

Sufficiency of Placements for Children Looked After

Report of the Chief Officer Children's Services

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Cabinet (and confirmation under the provisions of the Council's Constitution) before taking effect.

Recommendation:

Members of the committee are requested to:

- Consider this report providing an update on the current position with regard to placements and the work in progress to improve placement sufficiency and develop a multi-disciplinary 'Edge of Care' approach.

1. Background/Introduction

- 1.1 In delivering our Corporate Parenting responsibilities and in achieving good outcomes for Children Looked After (CLA) it is vital that we can meet their accommodation needs.
- 1.2 Sufficiency can be defined as access to the right number or type of provision to meet the needs of CLA. Firstly, Local Authorities need to ensure that only the right children are looked after. This is done by effective preventative and early help structures but also family support to return children home as quickly as possible. Secondly Local Authorities need to be able to access a range of provision to ensure the right match of provision for their childrens needs. More provision than demand is required/desirable to meet a broad range of needs at any one time.
- 1.3 The principles that drive our Social Work practice is that **Children are best brought up in families**, with local, place based support when needed. Where children can't be brought up in their birth family, timely permanent arrangements for them will be secured.

2. **Family Based Care**

- 2.1 There is a national shortage of 7,000 foster carers (Fostering Network, National Stocktake) with the Devon in-house fostering service competing with each Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) to recruit and retain from the same pool of potential carers.

- 2.2 The in-house fostering service has 356 approved places in total. The service has developed therapeutic wrap around services which is impacting positively on placement stability for this group of children. An increase in the number of in-house foster placements will prevent use of Independent Fostering Agency. Recruitment is on-going for in house fostering with a new Digital Advertising Campaign and Social Media posts. The impact of this will be measured.
- 2.3 We have placed 186 of our children with external foster placements. This includes access to placements with 15 different agencies. A re-tender of the Independent Fostering Framework is in the process of award for May 2018. This is an agreement in partnership with Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay.
- 2.4 This tender has resulted in development plans for each provider which will increase sufficiency and capability of carers. The tender should also have achieved good value for money however the impact of prices being held below market rate for the last six years has resulted in price rises. With many of the providers increasing foster carer rates and support services. This is further evidence of the competitive nature of the recruitment of carers. The mitigation for these price increases is to increase use of providers with the more favourable rates.
- 2.5 The quality of the IFA market is good with independent fostering services currently represented as 100% at 'Good' or better. This has been a sustained position of this market within Devon. The national average for this market is 84% at 'Good' or better.
- 2.6 The capacity for placements needs to continue to grow, with a focus on the ability of carers to meet the needs of children with multiple vulnerabilities and complexity. There is limited capacity to respond to crisis and complex needs. The impact of lack of sufficiency in the number or right type of fostering placements results in an increased use of residential care. This can be as much as four times the weekly cost of a foster placement. The further development of our in-house service is designed to cap escalating costs as well as improving outcomes. Further, the development plans with each of the IFA's will set out their response to meeting need in partnership with other services such as CAMHS.

3. Residential Children's Homes

- 3.1 The national crisis in the residential care market for children's services has been well reported.
- 3.2 Providers say they have difficulty recruiting care workers and managers with the right skills and experiences. Currently the local market is not able to meet the needs of the most challenging. A particular area of concern for Devon is access to emergency and crisis assessment placements locally.
- 3.3 Devon is part of a Peninsula arrangement where the collective purchasing power of the five partner authorities is used to lever growth from local and national providers and to encourage new providers to the area. Devon is one of five placing authorities that commission the South West Peninsula

Framework which includes Somerset, Cornwall, Torbay and Plymouth. This framework currently has 24 providers of Children's Homes each with multiple provisions. Over the last three years we have seen an impact on the number of beds in Devon dropping as low as 67 but now with a sustained market development plan increasing again to 103 residential childrens home beds.

- 3.4 The drop in numbers was in large part due to the impact of inadequate Ofsted judgements. This resulted in providers placing restrictions on themselves in the number of beds available to the market, Ofsted placing restrictions and compliance notices on providers, or providers moth balling provision due to recruitment and retention issues. As at 'December 17' 79% of Children's Homes within Devon were graded by Ofsted to be Good or Better. This sits just below the national average of 81% and has been a variable picture in recent months (see Annex A).
- 3.5 Devon manages quality assurance with providers by working closely with cross border agencies, commonly other placing authorities and partner agencies such as health and the Police. Where there are organisational failings, these are addressed often with representatives at CEO level.
- 3.6 The collaborative efforts from the Peninsula authorities for quality assurance and support to providers has seen a number significantly improve. However, in Somerset we have seen a national provider reduce capacity by 70% in the last quarter. Their CEO has in place a three-year turnaround plan. This remains a volatile area with a reliance on providers securing private sector investment to increase investment in skills and capability of staff and address quality concerns.
- 3.7 Access to our current supply of residential placements, whilst improved, is impacted by the demand for services from other authorities. Plymouth and Torbay have seen a threefold increase in the use of residential in the last three years, Cornwall place into Devon because of poor sufficiency within their own county. Somerset place into Devon due to the quality of some provision as detailed above.
- 3.8 This lack of choice of placements means that some children do not have adequate choice of where they can best live to match their needs. This impacts on stability because placements that are not properly matched are more likely to break down, or because social workers may need to place children in short-term placements before an appropriate long-term placement can be identified.
- 3.9 A single solution is not sufficient to address this mix of complex issues. We are undertaking several strategies in parallel. These will adapt and flex as the market shifts and changes.
 - 1) Edge of Care Services and Early Help
Continuing to strengthen early help services with a particular focus on wrap around support to placements, support to return home and step down to family based care. Also, successful preventative measures will be identified to continue to prevent children coming into care.

- 2) Market Development
Continued relationship management with the sector to achieve growth in placements to meet the needs of Devon's children and take forward plans to secure beds in Devon for our exclusive use.
- 3) Market Management and Quality Assurance. Increasing the quality of the provisions to therefore increase access to local care which can offer high quality and stable placements.

4. Current activity to improve placement sufficiency and develop an 'Edge of Care' approach.

- 4.1 Vivien Lines has been commissioned to examine our placement sufficiency, to consider whether we need to open in-house capacity and to develop proposals for a multi-disciplinary 'Edge of Care' approach.
- 4.2 The activity to date has included an examination of:
 - the profile of our children in care and our placement mix;
 - the utilisation of residential capacity in Devon and the Peninsula by Devon County Council;
 - the profile of currently approved in house foster carers
 - recruitment and retention within the fostering service;
 - meetings with a range of partner agencies to scope the potential for a multi-disciplinary 'Edge of Care' approach.
- 4.3 A discussion paper providing an update on the work is currently with the Head of Commissioning and the Head of Children's Social Care for consideration and decisions about next steps.
- 4.4 Representatives of a range of agencies have been invited to participate in a workshop in April 2018.
- 4.5 Initial activity has highlighted that the service could make changes to the overall brokerage of placements (including commissioning, contract management, placement planning, and quality assurance of placements) that could contribute to a more efficient and proactive approach in the future and work has already commenced to review the current processes and to make changes where required. At this time the evidence does not argue in favour of opening in-house capacity, this will be kept under review.
- 4.6 In addition to the development of an Edge of Care model and proposals to improve placement sufficiency, the completed work will also lead to the production of a sufficiency strategy.

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972: LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

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