Resetting the relationship between local and national government. **Read our Local Government White Paper (https://www.local.gov.uk/local-government-white-paper)**

Placements for children in care: Resource pack

This resource pack gives councillors an overview of the key legislative and policy issues regarding placements for children in care. The resource explores good practice, key issues and things to look at in local areas to try to improve the sufficiency and quality of placements, so that every child can live in the best possible home.

30 Apr 2024
LGA
15.135

Introduction

Where a child is in the care of the council, making sure that their home is a place where they feel safe, loved and are able to thrive is a vital responsibility that all corporate parents will take seriously.

In its annual **survey of children in care (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-questionnaires-2023/childrens-social-care-questionnaires-2023)**, Ofsted found that nearly all children in foster care and children's homes felt safe all or most of the time (99 per cent and 95 per cent respectively), and the majority reported getting on well with the adults where they lived and feeling listened to. 96 per cent of children in foster care and 94 per cent in

children's homes reported doing something fun in the last week. These are positive findings to build upon, and as a corporate parent it is helpful to know what children in your care feel about where they live too.

However, as the number of children in care has increased – reaching 83,840 in 2023 - councils are finding it increasingly difficult to find the right home for every child, as soon as they need it – and this is particularly the case for certain groups of children including those with more complex or challenging needs, large sibling groups and teenagers.

This resource pack gives councillors an overview of the key legislative and policy issues that are the backdrop to the issue, before looking at good practice, key issues and things to look at in local areas to try to improve the sufficiency and quality of placements, so that every child can live in the best possible home.

Please note that this pack only considers placements for children in care. For more on accommodation for care leavers, please see our **Support for Care Leavers Resource Pack. (https://www.local.gov.u k/publications/support-care-leavers)**

Council responsibilities

Councils' duties in relation to the placement of children in care are outlined in the **Children Act 1989 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukp ga/1989/41/contents)** and **associated guidance (https://assets.publi shing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachm ent_data/file/1000549/The_Children_Act_1989_guidance_and_regul ations_Volume_2_care_planning__placement_and_case_review.pd f)**.

Section 20 in the Act allows for the accommodation of children with parental permission or where there is no person with parental responsibility. Councils do not have parental responsibility for these children.

Section 21 places a duty on councils to provide accommodation for children in police protection, detention or on remand.

Section 31 gives the court the power to make a care order where a child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm which is attributable to the care given to the child or the child being beyond parental control. This places a child in the care of the council which made the care order application and gives that council parental responsibility for the child.

Councils are corporate parents to all children who are looked-after by the local authority, even where they do not have parental responsibility for them.

The **Care Planning, Placement and Case Review statutory guidance (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-care-planning-placement-and-case-review)** outlines issues that a council must consider when placing a child:

- preference should be given to a placement with a connected person (e.g. a friend or relative).

- placements should be close to home, should not disrupt education (especially at key stage 4), enable siblings to live together, be suitable to a child's needs if they are disabled, and is within the local authority area, unless a "distant" placement is the most suitable option, for example if a child has complex treatment needs that cannot be met by services in the area or where this is necessary to effectively safeguard the child.

Section 22G (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/22G) of the Act places a duty on councils to take steps to ensure that they are able to provide sufficient accommodation within the authority's area to meet the needs of children in care.

The **Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2021/161/made)** came into force on 9 September 2021. These regulations banned the placement of children under the age of 16 in unregulated settings. The **Supported Accommodation (England)**

Regulations 2023 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2023/416/contents/made) introduced regulations and quality standards for supported accommodation for 16–17-year-old children in care and care leavers. These cover settings which were previously unregulated and mean that no children in care or care leavers under the age of 18 may now be placed in unregulated settings. Children under 16, under the Children Act 1989 and the 2021 regulations, should be placed in foster care, a children's home or a small number of other settings including a hospital; they should not be placed in supported accommodation.

Policy issues

Competition and Markets Authority

In 2022, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published its **market study into children's social care (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-market-study-final-report/final-report)** in England, Scotland and Wales in response to concerns about how the placements market was operating.

The review considered two key issues: the availability of placements to meet children's needs, and the prices paid by councils for those placements.

The CMA identified that "there are significant problems in how the placements market is functioning, particularly in England and Wales." Among its findings, the CMA noted:

- a lack of placements of the right kind and in the right places
- higher prices and higher levels of profit than would be expected in a well-functioning market
- concerns about the levels of debt carried by the largest providers
- limitations on the ability of councils to engage effectively with the market
- difficulties for councils to accurately forecast need due to the relatively few placements bought by each council
- challenges in the out-dated regulatory system in England
- recruitment and retention challenges, and low wages, amongst children's homes workers.

The CMA recommended a more collective approach to engaging with the placements market and additional support for local authorities for forecasting, market shaping and procurement.

Independent Review of Children's Social Care

The **Independent Review of Children's Social Care (https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care)** ("the Care Review") was launched in January 2021 with Josh MacAlister as the lead reviewer. The final report was published on 23 May 2022.

The review stated that "without a dramatic whole system reset, outcomes for children and families will remain stubbornly poor…and a flawed system will cost over £15 billion per year (up from £10 billion now)." The review recommended a "fundamental shift" to improve family help and child protection, work to enable more children to remain with family networks, and action to "fix the broken care market", as well as ensuring children have a powerful voice in the decisions that affect them and improving outcomes for care experienced people. It was calculated that £2.6 billion in new spending over four years was needed to deliver the improvements proposed by the review.

With regard to placements for children in care, the review made a range of recommendations including:

- the development of new universal care standards for all types of care to guarantee care for every child in care, and provide the flexibility needed to ensure homes can meet the needs of children;
- moving the commissioning and running of children's homes, recruitment and training of foster carers into new Regional Care Cooperatives to bring a wider choice of homes for children closer to where they live;
- a 'new deal' for foster care, involving recruiting thousands more foster carers, making more foster homes feel like loving family environments for children and providing significantly more support for foster carers.

Stable Homes, Built on Love

Stable Homes, Built on Love (https://www.gov.uk/government/cons ultations/childrens-social-care-stable-homes-built-on-love) is the Government's children's social care reform strategy and was published on 2 February 2023. Its proposals were backed by £200 million of additional investment over two years, and were organised under six 'pillars' of reform:

- family help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families
- a decisive multi-agency child protection system
- unlocking the potential of family networks
- putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care
- a valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one
- a system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data.

