



# **Placement Sufficiency for Children Looked After and Care Leavers**

Children, Young People and Education  
Scrutiny Commission

Date of meeting: 08 April 2025

Lead director: Laurence Jones

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## Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All.
- Report author: David Thrussell / Mike Evans
- Author contact details: 454 1657
- Report version number: Final

### 1. Summary

- 1.1. The council has a legal duty to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for children looked after and care leavers that meets their needs, and as far as is reasonably practical is within the local authority area.
- 1.2 The report provides a summary of the progress made since our last placement sufficiency strategy from 2020/24 and sets out our proposed long-term priorities for 2025/30.

### 2. Recommendation(s) to scrutiny:

- 2.1 To note the progress made delivering the Placement Sufficiency strategy from 2020/24 and agree the proposed strategic priorities for 2025/30.
- 2.2 To provide an annual update to CYPE Scrutiny on the progress made against the strategic priorities and any changes to the operational context that might impact on the delivery of the priorities.

### 3. Detailed report

- 3.1 The council has a legal duty under Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for children looked after that meets their needs, and that as far as is reasonably practicable is within the local authority area.
- 3.2 In order to meet its statutory duties the council has a Placement Sufficiency Strategy that sets out our strategic goals over a five-year cycle which expires in 2024/5. It is proposed to adopt a further five-year strategy for the period 2025/30 and for progress to be reviewed and reported annually.
- 3.3 Our placement sufficiency priorities for 2025/30 are:
  - 3.3.1 To invest and strengthen our edge of care offer to support children to continue living at home or be reunified with their families when it is safe to do so.

- 3.3.2 To support stability for our children and young people, by providing timely options to achieve permanence in a safe and loving home with additional support to meet their individual needs.
- 3.3.3 To increase our recruitment and retention of mainstream and specialist foster carers to support their capacity to meet the needs of the children they care for and enable more children and young people to live locally.
- 3.3.4 To review and to reduce our use of out of area children's residential homes and independent fostering agencies, and to increase our inhouse children's residential home provision.
- 3.3.5 To commission smarter to reduce costs, assure quality and support better matching, through building relationships with our market providers and establishing stronger commissioning practices.
- 3.3.6 To expand our provision of high quality semi-independent and independent accommodation, working with both the voluntary and private sectors as we seek to commission new accommodation and support.

#### **3.4 Placement Sufficiency Strategic Aims – What We Will Do**

##### **3.4.1 To invest and strengthen our edge of care offer to support children to continue living or be reunified with their families when it is safe to do so.**

- To expand our Functional Family Therapy pilot to identify and support reunification of children with their families where appropriate to do so.
- Explore opportunities for reinvesting 18+ accommodation money in improved mental health support and youth work to reduce placement breakdown.

##### **3.4.2 To support stability for our children and young people, by providing timely options to achieve permanence in a safe and loving home with additional support to meet their individual needs.**

- Embed approaches that support re-unification of children looked after with their families including therapeutic support and intervention.
- Increase our utilisation of Kinship Care arrangements.

- Review our special guardianship support offer to ensure that children can exit care in a timely way that is appropriate and be cared for under special guardianship arrangements where this best meets their needs.
- Work collaboratively with our Regional Adoption Agency partners to ensure that where appropriate and in best interest's, children are considered and progressed for adoption in a timely manner.

**3.4.3 To increase our recruitment and retention of mainstream and more Specialist foster carers to support their capacity to meet the needs of the children they care for and enable more children and young people to live locally.**

- Promote the concept of Flexible Fostering to recruit more foster carers including mainstream carers, respite carers, enhanced and specialist carers.
- Develop existing mainstream foster carers and recruit additional new carers to an Enhanced Foster Carer programme that can match children with more complex needs to local foster carer households.
- Identify where existing mainstream carers can be upskilled with additional training and support to care for children with more complex needs, utilising the Valuing Care Tool developed with IMPOWER.
- Expand local targeted fostering awareness and recruitment events to increase the number of mainstream enhanced and specialist foster carers.

