

Devon's Sufficiency Strategy for Children in Care and Care Leavers 2024-2029

Report of the Director of Children's Services / Head of Service of Commissioning and Resources Children's Services

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

Recommendations

That Children's Scrutiny Committee considers the draft Sufficiency Strategy for Children in Care and Care Leavers 2024 – 2029 and are asked to consider the contents of this report and in particular the five key areas of focus outlined in paragraph 2.1.

Children Scrutiny Committee are asked to make any observations or comments about the detail within this report and to share any thoughts, ideas or suggestions about the ongoing improvements being made and proposed.

1 Introduction

- 1.1) The Sufficiency Duty contained in section 22G of the Children Act 1989 requires Local Authorities, as far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of those children they have a Corporate Parenting responsibility for within their Local Authority Area.
- 1.2) Although the sufficiency duty applies in respect of all looked after children it recognises the importance of targeting services to those who are on the edge of care and considers early and preventative action to support children and families not come into the care system.
- 1.3) Our vision to have the majority of children in care in family-based placements in line with their permanency plan and for children in care to remain in Devon wherever possible to significantly reduce the ratio from the current 35% of out of area placements.
- 1.4) The draft Strategy has been developed in response to a refreshed Data and Needs Analysis. It identifies priorities to address demand and identifies improvement areas of focus, consistent with Children Service's improvement plans.
- 1.5) A Place Called Home Programme has been established across Childrens and Young Peoples Directorate to govern and oversee improvements across the Service and

will be used to measure, monitor and report progress against the priorities identified in the draft Strategy.

- 1.6) The draft strategy has been published on the council's website and can be accessed using this link ([Devon's sufficiency strategy for children in care and care leavers 2024 to 2029 - Education and families](#)).

2 Draft Sufficiency Strategy

- 2.1 The draft Sufficiency Strategy sets out five key areas of focus which are summarised below:

- Providers: Improving and developing relationships with providers in Devon to keep children and young people in the county.
- Building Bridges: Strengthen the early help offer to reduce the number of children and young people coming into care.
- Fostering: Increasing the number and availability of foster placements across Devon Promoting Stability: Improving the permanence planning process to ensure children have the right plan to meet their needs, including increasing adoption rates.
- Stepping Forward: Increasing the number of post-16 providers across Devon with a stronger focus on transition to independence.

- 2.2 The Authority's operating principles have been used to develop the draft Sufficiency Strategy.

- 2.3) Governance and assurance

The draft Sufficiency Strategy 2024-29 responds to the duties placed on Local Authorities by the Children Act 1989. The data and needs analysis and recommendations are aligned to the existing priorities according to a child's pathway through care:

- Building Bridges
- Finding a Place Called Home
- Promoting Stability
- Stepping Forward

The Strategy will be implemented and managed through the Place Called Home Programme Board and be aligned to the programme's work streams. Progress against the priorities in the strategy will be monitored with the Corporate Strategic Parenting Board and its 'Care for Me' Subgroup. The impact of the strategy will be monitored by the Directorate and will feed into the Authority's corporate performance framework and corporate plan reporting.

- 2.4) Financial sustainability

The draft Strategy aligns with the Directorate's service budget and savings plans. The Place Called Home Programme Board will provide financial management and oversight and feed into the standard monthly financial reporting cycle.

- 2.5) The priorities set out in the draft Strategy support the delivery of savings plans and targets. For example, the Steps programme supports better outcomes and financial savings by ensuring that actions identified in targeted reviews of Permanence Plans are acted upon and that current and upcoming vacancies in both internal and external provision are captured weekly. Where capacity is released in Devon a child living outside of Devon is prioritised for that vacancy.
- 2.6) Controlling the cost of care is essential to facilitate effective forecasting and ensure value for money. This will be achieved by:
 - Review contract terms and conditions of / with providers
 - Development of provider costing template
 - Regular contract monitoring of spot contract arrangements
 - Benchmarking tool to compare costs and ensure value for money
 - Tracking progress of Steps programme and accurately projecting savings
 - Extending fostering provision to meet the varying needs of young people with a skills-based system for ensuring that foster carers have progression routes and are rewarded appropriately for having enhanced skills and accepting more complex young people into their homes.
 - Prioritising step across of children from residential care into fostering families to meet their needs (as identified in their permanence plan) and reduce cost.
 - Identifying and developing capacity in Devon to enable children and young people to 'step closer' and return to Devon thus improving oversight, communication and facilitating a step down or reunification with family where possible.
 - Ensuring that there is a holistic approach to the child's care and education provision to avoid duplication, mitigate against further disruption and reduce cost.
- 2.7) People first
- 2.8) The draft strategy highlights the need to strengthen the Early Help pathway to reduce the need for statutory intervention. The development of Family Hubs supports creating stronger pathways of support for families. Expanding the use of Family Group Conferencing to enable families to recognise and utilise their family and community support reducing the need for statutory intervention.
- 2.9) The draft strategy highlights the need or increasing capacity in the fostering and residential markets to offer immediate support and short breaks. It identifies the need for therapeutic and health related input for children and young people with complex / diverse presentations. Work with providers to upskill staff is a priority as is the work with health partners.
- 2.10) Through the 'Stand Up Speak Up' website children in care and care experience young people are able to access the information they need.
- 2.11) Partnerships

