

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 Cabinet (and confirmation under the provisions of the Council's Constitution) before taking effect.

Recommendation

That the Cabinet be asked to:

- (a) Approve the Sufficiency Strategy 2024 – 2029.

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 to not enter the care system.
- 1.3) Our vision, is 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, and to reduce the percentage of out of county placements from the 35% presented in the need analysis.
- 1.4) The proposed 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) The 'A Place Called Home' Programme has been established across Childrens and Young Peoples Directorate to ensure transparency and line of sight and oversee improvements across the Service and will be used to measure, monitor, and report progress against the priorities identified in the proposed Strategy.

- 1.6) The proposed 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](#)).
- 1.7) The strategy will be iterative and updated annually.

2 Sufficiency Strategy

- 2.1) The proposed Sufficiency Strategy sets out five key areas of focus which are:
- 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 proposed Sufficiency Strategy.

Governance and assurance

- 2.3) The 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
- 2.4) The Strategy will be implemented and overseen through the 'Place Called Home' Programme Board and will be aligned to the programme's work streams. Progress against the priorities in the strategy will be monitored by 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.

Financial sustainability

- 2.5) The 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 for Childrens Services.
- 2.6) The priorities set out in the 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.
- 2.7) Controlling the cost of care is essential to facilitate effective forecasting and ensure value for money. This will be achieved by:
- Reviewing 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 reducing costs.
 - Identifying and developing capacity in Devon to enable children and young people to 'step closer' and return to Devon, 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.

People first

- 2.8) The 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 strategy highlights the need for 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. It identifies our work with providers and health partners as a key priority and indicator of success.
- 2.10) Through the 'Stand Up Speak Up' website children in care and care experienced young people are able to access the information they need.

Partnerships

- 2.11) The successful implementation of the 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.
- 2.12) The Council is engaging with the other Local Authorities across the Southwest to explore a future collaborative commissioning arrangement.
- 2.13) The strategy identifies that improving the partnership working and strategic links with both Adult Social Care and Adult Mental Health Services is a priority. It confirms the importance of joint working with District Councils which is fundamental to securing appropriate housing and move on opportunities for Care experienced young people and those who may find themselves at risk of being homeless.
- 2.14) The strategy recognises the importance of being able to accurately 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 Strategy.

Digital self-service

- 2.16) The data that underpins the Strategy was gathered from a range of internal and external sources. While some was already held within existing Business Intelligence Reports other information comes from regional and national sources and some direct from engagement with providers and young people. Moving forward data will be gathered as part of a regular reporting cycle so that progress can be evidenced and any new trends emerging can be identified.

Evidence-informed

- 2.17) The needs analysis shows that like many local authorities, Devon has the following sufficiency related challenges:
- While 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, in practice 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 historical issues in relation to contracting, payments and communication and responsiveness as barriers to engagement.
 - As a result, Devon currently commissions a high proportion of services from independent providers and 35% of our placements as of May 2024 were out of county.

- 2.18) 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) It is proposed that the strategy is published on the council's website 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.
- 3.4) In addition, it is proposed to produce a summary document setting out the key points within the strategy for ease of use.

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 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
- 7.4) 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)

- 8.1) None identified.

9 Equality Considerations

- 9.1) 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) Having a 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 the proposed 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 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 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

N/A

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Appendix 1 – Risk Log

Ref	Date added	Date reviewed	Risk or Issue	Strategic Priority	Risk Description	Impact / Consequence	Mitigation / Counter Measure	Review by	Status	RAG
SS01	15-Aug		Risk	General	Relationships with providers, commissioners and practice do not mature enough to influence the market and fill identified gaps.	Provider non engagement and poor relationships with practice impact Devon's ability to develop the market sufficiently to address the gaps identified within the sufficiency strategy and therefore negatively impacting the possibilities of good outcomes and cost savings	Regular engagement opportunities with providers and a clear tracking process to ensure contracts are managed. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme.	End Sept 24	Open	8
SS02	15-Aug		Risk	Building Bridges	Partners are unwilling or unable to engage locally in the development of family hubs in a way which creates a pathway of Early Help services for families	Families are unable to access the services they need when they need them and the ability to stepfamilies across to community bases groups and activities becomes challenging.	Comprehensive community engagement and coproduction and action plans in place. Managed through the Family Hub development programme	Apr 25	Open	12
SS03	15-Aug		Risk	Building Bridges	The Steps programme implemented to step children across from fostering to residential and to bring children back into Devon is unsuccessful, or that it negatively impacts Devon's ability to find carers when needed for ongoing searches.	Children are unable to access the right provision to meet their needs and placement costs may continue to rise.	Step's co-ordinator in place for 8 weeks to trial the approach. A comprehensive tracker has been developed to keep drive and monitor the work. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Oct 24	Open	8
SS04	15-Aug		Risk	Building Bridges	The lack of same day provision leads to the continued use of unregistered placements. Same day provision remains a gap in sufficiency as providers are unable to engage in delivering this provision.	Unregistered placements remain the backstop when same day placements are needed leading to poor outcomes and rising costs.	Engagement with providers to develop same day provision and increasing the internal residential sufficiency to create this option. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec 24	Open	12
SS06	15-Aug		Risk	Finding a place called home	Efforts in place are unable to increase the number and capability of fostering in Devon to increase sufficiency	Children remain in homes which do not meet their permanency plan. Increasing cost of placements as children will	On going engagement with the IFA (Independent Fostering Agency) market to increase the number of and the capabilities of local foster carers. The	Apr 25	Open	18

