

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 June 2023

Present:-

Councillors S Aves (Chair), P Sanders (Vice-Chair), T Adams, J Bradford, J Brazil, I Hall, L Hellyer (remote), F Letch MBE, L Samuel and M Squires

Apologies:-

Councillors P Bullivant, C Channon, G Gribble, P Maskell and J Wilton-Love

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillors J Hart and A Leadbetter

* 90 **Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

* 91 **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2023 be signed as a correct record.

* 92 **Chair's Announcements**

(a) The Chair welcomed Mrs Ruth Saltmarsh who was attending the meeting in her capacity as Co-opted member of the Council's Standards Committee to observe and monitor compliance with the Council's ethical governance framework.

(b) Ms Claire Platt, the Church of England Co-opted representative, had tendered her resignation from the Committee, and thanks were extended to Ms Platt for her time on the Committee and the contributions she made. The Diocese would advise a replacement in due course.

* 93 **Public Participation**

In accordance with the Council's Public Participation Rules, the Committee received and acknowledged oral representations made by Nicola Cardwell Brewin, Elaine Davis-Kimble, Caroline Bolingbroke and Astrid Harding on a matter to be considered by the Committee that day, namely the SEND Improvement Plan. In short, their respective representations covered:

- Concerns there had been no improvement in the EHCP process one year on from the last Joint Local Area SEND Inspection.
- Concern about the recent SEND survey produced by PCFD and explaining the concept for a survey to be produced by Devon SEND Parents and Carers for Change.
- Commenting on the EHCP Hub; and communication in regard to SEND.
- A range of 'lived testimony' statements from parents and carers of children with SEND living in Devon.

The Chair responded, thanking each for their attendance and presentations which would be taken into account by the Committee during its subsequent deliberations.

* **94** **Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Committee was updated as to the Work Programme and it was agreed to add the following item(s):

- Exeter University post pandemic research
- Young Carers

Members noted that Children's Services currently had limited capacity due to dealing with priority matters.

* **95** **Election of Commissioning Liaison Member**

In line with the recommendations of the 'Scrutiny in a Commissioning Council' Task Group Report, the Committee was asked to select a Commissioning Liaison Member, whose role was to work closely with the relevant Cabinet Members and Chief Officers/Heads of Service, developing a fuller understanding of commissioning processes, and to provide a link between Cabinet and Scrutiny on commissioning and commissioned services.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Aves, **SECONDED** by Councillor Samuel and

RESOLVED that Councillor Sanders be re-appointed as the Commissioning Liaison Member for the Children's Scrutiny Committee for the ensuing year.

* **96** **SEND Improvement Plan - Progress on Task Group Recommendations**

(Councillor Leadbetter attended in accordance with Standing Order 25(1) and spoke to this item at the invitation of the Committee.)

The Committee received a presentation on the SEND Task Group Recommendations: Linked to the SEND Improvement Plan. The Improvement Plan had been considered by the Committee at its last meeting.

The presentation highlighted:

- Staff caseloads to be reduced to the average of our demographic neighbours, and no more than 200 per officer.
- There were currently 8,412 learners with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). 16 permanent vacancies had been successfully recruited to, starting in September. There was currently an interim team working on the backlog of annual reviews.
- Approximately 200 requests for assessment were received each month, so the number of EHCPs was growing and would continue to do so.
- A more streamlined template for the EHCP, going back to basics, which would be piloted later in the year.
- Various training was being rolled out across the team including subject specific training regarding EHCPs and annual reviews.
- The service structure would be reviewed and the direction of travel was to have one team, with good practice to align around schools rather than postcodes.
- The EHCP Hub was being looked at to see how it could be made more user friendly.
- HR were working with the service to ensure good practice in recruitment and retention.
- Emphasis on the importance of working with the Commissioner and national partners on the issue of the safety valve debt which was linked to SEND improvement.

Questions and discussion points with Members and Officers included:

- The Service was working hard to drive forward the Plan at a greater pace, but it was recognised that progress would take time.
- The capacity of the health system in carrying out assessments around e.g. autism, which remained a national issue. An NHS presentation had been given to the Improvement Board to address these challenges, which Officers undertook to circulate to the Committee.
- A governance review around Children's Services was developing and was seen as imperative going forward.
- There was a large backlog of education psychology assessments which were needed for EHCPS and although there was a national shortage of educational psychologists, a number had been recruited.

* 97

Ofsted Monitoring Visit Letter

(Councillor Leadbetter attended in accordance with Standing Order 25(1) and spoke to this item at the invitation of the Committee.)

The Committee received the Ofsted letter, which summarised the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon Children's Services on 18 and 19 April 2023. This had been the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority had been judged inadequate in January 2020.