The strategy includes specific plans in relation to placements for children in care:

- a fostering recruitment and retention programme, including regional recruitment hubs and rollout of the **'Mockingbird' programme (https://www.thefo steringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-a nd-programmes/mockingbird-programme). £36 million has been invested (https://hansard.parlia ment.uk/Commons/2023-12-18/debates/2312185 7000014/Children%E2%80%99SSocialCare#cont ribution-3D416335-681C-4BDC-9902-EE7D52C68 0C2)** in supporting over 60 per cent of councils to deliver this, with less intensive support also

available to councils not engaged in the full programme.

- support for the children's homes sector including exploring professional registration of the workforce and a leadership programme

- introducing a financial oversight regime for the largest providers of children's homes and fostering agencies

- running two Regional Care Cooperative pathfinders

- set up an expert group to review standards of care, regulations and guidance.

Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) will be organisations owned and run by sub-regional groups of councils to plan, commission and deliver care places. The two pathfinders will initially focus on improving support for children with the most complex needs, in addition to joint work on sufficiency planning and forecasting and foster carer recruitment and retention. The Department for Education's (DfE) ultimate ambition is that all placements will be delivered by RCCs, including running children's homes and moving fostering services from councils into RCCs. Councils and others in the sector have raised concerns that this vision could move care and support for children in care too far from their corporate parents and may not improve overall sufficiency; the DfE remains committed to co-designing any system with councils and partners, and learning from pathfinders.

National standards for independent and semi-independent provision for children in care and care leavers aged 16 and 17

Following a consultation in 2020, the Government has introduced **national standards (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/providing-supported-accommodation-for-children-and-young-people)** for independent and semi-independent provision for looked-after children and care leavers aged 16 and 17. This provision has previously been unregulated (that is, not subject to registration with or inspection

by Ofsted), and has been of variable quality. Unregistered provision, on the other hand, is provision that should have been registered with Ofsted but was not, and is therefore illegal.

The intention of the Government is to raise the standard of this provision to ensure high quality accommodation and support for all young people living in such homes.

All providers of this accommodation were required to have had an initial registration accepted by Ofsted by the end of October 2023, with full inspections by Ofsted expected to begin in September 2024. The Government has invested over £142 million to deliver the reforms, with a significant portion of this allocated to councils as new burdens funding in recognition of the increase in placement costs these reforms are likely to bring.

National Safeguarding Practice Review Panel review into safeguarding children with disabilities in residential settings

The National Safeguarding Practice Review Panel review (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-children-with-disabilities-in-residential-settings) examined allegations of abuse and neglect towards children living in three private residential settings located in Doncaster and operated by the Hesley Group. These were specialist, independent settings located alongside schools and attended by children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), who functioned significantly below their chronological age and exhibited behaviour that challenges. Many had profound difficulties with receptive and expressive communication.

The Government published its **response to the review (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-children-with-disabilities-in-residential-settings-government-response)** on 18 December 2023 and **wrote to safeguarding partners (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/657adeaa254aaa0010050d28/National_review_-_HM_Government_letter_to_safeguarding_partners.pdf)** highlighting key issues to consider in reviews of arrangements for placing disabled children in residential settings. These included:

- the duty of councils and Integrated Care Boards to work together to commission the right care, education and support for disabled children in need
- the duty of councils and partners to work together to ensure sufficiency of residential placements
- quality assurance processes
- record-keeping
- information sharing, including for Local Authority Designated Officers and between placing and host authorities
- training for frontline staff on "closed culture" environments
- involving parents in decision-making
- advocacy for disabled children.

Southwark Judgement

The Southwark Judgement was a judgement made in May 2009 which clarifies councils' responsibilities towards homeless 16- and 17-year old children. Under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, children's services departments have a duty to accommodate children under the age of 18 who are unable to live with their families and these children become looked-after. Council housing services also have a duty towards homeless 16- and 17-year-old children under part 7 of the Housing Act 1996, with these children considered in 'priority need' for housing if they are not a care leaver or owed a duty under s20 of the Children Act.

The Southwark Judgement ruled that a council's Children Act duties should take precedence over their Housing Act duties, with **subsequent guidance (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/upl oads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/712467/Provision_of_ac commodation_for_16_and_17_year_olds_who_may_be_homeless. pdf)** clear that children taken into care and accommodated under section 20 unless they are judged not to be in need, or when they refuse that form of support.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

The number of inpatient mental healthcare beds for teenagers **fell by 20 per cent (https://www.ft.com/content/27818675-ee95-4915-a956-6a387abc599d)** between 2017 and 2022, a reduction of 325 beds, despite increasing need for treatment. This means that councils are increasingly having to identify suitable accommodation and support for young people experiencing severe mental distress, with a **significant increase (https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/news/number-of-applications-to-deprive-children-of-their-liberty-in-unregulated-placements-rises-by-463-in-three-years)** in the number of applications for Deprivation of Liberty Orders for children in unregulated settings.

Youth justice

The number of children in youth custody has **declined by more than three quarters (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2021-to-2022/youth-justice-statistics-2021-to-2022-accessible-version#children-in-youth-custody)** in the last ten years, from an average of 1,959 children at any one time in the year ending March 2012 to 450 in the year ending March 2022. However, while the number of children in custody has fallen, the **proportion of proven offences (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2021-to-2022/youth-justice-statistics-2021-to-2022-accessible-version#proven-offences-by-children)** by children in the category "violence against the person" has risen, now accounting for 35 per cent of all proven offences. While fewer young people are being sentenced to custody in a drive to support more young people in the community and improve their life chances, this also means that youth justice services are working with young people who are committing more serious crimes and may have more entrenched needs, requiring additional support from children's services and potentially being brought into care.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

The increase in the number of children needing placements has, for the last few years, largely been driven by increasing numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children arriving in the country. Between 2021 and 2023, the **total number of children in care (http**

s://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/b6dc8277-5acb-41f1-fb49-08dbf5f3097e)** increased by 3,070 (80,770 to 83,840), while the **number of UAS children (https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/adbecb9f-3ac2-4a1c-fb48-08dbf5f3097e)** increased by 3,140 (4,150 to 7,290).