				enough to meet identified need.	remain or be placed in more costing solutions.	internal fostering workstream within the A Place Called home programme is seeking to recruited and retain local foster acers. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme			
SS07	15-Aug	Risk	Finding a place called home	The aging profile of our internal foster carers across Devon and limited numbers in some areas of Devon.	May result in a decline in numbers of foster cares in the next 5-10 years.	Efforts are focused on ensuring the overall numbers increase as well as how younger foster carers can be attracted. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme			
SS08	15-Aug	Risk	Finding a place called home	Due to the gap in access to residential care for the most complex children Devon will have no choice but to continue the use of unregistered and out of county provision.	Rising number of children in unregistered and out of county homes.	Engagement with providers to help fill the gap through prioritising Devons children, upskilling tier workforce and work to create more internal provision for these children. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-25	Open	12
SS09	15-Aug	Risk	Promoting stability	Health and education partners are unable or unwilling to engage in developing care and support arranging and in funding arrangements for the most complex children.	Social care takes the entire burden, and children are unable to access the right package to meet their needs.	Close working with health and education to put arrangements in place to effectively assess children according to their need. Working with health to jointly coming a step-down provision form hospital / tier 4. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-24	Open	18
SS10	15-Aug	Risk	Promoting stability	Due to the lack of sufficient local family-based solutions, Devon continues to place children under the age of 12 in residential care.	Children experience poor outcomes and are unable to step access effectively to a family-based solution. Rising costs of placements.	A focus on culture with providers to ensure residential is not seen as a permanent solution for this agree group. Increasing the sufficiency of family-based care. A comprehensive step across program to tack and manage children into the right homes. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-24	Open	10
SS11	15-Aug	Risk	Promoting stability	Accommodation available to asylum seeking children is significant to meet need due to restrictions on move on for these individuals.	Young people become stuck in costly provision which does not meet their needs in independence.	Reviewing the sufficiency in this area and developing a plan. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-24	Open	12

SS12	15-Aug	Risk	Promoting stability	Permanency planning is unrealistic, or, not reviewed in a timely manner, impacting on sufficiency forecasts and availability of the right homes according to need.	Children's plans do not adequately reflect their long-term needs. Commissioning is enabled to effectively plan for longer term need.	A drive on placement planning and permanency as part of the overall improvement plan. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-24	Open	10
SS13	15-Aug	Risk	Stepping Forward	Post 16 supported accommodation providers are unable to meet the needs of our young people due to staff capabilities and are becoming increasingly risk averse due to their Ofsted registration requirements.	Provision available in the county is not utilised forcing the market to look for placements outside of the authority.	Targeted engagement with the post 16 providers to find a solution. Practice guidance on the use of post 16 provision being developed. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-24	Open	12
SS14	15-Aug	Risk	Stepping Forward	The lack of homeless prevention provision leads to young people being placed in unsuitable arrangements.	Continued use of unsuitable accommodation leading to poor outcomes.	Working with district councils to increase sufficiency in this sector and implementing the staying close programme. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-24	Open	10
SS15	15-Aug	Risk	Stepping Forward	The lack of robust and triangulated data collected over time restricts Devon's ability to effectively forecast for sufficiency need.	Sufficiency will continue to poor leading to poor outcomes.	Improving the data available through better oversight. Longer term the new case management system will support with the mitigation of this risk. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-24	Open	8
SS16	15-Aug	Risk	Stepping Forward	The lack of move on is silting up the supported accommodation provision for care experiences young people.	Young people who need supported accommodation are being placed in unsuitable accommodation what does not meet needs.	Working with district councils to increase move on opportunities. Monitored through A Place Called Home Programme	Dec-24	Open	10