Areas covered by the visit were of the progress made in the quality and impact of services for children in care, with a particular focus on the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Permanence planning for children
- The quality and timeliness of life-story work
- The assessment of children looked after placed with parents
- Strategic oversight and grip on areas for improvement and oversight by senior leaders, including case audits and supervision.

The letter detailed the headline findings and evaluation of progress, noting positive areas of progress and areas that still required improvement.

Questions and discussion points with Members and Officers included:

- The timely permanency planning for children in care remained a concern and area of improvement and, although the Corporate Parenting Strategic Partnership Board had significantly improved, there remained wider partnership work to do.
- Important to note that there was a permanent Director of Children's Services starting in September and a Deputy Director of Social Care starting in mid-July to continue the improvement journey, working closely with the Commissioner in managing the transition.
- Officers commented that there were no quick wins or easy fixes but were focused on ensuring the wellbeing of staff and ensuring good, consistent practice across the service.

The Committee noted the progress being made.

* 98 **Children's Services Improvement Plan**

The Committee received the Devon Children's Services Improvement Plan April 2023 – March 2024.

The Devon Improvement Partnership Board was established by the Department for Education in 2020 in response to an Inadequate rating from Ofsted for Children's Social Care Services. The role of the Board was to direct, prioritise, measure and hold accountability for the Improvement Plan and the Devon improvement journey.

In March 2023, the Board agreed to reset its focus and approach to:

- Clarify and create shared understanding of the role and purpose of the Board, particularly with new system leaders and Board members.
- Create the condition for Board meetings to focus on key outcomes and associated actions.

- Create partnership priorities, outcomes and actions to become part of the Devon Children's Services Improvement Plan.

As part of this reset, the strategic Improvement Plan had been updated to incorporate:

- Children's Services Action Plan
- DCC Corporate Services Action Plan
- Partnership Action Plan.

The Improvement Plan set out priority outcome areas for Children's Services, at a strategic and operational level, namely: Change, Leadership, Engagement and Workforce.

Questions raised and discussion with Members and Officers included:

- The challenges of progressing the Improvement Plan, such as being focussed on key elements around staffing, where there was a large number of agency workers and how permanent workers could be secured.
- Confidence that Devon Children's Services, under its new leadership, would have the resources and capacity to achieve the required improvements. However, staffing was critical especially in North Devon due to lack of accommodation and District partners had oversight of this.
- That the Council were supporting the post pandemic research work currently being undertaken by Exeter University - schools were dealing with a lot of post pandemic children but lacked resources, staffing and funding.
- How workforce challenges and the high reliance on agency social workers would impact improved outcomes, the offer from the Social Work Academy on growing own staff; and looking at mentoring for children in care.
- How the Committee could provide additional support to improve progress by inviting partner colleagues to attend Scrutiny, and to focus on good practice and learning from that to develop confidence.

RESOLVED that the Improvement Plan be added to the Work Programme so progress could be monitored.

* 99

Sufficiency Initiatives for Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People

The Committee considered the report and presentation given by the Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing on Sufficiency Initiatives for Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People (presentation attached).

The Council had recently secured funding following the submission of two successful bids to the Department of Education (DFE) for the following initiatives:

- The DFE Children's Home Capital Programme – the Council had been awarded capital funding of £733,354 to develop Welland Children's Home and a new children's home at The Link Centre to create five new 52-week placements for complex needs children in care.
- The DFE Staying Close Programme – the Council had secured a grant of £1,147,106 in May 2023, to be used over the next two years to pilot supported accommodation for care experienced young people.

The Committee were asked to consider and comment on the sufficiency initiatives and to review the next steps for each project, as outlined in the report.

Discussion followed with Members and Officers including the greater role that could be played by the Council and District partners, which was being taken forward by the Team Devon agenda.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Sanders, **SECONDED** by Councillor Hall and

RESOLVED that the Committee welcomes the sufficiency initiatives outlined in the report and recommends the programme to Cabinet when it considers the report in July.

* 100

Children's Standing Overview Group

The Committee received the report from the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group held on 18 April 2023.