The **National Transfer Scheme (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-interim-national-transfer-scheme)** was established in 2016 to enable the safe transfer of unaccompanied children in the UK from one local authority to another local authority. This aims to ensure a fairer, more equitable distribution of unaccompanied children across local authorities to help all councils meet their duties under children's legislation, and participation has been mandatory for all councils with children's services since February 2022.

Children's Homes Capital Fund

The Department for Education has **invested £259 million (https://www.gov.uk/government/news/transformational-investment-in-childrens-social-care-placements)** in expanding capacity in children's homes. This includes £12 million to expand secure children's homes provision, including work to create new units in London and the West Midlands where there is currently no provision. Councils across the country have also been able to bid into the Children's Homes Capital Fund for match funding to develop new provision or refurbish existing provision, with a particular focus on developing step-down provision or homes for children with more complex needs.

22 open children's homes projects were funded in the first wave of funding, and another 48 projects in the second wave. These projects are anticipated to deliver around 350 additional beds by 2025. The secure children's homes funding will deliver around 50 additional spaces.

Building on this programme, in the Spring Budget 2024 the Government committed £45 million match funding to local authorities to build an additional 200 open children's home placements and £120 million to fund the maintenance of the existing secure children's home estate.

Statistics

A wide range of local, regional and national statistics with regard to placements are available via the **Department for Education (https://ex plore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics)**, and can help you to understand how things are changing in your area and how this compares with local and national neighbours.

It is important to recognise that each area will have its own needs, strengths and challenges, so statistics should be used to inform, rather than dictate, local discussions both internally and with partners. Context is also key to understanding data; for example, while most children should be placed within their local area wherever possible, for some children it is more appropriate to place them at a distance, for example for their own safety, to be closer to other relatives, or to access specialist services.

Datasets available via the DfE include:

- placement types
- distance and locality of placements
- placement providers
- placement duration
- placement stability
- reasons for placement changes
- suitability of accommodation for care leavers
- expenditure on children's services.

Ofsted also publishes **annual data on children's social care (https:// www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistic s)**, including inspection outcomes, ownership and regional breakdowns of children's homes, and fostering data.

Fostering

What does 'good' look like for foster carers?

The Fostering Network carries out a triennial "**State of the Nation (http s://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn21)**" survey of foster carers which provides insight into the views of foster carers and fostering providers.

The last survey was carried out in 2021 and offers the following insights into how to improve the retention of foster carers:

- Status – foster carers to be treated as equal in the team around the child
- Social work support – for both children and foster carers, including ensuring children's voices are heard in decision making.
- Fees and allowances – these should cover the cost of looking after a child. Consideration of retainer payments between placements.
- Improved matching by providing better referral information and improving sufficiency.
- Learning and development opportunities.
- Out of hours support.
- Access to psychological support/therapy.

This is reflected in a **2023 report on the retention of foster carers (htt ps://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/CEI_Rep ort_Foster_Carer_Retention_and_Recruitment_May23.pdf)** (commissioned by The Fostering Network) which highlights three key themes:

- feeling valued and respected by fostering services and social workers
- receiving sufficient support from fostering services

- adequacy of administrative and financial systems.

In a survey carried out for that report, the top three suggestions for improving retention were:

- improving pay for foster carers
- reducing the rate of turnover in social workers
- providing greater respect for foster carers and valuing the role of fostering.

Both the Foster Care in England review and the Fostering Network have highlighted challenges around how allegations against foster carers are dealt with and the impact this can have on foster carer retention. In 2021-22, there were **3,010 allegations of abuse (https://www.gov.uk/ government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-marc h-2022/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022#safegu arding)** made against foster carers (on 31 March 2022 there were 57,210 children in foster placements), with 52 per cent of these resulting in no further action. A **thematic report by the Fostering Network (http s://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-04/State%20 of%20the%20Nation%20Thematic%20report%202%20Allegations_ 0.pdf)** made recommendations including more national and regional focus on fostering to drive improvements in the sector, the use of a foster carers' charter, ensuring compliance with national guidance on allegations and support for foster carers during the allegation investigation. Councils will also want to consider their relationships with the police to try to ensure that investigations are not delayed so that allegations can be addressed as quickly as possible for the benefit of both carers and children.

Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) have **reported (https://drive.go ogle.com/file/d/1PCLuQTtM0wsqvwpMc9MGmXs3NJLZjOJv/view)** an increase in foster carers leaving the sector due to the "stressful experience of poorly managed notice periods." The Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers has co-produced with local

authorities **guidance on managing contract notice periods (https://w ww.nafp.org.uk/resources/managing-contract-notice-periods)** to promote positive endings, clear planning for children and to ensure that foster carers feel engaged and supported.

Exit interviews are not as common with foster carers as with employees but are likely to be helpful for fostering services seeking to understand how to improve.

As part of the *Stable Homes, Built on Love* strategy, the Government is planning to roll out the **Mockingbird programme (https://www.thefost eringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/mo ckingbird-programme)** to more areas. Mockingbird builds communities ('constellations') of six to ten foster families led by a hub home carer and liaison worker. The constellations offer peer support and guidance alongside social activities and sleepovers. An **evaluation of the programme (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/u ploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/933119/Fostering_Net work_Mockingbird.pdf)** found that it improved foster carer wellbeing and retention, while children were more likely to experience continuity of care (even if placements changed), take part in experiences that they otherwise would not have and reported feeling like an extended family.

What does good foster care look like?