- 2.12) The successful implementation of this draft strategy will rely on collaboration between partners including the district councils, health providers, service providers and the third sector. The data analysis identifies gaps in sufficiency in Exeter, West Devon, Torridge, Teignbridge, and North Devon. This has meant that children have not been found homes in their local communities, impacting on their continuity of education and their ability to maintain connections within their community.
- 2.13) The Council is engaging with the other Local Authorities across the Southwest to explore a future collaborative commissioning arrangement.
- 2.14) The draft strategy identifies that improved links with Adult Social Care and Adult Mental Health Services is a priority area to be strengthened. It confirms that work with District Councils is fundamental in securing appropriate housing and move on opportunities for Care experienced young people and those who may find themselves at risk of being homeless. It is essential that the Council can forecast and plan for housing needs with our District Council partners, especially those in 16+ supported accommodation.
- 2.15) Working with providers to increase the number of residential and 16+ supported accommodation places in Exeter, West Devon, Torridge, Teignbridge, and North Devon where the data analysis has identified gaps in provision is a priority within the draft Strategy.
- 2.16) Digital self-service
- 2.17) The data that underpins the draft Strategy was gathered from a range of sources both internal and external to the council. Some was already held within existing Business Intelligence Reports whilst other information comes from regional and national sources and some from engagement with providers and young people. Moving forward it is intended that most data can be gathered as part of a regular reporting cycle so that progress can be evidenced and any new trends emerging can be identified.
- 2.18) Evidence-informed
- 2.19) There is evidence that Devon, like many local authorities, has the following sufficiency related challenges:
- Devon currently commissions a high proportion of services from independent providers and 35% of our placements are out of county.
 - In theory there are sufficient providers registered to provide services in Devon to enable all Devon children in care to be able to live in the area. However, this is not happening for a number of reasons:
 - Other Local Authorities are purchasing provision located in Devon
 - Some providers choose not to work with Devon County Council citing issues in relation to contracting, payments and communication and responsiveness as barriers to engagement.

- 2.20) There are gaps in the range of provision on offer in all market sectors particularly in relation to children and young people who may present with:
- self-injurious behaviours, suicidal ideation and other mental health presentations
 - neurodiversity and/or exhibit behavioural challenges.
 - Self-identified gender that is different to that assigned at birth

Engagement with care leavers has also indicated that rural areas present more difficulties for inclusion and access to resources than urban areas.

3. Options / Alternatives

- 3.1) The Sufficiency Duty contained in section 22G of the Children Act 1989 requires Local Authorities, as far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of those children they have a Corporate Parenting responsibility for within their Local Authority Area.
- 3.2) The draft strategy will be published on the council's web-site and updated regularly.
- 3.3) The use of a web-based platform for the strategy has a number of advantages:
- It enables easy access via text readers and the ability to change text size
 - It can encapsulate a lot of information in an easy to navigate format.
 - It is easy to update with progress on identified actions, next steps and new and emerging themes which make it relevant throughout the lifetime of the Strategy.
 - The underpinning data is accessible via a PDF to those who wish to gain a deeper understanding.

4. Consultations / Representations / Technical Data

- 4.1) The views of service providers were obtained through a full day workshop where providers from each sector were invited to engage with Devon County Council.
- 4.2) The views of young people were obtained via the Participation Team. Their feedback is a key theme in the Analysis of needs and is reflected in the Sufficiency Strategy and all action plans.

