

Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2026

Ward(s): All

Portfolio Holder(s): Cllr Stacie Elson

Executive Summary:

This report seeks approval of Our Childrens Sufficiency Strategy for the next 3 years which seeks to embed and developed practice, sustaining and progressing the partnership approach to deliver innovate models of accommodation. This will enable the directorate to maximise the right accommodation for the right children at the right time.

The Strategy will have governance through, the Childrens Direct rote Management Team and the Corporate Parenting Board.

We will ensure our children are cared for by skilled and talented people who are passionate about our children, have the right home, in the right place at the right time enabling them to be safe, happy, successful and healthy

We know that there are unprecedented demands on children's social care, the recent reports from the Competition and Markets Authority and the Care Review all share similar concerns regarding the privatisation and profiteering from children's care placements by providers.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board:

- To agree the Board's shared partnership ambition for children in our care and care experienced young people.
- To support Walsall Council in meeting its legal responsibilities in regard children in our care and care experienced young people.

Recommendations:

The Board members are asked to

1. Consider and comment on the approach and implementation of the 2023-2026 Sufficiency Strategy
2. Agree the priority areas and action plan for the delivery of the strategy.

Background papers:

None

Resource and legal considerations:

There are resource implications associated with the delivery of the strategy. The proposals within the strategy will manage the cost of accommodation for Children's Services. The placements budget for 2023/24, set out in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, is £39 million.

Section 22G Children Act 1989 places a general duty on the local authority to secure sufficient accommodation for looked after children that is, so far as practicable, within the authority area and that meets the needs of those children. This "sufficiency duty" also requires local authority to have regard to the number of accommodation providers in the area and the range of accommodation capable of meeting different needs; such accommodation being sufficient to meet the duty. Commissioning strategies should include where relevant plans for meeting the sufficiency duty. Appropriate procurement legislation and process will need to be followed.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

- Children have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.
- People have increased independence, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities.

Citizen impact:

The services and the improvements play a key role in the quality of life and outcomes for the children, young people and families of Walsall.

Ensuring children in our care have good quality accommodation which meets their needs, risks and circumstances is key to their safeguarding and wellbeing over the longer term. This is the essence of the Sufficiency Strategy and the programme of development it sets out. A key aim of the Sufficiency Strategy will be to develop provision close to need, thereby reducing travel distances for young people families and practitioners. As well as helping to maintain personal and familial connections that are important to young people. The strategy will deliver considerable social value through better outcomes for children in our care.

Environmental impact:

There are no environmental implications associated with the development of the strategy

Performance management:

The delivery of the strategy will be monitored through the Corporate Parenting Board.

Reducing inequalities:

Successful delivery of a strategy to improve outcomes for children in care and care leavers will have a significantly positive impact on the outcomes of one of the most vulnerable groups. The Strategy will ensure that the directorate delivers inclusive services that meet the needs of our diverse communities, through the commissioning of a diverse range of accommodation, co-producing and developing models with our children and families.

Consultation:

Consultation has not been undertaken on this strategy as a whole, although individual commissioned services within it (such as tenders for supported accommodation, the development of new homes for example) are subject to consultation with services users to ensure that the commissioned services are fit for purpose.

The children in care council is one of the key forums through which services for children in our care and care experienced young people seek to consult on service delivery and where children and young people are able to shape and influence the parenting they receive at every level.

Contact Officer:

Full Name: Jivan Sembi



01922 658412/0555

Jivan.sembi@Walsall.gov.uk

Report: Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2026	
1.0	Introduction
1.1	Walsall Council's Sufficiency Strategy covers the breadth of services that seek to support all children, young people, and families, through to specialist services supporting children and young people with complex and dynamic needs. We believe in supporting all of our children and young people to have a safe place to live and thrive. We recognise that most children and young people are best brought up within their own families, however where this is not possible, we look to find a family or a home that best meets their needs and offers access to the support and opportunities needed for success and happiness in later life. To meet this vision, we need to have the right home, in the right place, at the right time. This strategy sets our aims and priorities to deliver this.
1.2	As corporate parents, Walsall Council is committed to ensuring children and young people in its care achieve the best possible outcomes and are well supported to step confidently into adulthood. When they cannot remain within their family, we are committed to providing children and young people with permanence and stability in care in settings which meet their changing needs over time.
1.3	The duty to cooperate underpins our role as Corporate Parents and applies to all partners. That services are based on the 'if this were my child' principle and by making sure young people have a safe and stable place to live, that they are economically sound; with the opportunity and support to be successful.
	Background
1.4	The 'sufficiency' duty to provide or procure placements for Children in Care (referred to as children looked after in legislation) is explicit within the Children Act 1989. The duty has since been strengthened by the introduction of Sufficiency Statutory Guidance (2010) and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010.
1.5	The sufficiency duty requires Local Authorities and partners to ensure, through direct provision or commissioned services, that a range of placements sufficient to meet the needs of all children are available locally, or that there is a plan in place to move towards that position. The guidance also requires that the commissioning standards on securing sufficient accommodation for children in care, also apply to children in need who are at risk of care or custody (referred to as children on the edge of care). This is important since it is preferable, where it is in the best interest of the child to provide support to avoid the need for them to become children in care.
1.6	The resulting sufficiency strategy describes how we intend to provide sufficient care placements for our children in care. To achieve this Walsall works in partnership with young people, their families, providers, and partner agencies to ensure that there is a robust and quality choice of accommodation. Securing sufficient accommodation and support that meets the needs of children in our care and those leaving care is important in delivering improved outcomes. Having the right home in the right place,

	at the right time, is an essential factor in improving placement stability, which in turn is critical in achieving better outcomes for children in our care
1.7	<p>The Walsall Right 4 Children vision for our children in care and care experienced children and young people is</p> <p>Find the right home securing a permanent home and support that meet the needs of our children and young people whether that is supporting them to return to their birth parents, long term foster care in a family home or children’s home or adoption.</p> <p>In the right place most of our children and young people will remain living close their home or within the local area but where it is in the best interest of the child or young person the right place may be outside the local area.</p> <p>At the right time where children need to enter care or where their placement needs to change, moves will be well planned, reducing the need for unplanned change and emergency homes</p>
1.8	<p>Our placement sufficiency strategy aims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide a suitable range of homes for our children and young people that meet their needs and are safe places for them to live and thrive. • To increase the recruitment and retention of Walsall Council foster carers and through training and support increase their capacity to meet the needs of the children they care for. • To ensure that our children and young people live as far as possible in local provision with appropriate services in place to support their needs. • To provide stability for our children and young people, by providing timely options to achieve permanence and providing homes and support at the right time. • To ensure we work with our partners across health and education to identify appropriate support and joint funding arrangements which benefit of our children. • To implement effective early intervention and prevention services through Early Help and Turning Point to ensure that young people receive support as early as possible and avoid or reduce the need on-going services. • To guide and help our young people to develop the life skills needed to live successfully as independent adults. • To commission smarter and deliver the best value for money while assuring quality and delivering support which meets the needs of our children and young people through building better relationships with our market providers and establishing stronger commissioning practices.
1.9	<p>There are increasing challenges in securing the right homes for some of our children. This is not just a local Walsall issue but is something that is occurring both regionally and nationally. We know that there are unprecedented demands on children’s social care, the recent reports from the Competition and Markets Authority and the Care Review all share similar concerns regarding the privatisation and profiteering from</p>