Ofsted inspects independent fostering agencies and councils to assess the quality of their services. The frameworks for these inspections are a useful reference point to understand what good foster care looks like, and it should be noted that children's experiences and what matters most to them are central to these. The **social care common inspection framework for independent fostering agencies (https:// www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-common-inspect ion-framework-sccif-independent-fostering-agencies/social-care-c ommon-inspection-framework-sccif-independent-fostering-agencie s)** highlights the following areas that it inspects against, and also includes guidance as to what "good" looks like:

- the quality of individualised care and support provided and the influence and impact of the agency on the experiences and progress of children

- the quality of relationships between professionals and children and parents

- how well foster carers are prepared and supported to promote the progress children make in relation to their health, education, and emotional, social and psychological well-being

- how well children's views are understood and taken into account and how their rights and entitlements are met

- the quality of children's experiences on a day-to-day basis

- how well children are prepared for their futures and how well transitions are managed

- how well the needs of children who live outside their home authority are met

- how well prospective carers are welcomed, prepared and assessed

- the quality and impact of **fostering for adoption (h ttps://www.gov.uk/government/publications/soci al-care-common-inspection-framework-sccif-ind ependent-fostering-agencies/social-care-comm on-inspection-framework-sccif-independent-fost ering-agencies#fostering-adoption)** work

- ensuring that referrals are accurate, including being clear where specialist placements are needed and using information from previous foster carers to inform these, working with the IFA to improve the quality of referrals.

How can we recruit more foster carers?

In recruiting foster carers, it is helpful to understand people's motivations for becoming foster carers and what encourages them to apply. **Research for The Fostering Network (https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/CEI_Report_Foster_Carer_Retention_and_Recruitment_May23.pdf)** found that the top motivations for becoming a foster carer were wanting to make a difference to the lives of children in care, wanting to offer children the opportunity to be part of the family, and enjoying working with children. These motivations did not differ by participants' gender, age, ethnicity or education.

The research also identified a range of lifestyle factors that encouraged people to apply, including previous experience working with children, having flexible work arrangements or finishing full-time employment, and gaining spare bedrooms due to moving house or having children move out. Knowing other foster carers also supported people to apply. Financial motivations were not noted in the research, with some participants stating that they only felt able to foster due to having alternative income or financial stability.

The **Foster Care in England (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/679320/Foster_Care_in_England_Review.pdf)** review by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers (2018) argues that "much recruitment practice looks a little old fashioned with many local authorities continuing to use traditional recruitment techniques", however it also noted some more innovative approaches such as a behavioural insight approaches. The report notes that some councils reported significant reductions in marketing budgets for recruitment, while Independent Fostering Agencies can have access to more fostering-specific marketing expertise than some councils, whose fostering departments have to rely on corporate services for marketing support. Both the Foster Care in England review and the CMA review of children's social care highlighted the challenges of a fragmented market, with councils and IFAs all competing against each other to recruit foster carers. As highlighted above, the Government is investing £36 million through the *Stable*

Homes, Built on Love strategy to support many councils to work in regional fostering hubs to pool resources and expertise around recruitment and retention to try to address this challenge.

Research (https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/CEI_Report_Foster_Carer_Retention_and_Recruitment_May23.pdf) has highlighted some key issues to be considered in recruitment campaigns, in particular the need to demonstrate realistic portrayals of fostering and balancing this with the prospect of accessible and ongoing support.

Fostering services will also want to consider how prospective foster carers are welcomed and supported. As **The Fostering Network highlights (https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/CEI_Report_Foster_Carer_Retention_and_Recruitment_May23.pdf)**, only around 6 per cent of initial enquiries lead to applications, and only around a fifth of those are then approved. A key reason for applications not leading to approvals is that most (71 per cent) are withdrawn, for reasons including applying to another service, feeling that the time wasn't right or the relationship with the fostering agency or assessor.

In a blind shopping exercise, the Foster Care in England review found that organisations were not always good at following up initial inquiries, including promising to email more information yet failing to do so, or the provision of poor information. Initial discussions from most organisations (both councils and IFAs) tended to focus on reasons why someone might not be suitable, rather than being welcoming. **The Fostering Network report (https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/CEI_Report_Foster_Carer_Retention_and_Recruitment_May23.pdf)** notes that putting time into forming relationships with prospective foster carers by following up individual enquiries can be effective, along with consistent and regular communication, flexibility, culturally sensitive practice and providing lots of opportunity to ask questions in a judgement-free space and speak with existing foster carers.

Working with Independent Fostering Agencies

Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) are private or third sector organisations which provide foster carers to councils to support children in care. They are regulated by Ofsted and carry out all activities in relation to their foster carers including recruitment, assessment, training and supervision. IFAs provide nearly half (47 per cent) of filled mainstream fostering placements and are important partners for councils. Strong working relationships are important if councils and IFAs are to work together to provide the right placement and support for each individual child.

The Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers, which represents many IFAs, has produced a **report on how processes can be improved (https://hubble-live-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.co m/nafp/file_asset/file/291/NAFP__referrals_to_independent_fosteri ng_agencies_2019-2022.pdf)** between councils and IFAs to support both organisations to provide children with the best care. Key recommendations include:

- a focus on ensuring the best match is made for each child
- work together to understand each other's roles and internal processes
- review placement procedures and decision-making processes to reduce demand for emergency placements
- clear information for IFAs on how services are commissioned.

Councils should also work with IFAs to consider how services can most effectively and efficiently be monitored, including avoiding duplication of requests for information.

Staying put

'**Staying put (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-put-arrangements-for-care-leavers-aged-18-years-and-above)**' is an arrangement that allows a looked-after child to continue to live with their foster carer after their 18th birthday, when they cease to be 'looked-after' by the local authority. This can take place where the council considers it appropriate, and both the young person and the carer want to enter a staying put arrangement. A 'staying put' duty was introduced in the Children and Families Act 2014, which requires councils to monitor arrangements and provide advice and support (including financial) to the foster parent and young person to facilitate the arrangement until the young person reaches 21.

This is a welcome policy, providing former looked-after children with a stable home and support in the same way that most of their peers will have. However, while they are in these placements, this means the placement is not available to a looked-after child. **Ofsted reports (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022)** that around one in ten fostering placements not available for use in 2022 were unavailable because they were being used as staying put places.

We have concerns that the funding of Staying Put limits the opportunities for young people to remain in their placements, impacting on their outcomes. **Research by Action for Children (https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Staying_Put_six_years_on.pdf)** found that while the Government paid local authorities £33.28 million to implement the policy in 2020/21, the actual cost to councils of payments to foster carers was likely to be £51.4 million, a gap of over £18 million. Funding is also currently only announced on an annual basis, leaving uncertainty over how the policy will be funded each year.