**3.4.4 To review and to reduce our use of out of area children's residential homes and independent fostering agencies, and to increase our inhouse children's residential home provision.**

- Develop our internal residential provision including skills and capacity to care for more young people with complex needs and challenging behaviours.
- Complete a formal review of the feasibility for adding further homes to our internal provision, to include exploring creative options such as partnering with other accommodation providers.
- Develop a wider local residential estate with a strategic not-for-profit partner.

- Ensure that the completion of the new Hillview Children’s Residential Home progresses smoothly and is ready for occupation end of 2025.
- Conduct an in-depth review of the use of Independent Fostering Agencies with a focus on improving value for money from the use of these providers.

**3.4.5 To commission smarter to reduce costs, assure quality and support better matching through building relationships with our market providers and establishing stronger commissioning practices.**

- Implement one consistent tool for assessing and understanding need, providing consistent, real-time insights.
- Develop and review annually a 5-year commissioning plan based on predicted placement needs.
- Ensure that there is sufficiency and diversity of providers across all required service areas so that no procurement failures occur which are caused by market shortages or lack of specialist provision.
- Explore more strategic development approaches as an East Midlands region, utilising learning, and insights from sub regional teams (e.g. Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire).
- Review the use of block and spot purchasing of provision for 16+ young people leaving care.
- Engage more fully with our provider markets so that a shared ownership for solution finding can be engendered.
- Increase our Quality Assurance activity including reviewing care packages and staffing ratios of commissioned placements ensuring best value.
- Expand our pilot involving care experienced young people in the quality assurance and commission of children’s residential homes.
- Work in collaboration with the newly formed Departmental Project Management Office to support market engagement and to strengthen commissioning practices.

**3.4.6 To expand our provision of high quality semi-independent and independent accommodation working with both the voluntary and private sectors as we seek to commission new accommodation and support.**

- Review our existing commissioned accommodation ahead of the next tendering and procurement cycle to ensure we are achieving best outcomes and efficiency.
- Develop an improved and more cost-effective supported accommodation offer for care leavers.
- Refine our published Care Leaver Offer to include a specific Children and Young People from Abroad Seeking Safety offer.
- Complete a feasibility study and business case for a pilot supported lodgings scheme.
- Fully embed our Manage Your Own Home course and extend to 16- and 17-year-olds to support young people preparing for adulthood.
- Work with the Housing Department to co-produce a plan for Supported Living and Extra Care to inform the type of physical developments required for this type of housing in Leicester.
- Identify and develop new housing initiatives including Hospital Close, Zip Building to provide supported and semi-independent accommodation.

3.5 Our placement sufficiency strategy continues to focus on support for families through early help and prevention, and to strengthen our edge of care offer to families where children are at risk of entering care.

3.6 The placement sufficiency strategy is underpinned by the principle that children are best cared for by their families, and where they cannot live with their immediate or extended family due to safeguarding concerns or a lack of any family network, and need to remain in care, they are best supported to live in foster care households. In these circumstances we will look to find a family or a home that best meets the child's needs, and offers the love, support, and opportunities they need to thrive.

3.7 Children and young people enter care for a range of reasons, and we seek to ensure that they are only looked after if it is in their best interests and there is no suitable alternative to remaining in care. The reason children enter care and their adverse childhood experiences can influence the type and cost of placement that they require to meet both their immediate and longer-term care

needs. The most frequent cause for children needing to enter care is due to abuse or neglect.