***DENOTES DELEGATED MATTER WITH POWER TO ACT**

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 1.16 pm



Homes for Children's Update Report

Scrutiny Committee
6 June 2023

Restorative Devon



Devon Children in Residential Care – Numbers

Cohort of Young People	March 2020	April 2022	Sept 2022	Jan 2023	March 2023	May 2023
Residential	70	101	90	109	104	102
Percentage Placed Outside of Devon County Council			43%		41%	41%
		July 2022		Jan 2023	March 2023	May 2023
Children in Care - 'Unregulated' Placements		20		11	13	10



Children in Residential Care – Cost of Placements

	Ave. Cost Per Week
Devon Children in Care (2020-21)	£4,844
Devon Children in Care (March 2022)	£5,906
Top 20 High Cost Placements (September 2022)	£12,617
Top 20 High Cost Placements (March 2023)	£12,358.
Cohort of children identified for new children’s homes (May 2023)	£13,465

The high cost for DCC children in residential care reflects the limited supply of placements for complex needs children in care in Devon and in South-West England.



Improvement Actions

Outcomes:

- Improve sufficiency across all sectors, with a focus on internal provision / build.
- Develop our providers to better manage our young people.
- Better systems and processes to secure placements and track children and young people on their journey.
- Develop Provider Panel to secure placements for high needs young people.



Children in Residential Care – National Context

In 2022, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) completed a market study of children's social care provision, [CMA Report: England Summary](#). The study concluded:

'.... a lack of placements of the right kind, in the right places, means that children are not consistently getting access to care and accommodation that meets their needs.'

'It is clear to us that the residential care market is not working well and that it will not improve without focused policy reform.'

Page 5
Following the interim CMA fundings and the related Independent Review of Children's Social Care, [Independent Social Care Review](#), the DFE announced the Children's Home Capital Grant Fund for local authorities for the creation of additional residential capacity.

Following an unsuccessful bid in Wave 1 of the DFE Capital Fund, Devon County Council were successful in securing £733,354 of DFE capital following a Wave 2 application.

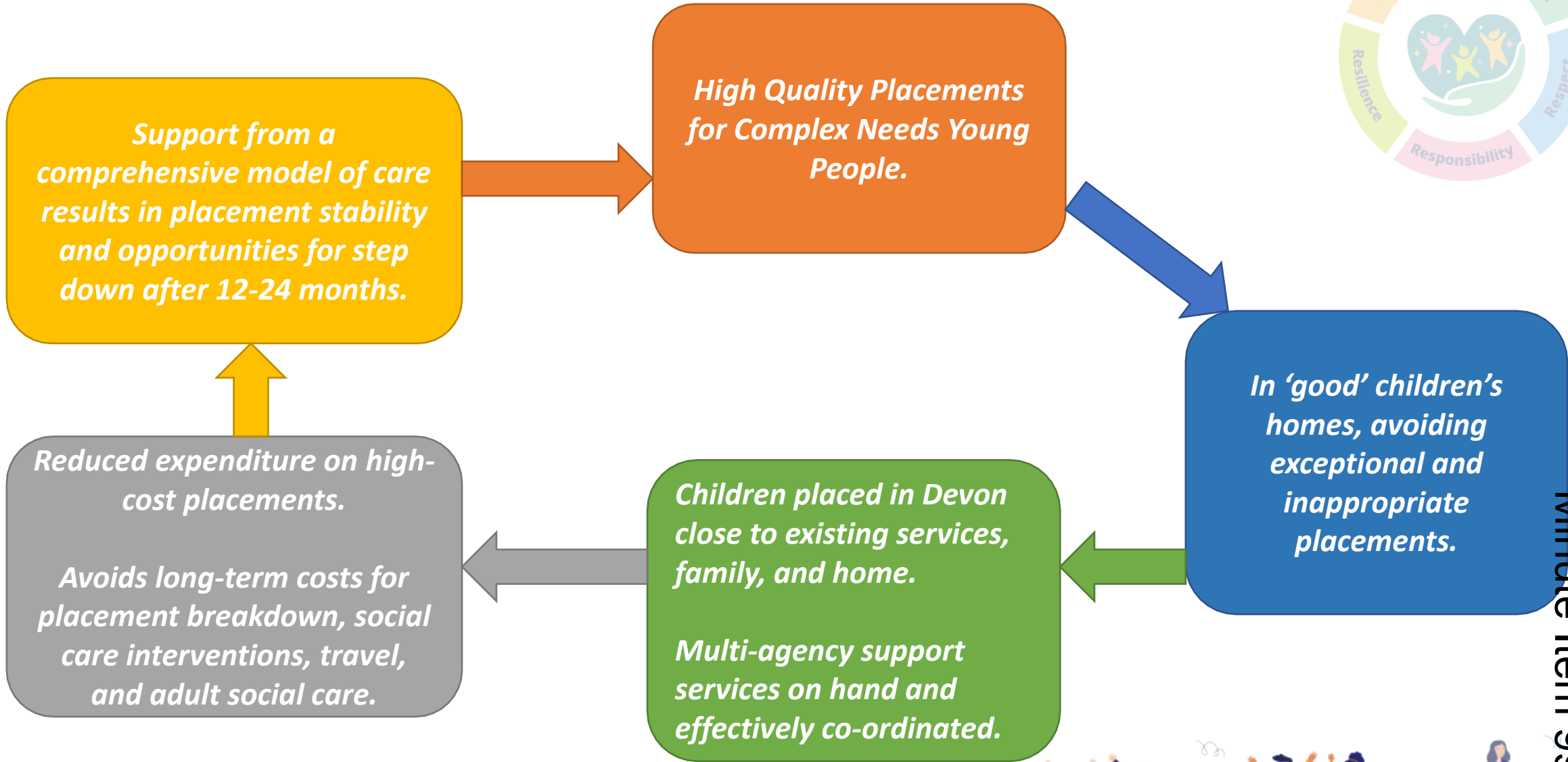
A Staying Close Wave 3 DFE Funding Bid was submitted February 2023. If successful the bid will result in the council securing up to 6 buildings to accommodate 24 care experienced young people aged 18+ in high and medium needs provision with the support of a personal advisor and key workers.