This inadequate funding means that payments to carers can drop when the young person reaches 18. The Fostering Network found that 54 per cent of local authorities reported a reduction in allowances compared with pre-18 foster care allowances (figures for payments by IFAs were not included in the research), and that in almost a quarter (24 per cent)

of cases where a young person did not stay put, this was because foster carers could not have afforded the drop in income they would have experienced.

Children's homes

It is helpful for councillors, as corporate parents, to understand the current role of residential care and how this has changed over the years towards smaller settings, mostly providing four places or fewer, that are far less institutionalised than their predecessors, to ensure a well-informed approach to sufficiency planning.

What does 'good' look like in children's homes?

The Ofsted **Social Care Common Inspection Framework (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-common-inspection-framework-sccif-childrens-homes/social-care-common-inspection-framework-sccif-childrens-homes)** (SCIFF) for children's homes outlines a range of evidence it looks for when considering whether a children's home is providing good experiences and progress for children, including:

- staff know children well and promote their welfare, and children can build trusted and secure relationships with them

- children, including those who communicate non-verbally, are supported to actively participate in day-to-day and more complex decisions about their lives, as appropriate

- children's rights are respected and promoted, they are treated with dignity and respect, and they know how to complain

- children attend school or other educational provision and make good progress

- all children enjoy access to a range of social, educational and recreational opportunities, and their achievements are celebrated

- children are in good health
- children are supported to develop their independence according to individual needs
- staff work proactively to promote meaningful and safe contact with parents and former cares, where appropriate.

Furthermore, strong leadership **and a stable workforce are fundamental (https://socialcareinspection.blog.gov.uk/2022/11/24/childrens-homes-need-strong-leadership-and-a-stable-workforce/)** to excellent children's homes.

These criteria reflect what children in care told the **Bright Spots survey (https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/10091/)** was important to them, including trusting and supportive relationships, being involved in decision-making and feeling safe and settled. Children also highlighted the importance of friendships and being able to see parents and siblings.

Feedback from children living in children's homes indicate that **most feel safe and get on with the adults in the home (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-questionnaires-2023/childrens-social-care-questionnaires-2023)** all or most of the time (though this is lower than for foster care), and the vast majority agreed that they had done something fun in the last week.

What are the barriers to delivering children's homes?

In 2020, the LGA commissioned SEC Newgate to investigate the barriers to establishing and maintaining children's homes. The **final report (https://www.secnewgate.co.uk/LGA%20Children's%20Homes%20-%20Final%20Report%20January%202021_.pdf)** was published in January 2021, with the main findings summarised in the rest of this section.

Stakeholders and research found that residential care was often seen as a "last resort", with children only placed in children's homes until a "proper home" could be identified. This stigma impacted the objectivity

within which such provision is viewed by policy makers and commissioners, leading to a non-committal approach to residential care as part of the overall support structures available to children and young people.

This stigma was further compounded as children were often only placed in children's homes after several failed foster care placements (due to the 'foster care first' approach). These failed placements had an impact on children's longer-term outcomes, and contributed to a perception that children's homes were "not very good", reinforcing a perception that they should only be used as a last resort.

How can a robust business case for children's homes be developed?

A common challenge identified in developing a robust business case was in predicting the 'flow' of placements. Establishing and maintaining residential provision, especially that which offers specific educational or therapeutic support, is a significant financial commitment and being unable to guarantee that all placements in such provision would be consistently needed (thereby guaranteeing income) was a substantial barrier.

A lack of accurate and up-to-date data on the needs of children (particularly given that any such data will by its nature be out of date as soon as published as needs are changing all the time) can also make it difficult to build a strong business case about the best type of provision to invest in.

The Government, as part of 'Stable Homes', has committed to investing in support for councils to help with forecasting, including the publication of relevant data held by government. Councils may also want to consider how to interrogate their own data and work with partners, including placement providers, to best understand changing patterns of need and what provision might be most appropriate to develop.

Developing the right infrastructure

Identifying suitable properties was found to be a significant challenge, and even when these were found, it could be very difficult to get planning permission due to considerable opposition from local

communities. Significant investment could then be required to ensure properties met legal requirements.

In May 2023, the Minister for Housing and Planning made a **statement in Parliament (https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-05-23/hcws795)** making it clear that "the planning system should not be a barrier to providing homes for the most vulnerable children in society." The statement noted that "Local planning authorities should give due weight to and be supportive of applications, where appropriate, for all types of accommodation for looked after children in their area". Some councils and providers have noted that early engagement with residents can be highly effective in addressing residents' concerns about the potential impact of a new children's home in an area.

Staffing also presents a considerable challenge, particularly the lack of suitably skilled children's homes managers. As part of the Stable Homes plan, the DfE has committed to exploring the introduction of professional registration of the residential childcare workforce and a leadership programme for new children's home managers. **The Children's Homes Association has set up a website (http://www.residentialchildcarecareers.co.uk/)**, to improve awareness of careers in children's homes and to support recruitment efforts.

Providers, including councils, have reported that they find the requirement to have everything set up within a children's home prior to its registration with Ofsted, and the length of the registration and approval process itself, to be too onerous (though it was recognised that this was also linked to whether applications were correctly completed when submitted). A time-consuming process places significant financial pressures on providers, with all work needing to be done with no income or guarantee of future income (if registration is refused) and this can impact on councils' or smaller providers' ability to establish provision.

Complexity of presenting needs

There is broad consensus that the complexity and severity of children's needs is increasing, which places additional pressure on placements. For example, children's homes providers have a responsibility to balance individual needs of children within a home, ensuring that children can live together well in a home. This may mean that places go unfilled rather than risk a child moving into a home and negatively impacting on other children already living there.

Providers also raise concerns that they believe Ofsted has a lack of flexibility when it comes to recognising that supporting children with very complex needs may not look like "standard practice" for a time, and may therefore rate provision as inadequate if providers offer places to children with the most complex needs. At a national level Ofsted has **tried to reassure providers (https://socialcareinspection.blog.g ov.uk/2022/11/28/looking-after-children-with-complex-needs-dispell ing-myths-about-inspections-and-the-need-for-suitable-homes/)** that its inspectors will recognise where risk is managed well, however there remains concern amongst providers many of whom continue to refuse to offer placements to some children.