- 3.8 Many children enter care for a relatively short period whilst suitable permanent arrangements can be made to ensure their long-term care needs are met. For some children this will be reunification with their family, or alternative care arrangements such as Kinship Care or Special Guardianship arrangements, and for some children this will involve adoption with a new adoptive family.
- 3.9 For most children looked after and care leavers the most suitable place for them to live is within the local area, minimising any disruption to their education, supporting their health and care needs, whilst ensuring that they maintain good social networks.
- 3.10 The numbers of children and young people looked after in Leicester has remained relatively stable over recent years as a national comparator. A focus on agreeing early permanence arrangements for children who enter care has meant that we have continued to ensure that where appropriate children are able to be reunified with their family, live in longer term kinship care arrangements, or cease to be looked after through being placed for adoption or special guardianship arrangements.
- 3.11 As of 31st March 2024, there were 599 children in care in Leicester, 45% identifying as female and 55% male. This reflects a decrease from the previous year when there were 630 children looked after (31st March 2023). This is in part attributable to the continuing focus on early help and prevention to ensure that families are identified early and supported to enable children to continue living with their families ensuring more intensive support is offered through specialist support for children on the edge of care where there are safeguarding concerns.
- 3.12 Despite the relative stability in the numbers of children looked after over recent years there has been an increase in the complexity of needs of children entering care who have experienced early childhood trauma, and this has had an impact on the level of support and care that some children and young people require. This had meant that the numbers of children requiring more complex care and support together with more costly placements in many instances outside of the local area has increased. Additionally, there has been an increase in the numbers of older adolescents entering care with more complex and challenging behaviours including young people at risk of criminal exploitation.
- 3.13 We have a strong track record of providing high quality care to children looked after with more complex needs in our own children's residential homes. In recent years there has been an increase in the complexity of needs of some of our children and young people including some young people subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders requiring higher and more costly packages of care.

- 3.14 We remain focussed on minimising children and young people's accommodation moves and seek to avoid any unplanned moves wherever possible due to the disruption this causes to a child's education, health and care needs.

### **Progress Update**

- 3.15 Our existing placement sufficiency strategy has three priority areas: to enhance and grow mainstream foster care, to expand our local children's residential homes and to provide suitable accommodation and housing related support to young people over the age of 16 and to care leavers up to the age of 25.
- 3.16 We have taken a range of steps to strengthen our support to mainstream Foster Carers since 2020 including a review of payments and allowances.
- 3.17 We have successfully introduced a higher level of accreditation for our foster carers (Enhanced Foster Carers). This recognises the skills of carers who can care for children with more complex needs and rewards them at a higher rate than a mainstream foster carer enabling more children to remain living locally.
- 3.18 We have launched a new Fostering Service web site with improved enquiry submission and tracking functionality and launched a revised Fostering Marketing & Communications Strategy.
- 3.19 We have implemented a capital investment fund to support adaptations to foster carers properties that has allowed more children to continue to live in sibling groups and will provide more flexible accommodation provision for foster carers to meet future needs.
- 3.20 We commissioned IMPOWER, the UK's largest independent consultancy focusing on change and transformation programmes for public service organisations in late 2023 to review our looked after child profile and placement costs and our local offer to our foster carers. This identified that the majority of our looked after children are appropriately matched and that our mainstream foster carers are looking after some of our most complex young people at a lower cost than Independent Fostering Agencies or external residential homes.
- 3.21 The intensive review of our services completed by IMPOWER has given us clear insights into where we need to focus our energies for the next five years. Using our own data, national insights, and census data, along with their Valuing Care tool, this has provided the basis for our plans for addressing the challenges we are facing.
- 3.22 A minority of children looked after are unable to live locally due to concerns about their safety, risk of exploitation, or complex health and social care needs.



For these children and young people, we will need to continue to commission specialist support and accommodation either with Independent Fostering Agencies or external children's residential homes. We will build on work with IMPOWER using the Valuing Care Tool to identify where any children with complex needs placed out of the area can be matched to local foster carers.