In-House Sufficiency Initiatives – Children in Care Impact and Benefits

Initiative	Impact	Key Benefits
DFE Children's Home Capital Bid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DFE Capital funding of £734,354 secured. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable placements that facilitate robust permanence planning.
Welland, The Link Centre and Barnes Children's Homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7-8 self-contained residential placements for complex needs disabled young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term positive outcomes for vulnerable children.
Two extensions of existing children's homes and one new home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-county placements using a flexible in-house workforce. • Multi-agency therapeutic care, health and education offer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step down for young people into less intensive services. • Reduction in 'unregulated' placements. (could fill now)



New Children's Homes – Creating a Positive Cycle



Improvement Planning Summary/Next Steps

Building Homes

- Revenue budget for the new children's homes agreed at Full Council as part of MTFS on February 16 2023.
- Welland and Barnes capital tenders awarded following approval of Finance letter in May 2023. Plan to be open by January 2024.
- Further consultation on The Link Centre project before the tender is published. Aim is to open by April 2024, if possible.
- Recruitment of registered managers and individual in place.
- Consideration of further DCC properties and wider procurement opportunities to create additional 'step down' placements.

Staying Close – Wave 3 Funding Bid

**Scrutiny Committee
6 June 2023**

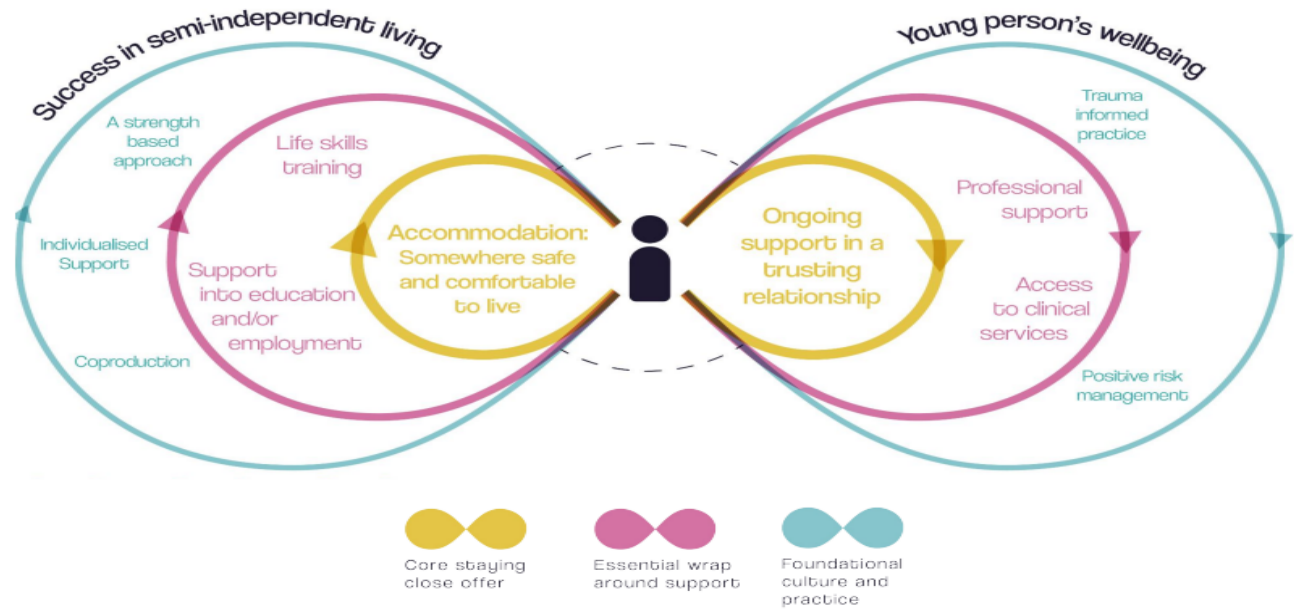
The proposal

- The council bid successfully for Wave 3 DFE Staying Close funding, securing £1.14 million of revenue funding to deliver this project in 2023-25.
- The council will secure up to 6 buildings to accommodate 24 care leavers aged 18+ in high and medium needs provision with the support of a personal advisor and key workers.
- These services will enable the Council to move young people out of high cost supported accommodation for 16-18 year-olds into semi-independent accommodation.



What is Staying Close?

It is a model which provides an enhanced support package for young people leaving care and is designed to be a **comparable offer to the option to Stay Put.**



Page 11

Staying Close provides an offer of move-on accommodation, **alongside a package of practical and emotional support**, provided by a member of staff from their former placement or from someone who they know and trust.

Independent evaluations have shown **positive outcomes for young people involved in Staying Close**, including reduced eviction rates, increased engagement in education, employment or training (EET) and improved wellbeing and relationship management skills.

Minute Item 99

Why do we need it? What we know...

31 young people aged 18+ are in Supported Accommodation for 16/17 year olds
5 young people aged 18+ are in Residential Childrens homes

The current post 18 options do not offer the level of support needed for many care leavers, and these options also support adults at risk of homelessness

Lack of move on options for young people leaving care, resulting in risk of homelessness

Due to young people lacking the options for move on post 18, beds in 16/17 provision and childrens homes are being blocked for young people who need that level of support

Many of our young people are not ready or do not have the skills to live independently when they turn 18

Why do we need it? What care leavers have told us...