Ofsted published a report in 2024 (https://www.gov.uk/government/ publications/good-decisions-children-with-complex-needs-in-child rens-homes/how-local-authorities-and-childrens-homes-can-achie ve-stability-and-permanence-for-children-with-complex-needs) outlining how local authorities and children's homes can achieve stability and permanence for children with complex needs, which was defined as multiple needs of different types. This report noted the following elements of good practice that they saw in their case studies:

- well-planned moves into the home, at a suitable pace for the child
- providing consistency, through relationships, education and other activities
- getting children access to the specialist services they needed

- facilitating a sense of belonging for children, through knowing staff would not give up on them and that this is their long-term home
- capturing and implementing children's views on their care.

Strategic challenges

A lack of co-ordinated and strategic commissioning of children's home provision at a sub-regional, regional or national level was considered a barrier to ensuring that the right provision for children was available in the right places, with a lack of understanding of what was needed over an extended period.

A lack of robust data on outcomes for children cared for in residential homes was also considered a challenge, with foster care not providing a suitable comparator group because of different presenting needs and a recognition that children's homes are typically the last step on an often-turbulent path through care.

The nature of local authorities was also identified as a barrier given that establishing residential provision requires recognition of the long-term nature of the investment commitment and subsequent returns on that investment. Four-year electoral cycles, annual local authority finance settlements and year-on-year budget reductions were not seen as conducive to longer-term planning.

Staying Close model

Staying Close is a model which provides an enhanced support package for young people leaving care from children's homes, and is designed to be a comparable offer to the option to "Stay Put", which supports young people in foster care to remain with their former foster carers until age 21. It provides an offer of move-on accommodation alongside a package of practical and emotions support, provided by someone they know and trust, which could be a member of staff from their former children's home.

The DfE has funded **47 councils to date (https://www.gov.uk/govern ment/news/childrens-social-care-reform-accelerates-with-more-su pport-for-care-leavers)** to roll out Staying Close, and has partnered with the Foundations What Works Centre to **evaluate the model (http s://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63d2956f8fa8f53fdff6a4 c9/Staying_Close_2023_to_2025_-_application_guide_for_local_au thorities.pdf)** ahead of bringing forward legislation in the future to make Staying Close a national entitlement to support young people up to age 23.

Supported accomodation

Supported accommodation refers to a wide range of settings which offer support- but not care – to young people aged 16 and over, including children in care and care leavers. It can include self-contained flats and bedsits, shared accommodation and supported lodgings.

As of 31 March 2022, 7,370 looked-after children aged 16 to 17 were living **independently or in semi-independent accommodation (http s://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/looke d-after-children-aged-16-to-17-in-independent-or-semi-independent -placements)**, equivalent to over a third of all looked-after children aged 16 to 17. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were more likely to be living in this type of accommodation than other children. Children in this type of accommodation were disproportionately male, and around three quarters of those in this type of accommodation were aged 17.

Since 2023, supported accommodation for 16–17-year-old children in care and care leavers must be registered and inspected by Ofsted.

The National Children's Bureau was commissioned by the Department for Education to support councils and providers to successfully register with Ofsted. They have published a **range of resources (https://www. ncb.org.uk/sector-awareness-provider-preparedness-supported-ac commodation/resource-hub)** for councils and providers to support with the process, including key learning with regard to **supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (https://www.ncb.org.uk/ sector-awareness-provider-preparedness-supported-accommodati**

on/resource-hub/information-and-2) and **providing supported
lodgings (https://www.ncb.org.uk/sector-awareness-provider-prepa
redness-supported-accommodation/resource-hub/key-learning-su
pported)**.

Other settings

Secure children's homes

There are 13 **secure children's homes (https://www.gov.uk/governm
ent/statistics/childrens-social-care-data-in-england-2023/main-findi
ngs-childrens-social-care-in-england-2023#childrens-homes-of-all-
types)** (SCHs) in England, 12 run by councils and one by a voluntary
organisation. Ofsted data shows they are registered to offer 113 welfare
places and 101 youth custody places. There are no SCHs in London or
the West Midlands, though the Department for Education is funding
work in both regions to address this.

In 2022, **Ofsted reported (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistic
s/childrens-social-care-data-in-england-2022/main-findings-childre
ns-social-care-in-england-2022#childrens-homes-of-all-types-1)**
that at any one time, 50 children were waiting for a secure children's
homes place, and 30 were placed by English councils in Scottish secure
units due to the lack of available places. The Scottish Care Review
recommended that Scotland no longer takes placements from English
local authorities, and work is currently underway to look at how this
might be implemented.

Secure welfare placements are paid for by the placing authority. The
Secure Welfare Coordination Unit is the single point of contact for
councils to arrange placements and streamline the process of finding
the most suitable placement for each individual child.

Youth custody placements are arranged and paid for by the Youth
Custody Service, part of HM Prison and Probation Service.

Unregistered settings

The vast majority of children in the care of the council should be living in
regulated homes – whether that is by Ofsted or the Care Quality
Commission (the exception is where children are living with their

parents under a care order).

However, as a result of significant placement sufficiency challenges many councils report that they are still having to use unregistered placements for some children. Often these placements are emergency placements and where children have particularly complex or challenging needs, resulting in difficulties finding suitable registered provision.

Where unregistered placements are made, providers should seek to register with Ofsted as soon as possible.

Inherent jurisdiction

An application can be made to deprive a child of their liberty via the inherent jurisdiction of the High Court if a local authority has concerns about risks to their safety, or that of others, and no other suitable place – such as in a secure children's home, or provision under the Mental Health Act – is available. It is intended as a 'last resort' measure, however applications have significantly increased in recent years.

The **Nuffield Family Justice Observatory has noted (https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/children-and-young-people-deprived-of-their-liberty-england-and-wales)**that:

> " "There is some evidence that there is a cohort of children with particularly complex needs who are seen as too 'challenging' to be suitable for a secure children's home. This includes children with very complex mental health needs but who do not meet criteria for detention under the Mental Health Act. This has led to a significant increase in the use of the inherent jurisdiction of the high court to deprive children of their liberty in alternative placements. In 2020/21, 579 applications were made under the inherent jurisdiction in England – a 462 per cent increase from 2017/18 (data provided by Cafcass). In 2020/21, for the first time, applications made under the inherent jurisdiction outnumbered applications under s.25 of the Children Act 1989."