- 3.23 Our strategy will need to ensure that Leicester remains an attractive authority for newly recruited foster carers whilst addressing the national shortage of foster carers and adopters for children and external pressures on recruitment such as the cost-of-living crisis.
- 3.24 The government has recognised the need to increase the provision of accommodation for children looked after and to address the excessive profiteering from the private sector which has been characterised by a significant increase in accommodation fees from some providers over recent years. The Competition & Markets Authority have reported in just six years costs for some residential care, have increased by 105%.
- 3.25 Since our last Placement Strategy we have opened two new children's homes, adding capacity for 7 more Children Looked After to live locally. A third new children's home is due to open in Autumn 2025 that will provide a further 6 spaces, including training flats for young people leaving care. This new provision has been joint funded by the council and central government following successful competitive bidding for capital funding from the DfE.
- 3.26 In order to meet the requirement to provide sufficiency of accommodation for children looked after and care leavers over the next five years we will need to continue to expand our provision of mainstream and specialist foster carers together with expansion of supported accommodation for care leavers.
- 3.27 We will continue to work to ensure that children and young people looked after are only placed in accommodation that is regulated and registered with Ofsted, and where this is not possible, we will work with Ofsted and the provider to support registration whilst ensuring that any children looked after are appropriately safeguarded and supported.
- 3.28 Our strategy will need to ensure that we are able to continue to support children and young people from abroad seeking safety, who come to Leicester either in a planned way through the National Transfer Scheme or are spontaneous arrivals.
- 3.29 Our placement sufficiency strategy has been developed in partnership with our children looked after and young people and the new strategy will continue to include contributions from care experienced consultants and our Children in Care Council.

- 3.30 Whilst we have a good retention rate for foster carers who report high levels of satisfaction with the support that they receive from the councils fostering service, we have an aging profile of foster carers which means that we will need to recruit additional new foster carers above and beyond previous levels if we are to continue to maintain the numbers of children living locally in foster carer households.
- 3.31 The placement sufficiency strategy is underpinned by our Corporate Parenting Strategy which sets out our strategic priorities for our children and young people including our commitment to *'A Place to Live' that meets needs*.
- 3.32 Our placement sufficiency strategy will need to remain integrated across the council to ensure that vulnerable children and young people who are looked after locally can continue to have their education and wellbeing needs met together with any ongoing housing and adult social care needs as they transition into adulthood.
- 3.33 We will continue to work with our partners in the NHS to ensure that children and young people with more complex physical and mental health needs can continue to be supported to live locally, and where this is not possible appropriate packages of integrated care are commissioned for children who live outside the area. This will include working with the Integrated Commissioning Board to identify any children with more complex health needs who can be supported through Continuing Care.
- 3.34 Our commissioning strategy will need to ensure that we have a greater understanding of care leavers housing and support needs up to a beyond the age of 25.
- 3.35 In order to meet our duty for sufficiency and to ensure that more children and young people who enter care can be matched to local foster carer households that best meet their needs we will need to recruit additional foster carers representative of all local communities.
- 3.36 We have developed a range of participation and co-production groups, with a Children in Care Council (from 9yrs) and Care Experienced consultants from 15yrs. Children and young people's voices and experiences have been a key part of corporate parenting meetings and processes.
- 3.37 Young people attend Scrutiny Committee meetings and have shared their experiences of seeking asylum and poverty, alongside their proposals for positive change and support. These young people are regularly asked to consult on both Council developments, service developments and local developments. Their views are sought, and influence has been seen in their presentations to Scrutiny Committee and their innovative podcasts sharing their experiences to shape services.

- 3.38 During the summer of 2024, we captured the views from a broad range of our Children Looked After and Care Leavers. This was done via an online, confidential survey (Leicester Asks) with support readily available for any young people that required it. The questions for the survey were co-produced with children in care and these reflected the themes that they felt were most important, and the findings will inform our new placement sufficiency strategy.
- 3.39 This strategy is overseen by the Strategic Director for Social Care and Education, supported by the Director for Children's Social Work and Early Help and Head of Corporate Parenting, who are accountable for ensuring progress against the stated aims.
- 3.40 Progress will be monitored through the Social Care and Education Department and corporate governance structures, including the Placement Sufficiency Board and the Education, Health, and Care Board, and updated annually to SCE Scrutiny.
- 3.41 As some actions rely on the engagement of partners the strategy is also of importance to the Integrated Systems of Care Group and Joint Integrated Commissioning Board. There are a range of working groups and forums that will support the delivery of actions and where barriers and issues can be taken for partnership support.