	children's care placements by providers. Covid 19 has also had a profound impact on a provider market and is showing significant signs of fragility. The emerging cost of living crisis has been a further compounding factor. Taken together with the complexity of the needs of our children in care, the prevailing provider market conditions require a proactive and innovative approach within our Sufficiency Strategy.
2.0	Summary of Needs Assessment and Trends
2.1	Our analysis has examined the changing trends in the characteristics of children in care and the nature of the placements they are experiencing. The key findings have been used to inform the development of this Sufficiency Strategy and identify the priority actions required to achieve its aims.
2.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our overall number of children in care is reducing over the last three years. As at 31/03/2023 there were 650 children in care compared with 669 on 31/03/2020, a decrease of 2.8%. The rate of children in care was 93.7 per 10,000 children in the population aged 0-17. The number of children in care remains lower than statistical neighbours but higher than regional and national comparators, despite falling numbers of children entering care. • The number of children who are entering care is falling and has been in line with or lower than comparators. In 2022-23 just 163 children entered care (23.5 per 10,000) compared with 180 children entered care in 2021-22(26.0 per 10,000 population) This is a reduction of 9.4% on 2021-22 and 31.2% on the number that entered care in 2019-20. • The proportion of children from ethnic backgrounds other than white is increasing, largely within the Asian and Other groups. This is driven by the increasing number of children seeking asylum, but also the increasing proportions of older children entering care generally. • There an increase in children remanded to custody in 2022-23 with 14 children entering care compared to 3 in 2021-23. Whilst this increase can be attributed to a significant incident the Youth Justice Partnership are undertaking needs assessment of all children involved in serious violence to influence wider partnership strategy. • The number of boys entering care has increased by 16.9%, whereas the number of girls entering care has reduced by 31.9%. The increase in children in remand and seeking asylum contributes to this. We have seen that boys are more likely to move into residential care either as a first placement or as a placement move. • The number and proportion of children in residential children's homes, secure or supported accommodation has been increasing gradually over time with 22.9% of children in supported accommodation and 11.3% of our children were living in Children's Homes • More children, coming into our care, have complex support needs, risks associated with exploitation, mental health difficulties, and have required Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst 83% of children live in Walsall but there has been an increase in children living away from Walsall from 11% in 2020/21 to 17% in 2022/23 • The stability that children have experienced in their homes has declined with percentage of children with 3 or more moves in 12 months has increased to 8.8%. This remains lower than 2021-22 regional and national comparators. • The proportion of children who have been in care for at least 2.5 years, are aged under 16 and who have been in the same home for 2 or more years has declined, in 2020-21 69% of these children had been in the same home for 2 years or more, this reduced to 66% in 2022-23 and is below the current published national average for 2020-21 of 70%..
3.0	Homes and Families for Our Children and Young People
3.1	<p>Our vision is for all children in foster care to have stable lives, establish trusted relationships, to feel cared for and to benefit from high quality foster care for as long as they need it. includes short-term, long-term, connected carers (family and friends) and foster-to-adopt fostering households.</p> <p>70% of our children live in foster home and this is a reduction compared with 76.8% in 2021-22 with fewer children in internal foster care and with family and friend's carers. Walsall supports around 200 fostering households offering short-term, long-term (permanent), connected carers (family and friends) and foster-to-adopt fostering households. Nationally and locally, there is a shortage of available foster carers, which has resulted in an increasing number of placements being sourced from independent fostering agencies which are typically more costly.</p>
3.2	<p>Our Fostering intentions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure we have a consistent approach to recruiting and supporting foster carers across Walsall Council incorporating learning from best practice. • Targeted recruitment and marketing activity to increase the overall numbers of foster carers and specifically for older children, teenagers and sibling groups. • Launch the New Horizons fostering scheme for children who have lived in a residential home but where a foster home has been identified as a better placement to meet their needs. • Continued roll out of DDP training and the Nurturing and Attachment training to increase foster carer confidence to manage trauma behaviours. • Annual Reviews to strategically explore carer capacity and encourage stretching approval / expanding approval when appropriate. • Expanding bedroom capacity of known and valued foster carers through the availability of capital funding to be promoted and used to increase foster carer capacity through adaptations. • Ensure that the Support and Stability Team offer targeted interventions, therapeutic support and guidance where there are risks to the stability of home life and reduce the risk of children's care needs escalating and the placement breaking down. • Develop and maintain strong relationships with our independent fostering agencies (IFAs). We will identify and develop creative solutions to meet

