access to short breaks – acknowledged in our recent SEND inspection with good practice identified
- Universal short breaks offer – grown by supporting small organisations with grant funding
- SEND fun and food programme to maximise opportunities for children with SEND
- Holistic and personalised approach – commissioned flexible support solutions that can respond to need for children with non-assessed needs, and to those with specialist and enhanced needs

Current Position

- Following an increasing number of CIC and increasing spend (£30m in 2020 increasing by 143% to a forecast year end of £74m in 2024), Newton Europe have been supporting us with some initial diagnostic work
- 143% increase in CIC spend has been driven by caseload growth (23%), placement mix (30%) and a rise in unit cost (47%)
- Mitigating actions to reduce CIC placement spend are planned such as the new edge of care home, increasing in-house children's home capacity and increasing in-house foster care capacity, however even with these development, forecast expenditure is still estimated to increase
- Further mitigations to reduce forecasted spend are currently being planned:
 - More edge of care support – targeted and intensive – reducing the number coming into care
 - Permanence out of care – support CYP to leave care at the right time for them
 - Increasing the number of in-house foster carers
 - Reducing the number of children escalating from family-based placements in care to residential homes
 - Sustainable pricing – the right cost for provision

Current Position

- New work programmes are considering these areas, which will be launched in January 2025
- Additional intervention is required to support our overall reduction in the number of children in care and to support children to remain at home where it is safe to do so
- Work programmes will help to influence and shape our new Sufficiency Strategy and its Action Plan, which will be produced in early 2025

Discussion:

(i) Observation or comments from the Committee about the detail within the report.