Ensuring that appropriate placements are available for this cohort of children is a key issue for both councils and central Government, with joint work across the Department for Education and NHS England to identify how best to provide support.

Residential special schools

Residential special schools which accommodate or arrange accommodation for any child for more than 295 days a year (38 weeks) are required to register as children's homes with Ofsted. They provide education and care for children with complex special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Many children in residential special schools are looked-after children, with most looked-after on a **voluntary basis (https://councilfordisable dchildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/LAC%20d ata%20bulletin.pdf)** (section 20 of the Children Act 1989). All children will have an Education, Health and Care Plan.

The **safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings – phase two report (https://assets.pub lishing.service.gov.uk/media/643e82136dda69000c11df6a/Safeguar ding_children_with_disabilities_in_residential_care_homes_phase _2_report.pdf)** by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel identified a range of systemic issues that need addressing to keep children safe. These included promoting the voices of cand rights of children with learning disabilities and complex health needs; improving the strategic commissioning for sufficiency of provision; and workforce development.

Youth justice accommodation

When a young person is arrested, the custody officer must aim to release them on bail wherever possible. If the custody officer decides that bail – even with conditions – should be refused, in most cases they must transfer the young person to local authority accommodation ("PACE beds") until their court appearance. This can be secure (such as in a secure children's home) or non-secure, such as with foster parents. Sometimes a young person is remanded into custody but this is intended as a last resort, though there can be significant challenges with access to PACE beds in some local authority areas to prevent a remand to custody.

A child becomes looked after if they are on remand regardless of where they are placed. This can mean working closely with custodial settings, with the council responsible for ensuring that the day-to-day arrangements for the child meet their needs. Where children are remanded to local authority accommodation, they are entitled to the same care planning and review processes as other children in care, and provision for these children should be part of sufficiency planning.

Over a third of children in custody are on remand. The Ministry of Justice has been undertaking **focused work on custodial remand (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61f150188fa8f5059601 353f/youth-remand-review.pdf)** to reduce this number. Remands into custodial settings may be due to the severity of the crime the young person has committed, difficulty in finding the right local provision as quickly as it is needed, or a belief that custodial provision is a better option due to risk or welfare concerns.

Key lines of inquiry for councillors

Do you have an up-to-date sufficiency statement that is shared with partners?

Statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked-after children (https://www.gov.uk/government/publication s/securing-sufficient-accommodation-for-looked-after-children) requires councils to develop a "strategic needs assessment" to inform the design or and commissioning strategies for a range of services including placements, and that this should be shared with all partners including regional partners and providers. The guidance also states that "local authority and partners commissioners will manage the markets to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation and other services to deliver the needs and desired outcomes described in the strategic assessment."

Such information is usually formulated in sufficiency strategies and statements, which are then shared in order to inform local understanding about needs for services. However, in 2022 the **What Works Centre for Children's Social Care found (https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research-report/are-local-authorities-achieving-effective -market-stewardship-for-childrens-social-care-services/)** that almost half (44 per cent) of councils did not have a publicly available or up-to-date sufficiency strategy. The Corporate Parenting Board and/or children's scrutiny committee may wish to review the council's sufficiency statement at regular intervals to ensure this is up-to-date and supporting the council to meet children's needs effectively.

The Competition and Markets Authority, in its report on the children's social care market, found that "many local authorities and large providers expressed the need for template sufficiency strategies in England with an underlying universal approach to identifying sufficiency gaps and predicting future needs." The LGA therefore commissioned Alma Economics to develop a **template sufficiency statement (http s://www.almaeconomics.com/sufficiency)** to support councils in drawing together consistent information and to identify gaps in their own planning.

What do you understand about the needs of your looked-after children, how these are changing and how they are being met?

Your local sufficiency statement should include information on the needs of your looked-after children and how these are changing to inform decisions on developing future placement capacity. All forms of placement should be considered, including that which may be provided on a sub-regional or regional basis such as local authority accommodation for children on remand, secure placements and specialist provision. Some of this information is relatively simple to draw together from your national data returns – for example, basic demographic data and the types of placements being used. However, more detailed information such as the social, emotional and mental health needs of children in your care, or particular challenges that they require support with, will need to be collected locally. Information from foster carers and children's homes staff will be valuable here to understand changing needs and how best to meet them.

You should also consider what placements and support were sought for children, and where they were eventually placed; where are the gaps that need filling? Are there some cohorts of children who are more likely to be placed at a distance, in unregistered placements or in otherwise unsuitable provision than others? For example, the **Fostering Network highlights (https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-informa tion/all-about-fostering/recruitment-targets)** that in some parts of the country, there are shortages of households able to care for teenagers, sibling groups, disabled children or unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Consider also how information from children themselves is captured. What are children telling you that they want and need, and how is this factored into the kinds of placements you are developing and commissioning? This should include information from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, whose needs may in some cases be quite different to the needs of other children you are supporting including in relation to language and culture.

Finally, what are the outcomes you hope for for the children in your care? How do you know whether each child is safe and making good progress, and are there patterns to help you understand which providers offer the best support, or what types of care work best for different cohorts?

How are all corporate parents engaged in improving sufficiency?

To deliver the right homes for all children in care requires input from corporate parents across the area. This includes engaging with councillors and officers responsible for housing and planning, to consider capacity for developing provision or approving planning applications.

This includes thinking about how to address barriers to people becoming foster carers or kinship carers, such as being able to move to a bigger home or extend a current one. Those responsible for finance will have a key role in designing and approving investment in placements and wider support. Are colleagues working on skills development considering roles working with looked-after children, for example to help expand the children's homes workforce? Are councillors sharing foster carer recruitment messages in their ward communications?

What work is taking place with neighbouring authorities to improve sufficiency?

Most councils are now working with neighbouring authorities to some extent to support sufficiency, whether that is pooling commissioning functions, sharing good practice or collaborative procurement strategies.