#### **4. Financial, legal, equalities, climate emergency and other implications**

##### **4.1 Financial Implications**

- 4.1.1 The proposed strategic priorities for 2025/30 contained within this report will contribute towards controlling costs for the care of children. Progress made against the strategic priorities will be included within the regular budget monitoring reports for each financial year.

Mohammed Irfan

Head of Finance, Social Care, Education and Public Health

11 December 2024

##### **4.2 Legal Implications**

- 4.2.1 Section 22G of the Children's Act 1989: Children Act 1989 sets out requirements for local authorities to take strategic action in respect of those children they look after, so far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for them that meets their needs and is within their local authority area.

- 4.2.2 Section 22G of the Children's Act 1989: Children Act 1989 sets out requirements for local authorities to take strategic action in respect of those children they look after, so far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for them that meets their needs and is within their local authority area. It further requires local authorities to have regard to the benefit of having both a number of providers in their area and a range of accommodation capable of meeting different needs.
- 4.2.3 The updated Placement Sufficiency Strategy has a wide range of action which together will ensure that the authority is able to comply with this statutory duty including meeting the needs of the increasing number of children and young people with complex needs. A failure to meet this duty could result in judicial review of the authority particular in litigated cases which are under the scrutiny of CAFCASS and the court.

Susan Holmes

Head of Law for Social Care & Safeguarding

09.12.24

### **4.3 Equalities Implications**

- 4.3.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which means that, in carrying out their functions, they have a statutory duty to pay due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act, to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't.
- 4.3.2 Due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty should be paid before and at the time a decision is taken, in such a way that it can influence the final decision.
- 4.3.3 Protected Characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
- 4.3.4 The report is seeking approval for the proposed strategic priorities for 2025/30 as well as providing an update on the progress made delivering the Placement Sufficiency strategy from 2020/24. There are six proposed strategic priorities for 2025/30 which cover a wide range of areas, and these will impact child looked after and care leavers who will be from across a range of protected characteristics by ensuring there is sufficient accommodation that meets their needs locally.
- 4.3.5 Going forward, equality considerations need to continue to be embedded throughout the Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2025/30. Equality impact assessments should, therefore, be undertaken on any element of the Placement Sufficiency Strategic Aims – What We Will Do, which will affect child looked after

and care leavers. Working strategically with other council services to co-plan and co-produce services, links to relevant strategies, i.e. Corporate Parenting Strategy, working regionally and with the provider market will help to ensure a joined-up approach is taken, which will benefit young people.

- 4.3.6 It is important to ensure that any consultation/engagement/communication is meaningful and accessible and targeted to meet the needs of relevant stakeholders from across all protected characteristics.
- 4.3.7 In addition, as changes are implemented, it will be important to monitor for any unexpected disproportionate negative impacts or where we are unsure of the impact, in order that they can be addressed swiftly and effectively. This will be beneficial in ensuring that there are no barriers to accessing support arising from any particular protected characteristic/s.

Sukhi Biring

Equalities Officer 0116 454 4175

12.12.2024.

#### **4.4 Climate Emergency Implications**

- 4.4.1 The council's provision of services and its use of buildings are a significant source of carbon emissions, and a key area to tackle following the council's declaration of a climate emergency and ambition to achieve net zero carbon emissions.
- 4.4.2 Where new children's home provision is developed or existing buildings refurbished, opportunities to reduce the energy use and carbon emissions of the buildings should be identified and implemented wherever possible. As relevant to the projects carried out, this should include the installation of measures such as high levels of insulation, low carbon heating and renewable energy systems. These measures would also reduce energy costs and could increase comfort levels for occupants.
- 4.4.3 As service provision generally contributes to the council's carbon footprint, any impacts could be considered as part of any changes made to commissioning and delivery, for example through encouraging the use of sustainable travel options, using buildings and materials efficiently and following the council's sustainable procurement guidance, as appropriate and relevant to the options selected.

Aidan Davis, Sustainability Officer, Ext 37 2284

11 December 2024

**4.5 Other Implications**

None

**5. Background information and other papers:**

Leicester Asks Survey 2024

**6. Summary of appendices:**

None