5. Strategic Plan

Alignment to the vision and priorities in the Council's Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025 - <https://www.devon.gov.uk/strategic-plan>

- 5.1) This Strategy aligns with:
- Our vision for Corporate Parenting: Together, we will build a Devon where every child in care feels safe, is surrounded by love, opportunities, and the belief that their dreams are valid and achievable. When they leave our care, they will feel prepared and supported for their onward journey and experience happiness and success

- ‘Be ambitious for children and young people’ and the Devon offer to Care Leavers by:
 - creating family-based care options that are long term and support continuation of education and engagement with their community.
 - engaging with children in care and care leavers through involvement in commissioning the right kind of provision to meet their needs
 - working closely with District Councils to facilitate their step forward into independence through the provision of appropriate accommodation options.
 - Working in a coherent way with partners from health to ensure that there is sufficient access to health and wellbeing services over and above what is ordinarily available to any Devon child or young person via specific commissioning of additional services or providing additional support to help them to access services that they need.

- Tackle poverty and inequality
 - This Strategy seeks to ensure that any potential educational disruption is mitigated against and that they are found the right home at the right time so that they can feel settled and thrive within their school and broader community.
 - By ensuring access to education, we can support children in care and care leavers to be ambitious about their future and access the opportunities available to them.

- Improve health and wellbeing
 - Through additional access to health and wellbeing services commissioned specifically for children in care and care leavers via Section 75 funding.
 - Ensuring that children and young people have access to health and dental checks
 - Creating strong community links by reducing placement disruption and unplanned moves (linked to developing more resilient providers)
 - Through sustainable family-based placement ensure a sense of belonging within a community and open opportunities for ‘staying put’ or accessing local housing as part of their move forward to independence

- Help communities be safe, connected and resilient
 - Through Early Help and Family Hubs create communities that can support each other and strengthen their resilience.

6. Financial Considerations

- 6.1) The draft Strategy priorities align with the Medium-Term Financial Plan and savings plans from the Directorate and will be monitored through the Place Called Home Programme Board.

7. Legal Considerations

- 7.1) The legal considerations of the recommendation have been taken into account in the preparation of this report

- 7.2) The Sufficiency Duty contained in section 22G of the Children Act 1989 requires Local Authorities, as far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of those children they have a Corporate Parenting responsibility for within their Local Authority Area. Although the sufficiency duty applies in respect of all looked after children it recognises the importance of earlier, preventative action to support children and families so that fewer children become looked after by targeting services to those who are on the edge of care. This strategy outlines how Devon will fulfil these duties.
- 7.3) The legal duties of the local authority in relation to Children in Need, Children in Care and Care Experienced young people are contained within the Children Act 1989
- 7.3) The Children and Social Work Act 2017 extends the duties to local authorities (including District and Borough Council's) to have regard to a set of Corporate Parenting principles when exercising their functions in relation to looked after children and care leavers up to the age of 25.

8. Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

None identified.

9. Equality Considerations

Where relevant, in coming to a decision the Equality Act 2010 Public Sector Equality Duty requires decision makers to give due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other prohibited conduct;
- advance equality by encouraging participation, removing disadvantage, taking account of disabilities and meeting people's needs; and
- foster good relations between people by tackling prejudice and promoting understanding

in relation to the protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership (for employment), pregnancy and maternity, race/ethnicity, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation). This Council also treats care experience as if it were a protected characteristic.

A decision maker may also consider other relevant factors such as caring responsibilities, rural isolation or socio-economic disadvantage.

In progressing this scheme / proposal, an Impact Assessment has been prepared which has been circulated separately to Cabinet Members and is available on the Council's website at <https://www.devon.gov.uk/impact/published>

Members will need to consider the Impact Assessment for the purposes of this item / meeting.

10. Risk Management Considerations

10.1) This policy/proposal has been assessed and all necessary safeguards or action have been taken / included to safeguard the Council's position. A risk log has been created to ensure identification and monitoring.

11. Summary / Conclusions / Reasons for Recommendations

11.1) The draft Sufficiency Strategy is a legal requirement. The previous strategy runs from 2022 to 2024 and does not reflect the current position or improvement journey that the council is on. Publishing a finalised strategy ensures the Authority is compliant with its statutory obligations and by responding to the refreshed data and needs analysis the priorities in the finalised strategy will ensure we are improving outcomes for children and spending our resources effectively.

11.2) Presenting the final strategy in a web-based format increases accessibility and ensures that it can be refreshed annually throughout its lifetime so that progress can be shared, and emerging themes identified and acted upon.

11.3) The draft strategy is underpinned by data analysis and input from stakeholders. The actions are placed within existing programmes of work with clear governance and oversight through strategic boards.

Stuart Collins

Director of Children and Young People's Futures

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children' Services: Councillor Andrew Leadbetter

Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers

Background Paper

Date

File Reference

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