Working with your neighbours may be particularly effective in more specialist areas. For example, you may wish to look at how you can collectively develop specialist provision for children with more complex needs, or placements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children so that more children can stay with others who they travelled with or from the same country, with good access to support services and culturally appropriate provision.

The DfE is funding two Regional Care Cooperative pathfinders, sub-regional arrangements for commissioning and managing placements. As these develop, lessons learnt will be shared more widely to help all councils understand where there are the best opportunities to collaborate and how to make the most of these.

How do you engage with your local providers?

With most children's homes provision, and almost half of fostering places, now in the independent sector, it has never been more important to consider how you are working with your providers to meet the needs of children in your care.

What feedback do you receive from your providers, how is this gathered and collated and what action is taken on it? If you wish to prioritise local provision and/or smaller providers, how are you working with them to ensure strong relationships and to collaboratively provide the best possible support for children?

Consider also your commissioning and procurement practices – do these encourage or exclude smaller providers?

How are you planning for future fostering placements?

Since 2021, there have been **year-one-year net decreases (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2022-to-31-march-2023/fostering-in-england-1-april-2022-to-31-march-2023#mainstream-fostering)** in the number of mainstream fostering households in both the IFA and LA sectors. Is this the case in your area, and do you understand how many of your foster carers may be looking to leave in the near future?

Your sufficiency statement should help you to understand how many foster carers you expect to need going forward and the needs of the children they are likely to be looking after. It is helpful to understand your ongoing recruitment and retention strategies for in-house carers, and how you are working with independent fostering agencies to ensure you have a range of options to meet children's needs. Do you understand what is working and what needs to change? Many councils are now setting up regional fostering hubs to support with recruitment and support for foster carers using money from the DfE Stable Homes programme; if your council is not part of this, are you taking advantage of other DfE support available and learning lessons from other areas?

How collaboratively are you working with local health services?

Ofsted found that councils found it most difficult to find homes for children with severe mental health difficulties, or whose needs manifest in behaviours that place the child or others at risk. A lack of appropriate mental health provision was leading to more children being deprived of their liberty. Ofsted also noted that shortages of professionals in clinical services were resulting in delays to health and mental health assessments, with some specialist children's homes or other services only accepting children with a diagnosis or completed needs assessment.

Strong partnership working with your local health partners is vital in developing the right provision for all children in your area, whether that is inpatient facilities for children who meet the threshold, access to services for children living in children's homes or with foster carers, or joint-funded provision for children in care who don't meet thresholds for inpatient mental health care. Who are your representatives on the local Integrated Care Board, and how explicitly are the health needs of looked-after children considered by the ICB?

Statutory guidance on **promoting the health and well-being of looked-after children (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-health-and-wellbeing-of-looked-after-children--2)** is clear that Integrated Care Boards and NHS England have a duty to cooperate with requests from local authorities to undertake health assessments ad help them ensure support and services to looked-after

children are provided without undue delay. Councils and health services must cooperate to commission health services for all children in the area, while the health needs of looked-after children should be taken into account in developing the local Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

What are the arrangements if a suitable placement cannot be found for a child in a timely way?

Many councils still report having to use unregistered provision for children where a registered placement cannot be found despite extensive searches. If this has been the case for your council, what action has been taken? Is registration with Ofsted swiftly sought for unregistered placements?

Are there ways to reduce the need for emergency or unplanned placement moves? Do you have provision available for those circumstances?

Looking further ahead, how are you using the information you have about children's needs to plan future provision?

How confident are you in support for looked-after children with disabilities and complex needs?

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel finalised its report, **Safeguarding Children with Disabilities and Complex Health Needs in Residential Settings (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-children-with-disabilities-in-residential-settings)**, in 2023. This report followed the neglect, abuse and harm experienced by a large number of children with disabilities and complex health needs living in residential settings run by the Hesley Group in Doncaster. Most of the 108 children in the report were placed under Section 20 (child looked after with parental agreement), with a smaller number on full or interim care orders.

The report found a variety of failings that led to the abuse and harm experienced by children. A key issue was that the voices of children and young adults were not heard, emphasising the importance of ensuring that children have access to independent advocacy, and using creative

approaches and training staff to ensure that children with communication difficulties are able to communicate their needs and experiences.

The report also highlighted that some children had been placed in the settings inappropriately and/or were far from home; local authority quality assurance processes were inconsistent; and challenges in current provision for children with disabilities and complex health needs limit their access to the right support at the right time.

Are commissioners equipped with the right tools, policies and procedures?

Commissioners of placements for children are working within a complex 'market' which can make it difficult to ensure children are living in the right homes. Do they have all that they need to support them in their roles? This can include access to effective IT systems and databases, clear policies on placing children in different circumstances or on procuring support, or strong data on which to make decisions. How do your commissioners feedback on those areas where changes could help them to be more effective in their roles and ultimately improve outcomes for children?

How is the stability of placements for children supported?

Stability is extremely important for children in care. While placement moves will sometimes be necessary, **research shows that frequent placement moves can negatively affect children's attachment and emotional wellbeing (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/articl e/abs/pii/S019074090900187X?via%3Dihub)**, sense of self-esteem and identity, and their access to education and healthcare. Do you know how often children in your care move placements, and what the reasons for these moves are? What work is carried out to try to maintain stability of placements? This could include work at the matching stage, or the provision of additional support at times of particular challenge or transition.

What is your spend on placements for children in care, and is this delivering good outcomes?

Spending on placements for children in care has risen significantly in recent years. While some of this is due to an increase in the number of children in care, there are also issues around the increasing use of residential care which is more expensive, and sharp rises in the use of very high-cost placements.

It is helpful to understand what you are spending on placements and whether these are considered to be good value for money – that is, are they the right homes for the children in your care and are they supporting children to thrive? Is your spending helping to deliver your priorities around supporting children? If not, do you have a plan to bring down costs, for example through developing in-house provision, working with independent providers and the NHS to develop new provision to meet unmet need, or looking at whether you could commission placements differently? You will also want to consider wider action taken to reduce the number of children coming into care, where that is possible – for example through improved use of kinship care or strong edge-of-care support. The LGA's **resource pack on early help (https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/early-help-resource-pack)** also outlines key issues around providing early support for all families.