You said that rent in supported accommodation is high due to the support costs which means that if you work and earn over a certain level, you are worse off than just claiming Universal Credit, so why bother?

You said that sometimes you need to move a long distance to access supported housing which makes it hard for you to keep up friendships and your support network

We need to be aspirational in our role as corporate parents for all our Devon Care Leavers, especially those who have a high needs who will require packages of support to help develop their confidence and skills for independent living, and for their emotional health and wellbeing.

You said that sometimes you need more support than is on offer in the house which means that you can be at risk of losing your room there or cannot have a room in the first place

You Said that some supported housing does not feel safe

Benefits to the young people

- A relationship based approach to supporting young people
- Personal Advisors have a very small caseload of young people and work out of the homes where young people live.
- Young people in Staying Close are not allocated to a central team. The PA co-designs and delivers their pathway plan
- PAs meet young people when they are 17 to start building a trusted relationship.
- Floating support from previous placement to protect and build further positive relationships and a support network. To achieve a smooth transition.
- Engagement from wrap-around services, such as drug and alcohol services, mental health services, employment advice, access to education and training, etc
- Young people will be ready to successfully transfer to an appropriate tenancy at the end of the Staying Close arrangement. – **CLOSE WORKING WITH DISTRICT COUNCILS**

Potential Savings and Costs

By moving to a model which allows young peoples housing benefit to cover some of the cost

- As it stands currently, for 31 young people 18+ in SLO and childrens homes, DCC are funding the whole placement cost at an average of £1,500/week, but this is much higher for higher needs young people. The Staying Close model costs £600/week.

Expenditure	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Existing Placements	£486,500	£1,456,900	£967,800
Staying Close Model	£209,900	£628,400	£417,600
Total Potential Saving	(£276,600)	(£828,500)	(£550,200)

The anticipated contribution from DCC to the 2-year pilot will be £108,157

- Whilst there is a cost to DCC as part of this bid, the potential annual savings are projected to be £1,655,300 compared to continuing with the model we currently have. This will be determined in the pilot.

Ongoing Evaluation

The initiative will be closely evaluated within DCC and as part of the national evaluation programme. This will focus on positive outcomes to young people and the financial impact of the project.

Risks

Recruitment

- We may not be successful in recruitment. Short-term contracts will be required in the pilot period.
- There is a risk that by recruiting to the roles stated in the bid, that existing PAs and residential support workers may apply for these new roles, which will mean that DCC will have to back fill these posts with agency and recruit.
- Further consideration by Cabinet in July.

Cannot secure suitable property

- There is a risk that we may not be able to secure suitable properties, that are affordable, in the right locations i.e. where our young people are currently placed.
- Officers have identified 6 potential properties, which are owned by housing and children in care providers. Securing these properties will underpin the Staying Close. partnership model.
- Aim is for the first property to open in November 2023 with all further properties opened by October 2024.