	<p>children's needs and ensure that all options are considered with them in order to navigate emerging local challenges.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the wherever possible children are supported to live with their families who can be assessed as their connected carers.
<p>3.3</p>	<p>Our vision is for all children in residential care homes to have a safe place to live, to feel cared for and to benefit from the support offered by staff and services to succeed and thrive.</p> <p>11% of children and young people lived in children's homes or residential care settings. The number and proportion of children in residential children's homes or secure accommodation has been increasing gradually. We have also seen a distinct shift towards younger children living in children's homes with over 60% of children moving to residential care in 2022-23 being for children aged 13 or under (compared with 41.0% in 2021-22 and 26.5% in 2020-21).</p>
<p>3.3</p>	<p>Our Residential Care intentions are to improve sufficiency to increase and improve the availability of children's home provision and reduce use of unregistered placements, we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop two children's homes to meet the needs of children in crisis and the needs of these children with complex needs, reduce the use of unregistered provision. • Develop an internal multi-disciplinary model of residential assessment provision for children in crisis. The service will focus on meeting the needs of children in crisis and support them to live in a foster family or return to their families. • Deliver robust quality assurance and monitoring of internal residential children's homes to support them to achieve good or outstanding Ofsted ratings and ensure that exiting internal children's homes are at full occupancy. • Capitalising on collaborations address specific gaps in provision by working with our local market and through the West Midlands Framework Providers. • To develop residential block bed contracts and negotiate with external spot providers on pricing where framework providers are not available. • Maintain robust quality assurance and contract management processes for spot bed purchases and WM Midlands Framework Providers. • Work with health services to develop a Ofsted registered "crash pad" to support children coming out of hospital settings and increase our ability to secure registered provision based on a holistic assessment of the child's needs. • Robustly apply protocols to secure joint funding and appropriate support from Health partners (ICB, TCP and BCMHT) and Education. • Supporting providers to prepare for Ofsted registration and inspection.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening and brokering closer relationships with local and regional providers to increase access to local placements.
3.4	<p>Our vision is for all young people living in supported accommodation to have a safe place to live, whilst developing their life skills to successfully transition into adulthood and independence. This type of accommodation also includes support from a key worker and dedicated facilities.</p> <p>Our Supported Accommodation intentions for young people is to improve sufficiency of Supported Accommodation to meet the needs of young people who are moving into adulthood or who have specific needs we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure young people are living in supported accommodation in line with their needs, closer to their communities and are supported to transition to adulthood. • Work with the regional commissioning arrangements for Supported Accommodation Framework to ensure that there are a range of providers to meet the needs of our young people. • Supporting providers to prepare for registration and inspection by Ofsted, ahead of the implementation of statutory regulations across the sector in 2024. • Maintain robust quality assurance and contract management processes for spot bed purchases and for West Midlands SA Framework Providers.
3.5	<p>Achieving Permanence</p> <p>We want all our children and young people to feel safe and secure at home. We have made significant improvements in helping our children and young people in care to achieve permanence in a timely manner and find a stable, long-term home. There has been significant activity towards helping our children and young people achieve permanence in a timely manner. An increasing number of our children achieve permanence through reunification to the care of their parents, special guardianship orders or adoption which means they are no longer looked after by the local authority. Our strategy focuses on finding homes that create stability.</p>
3.6	<p>Our Permanence intentions are to support more children and young people to achieve permanence within loving and stable homes we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure children who enter care have an effective permanence plan as soon as possible. • Increase the number of prospective adopters available regionally through targeted recruitment, focusing on recruiting adopters who are able to adopt older children and children in sibling groups. • Increase the planned adoption of children where effective permanence planning shows that is the best option for the child. • Implement the Family Safeguarding model to support the task of renunciation of children and subsequent revocation of care orders is proactively progressed where this is appropriate.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide training and support for special guardians to equip them to meet the needs of the child or young person and maintain stability. • Ensure that therapeutic support is available to special guardians through the Adoption Support Fund • We will review our SGO Policy, including the allowances offered and increase staffing capacity to support the stability special guardianships.
3.7	Location - We aim for the majority of our children and young people to live within the local area or close to their home. However, we recognise that sometimes it may be in the best interest of the child or young person to live outside of the local area (for example, for their own safety or need for specialist support). 83% our children living within the borough, or within a 20-mile area of their home. Sometimes it may be in the best interest of the child or young person to live outside of the local area (for example, for their own safety or need for specialist support).
4.0	Governance and next steps
4.1	The aim of the Sufficiency Strategy 2023 - 26 is to embed the developed practice, sustaining and progressing the partnership approach to deliver models of accommodation. This will enable the directorate to maximise the right accommodation for the right children. The Strategy will have governance through, the Children's Regulated Board, the Childrens Directorate Management Team, and Corporate Parenting Board.
4.2	<p>We will ensure our children are cared for by skilled and talented people who are passionate about our children, have the right home, in the right place at the right time enabling them to be safe, happy, successful and healthy by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving timely plans of 'permanence' for children and young people. • Increasing the number of 'our' children who are able to live in Walsall. • Delivering sufficient quality provision internally and externally to meet the needs of all children and young people irrespective of cultural or ethnic background. • Continued targeted recruitment of foster carers to reflect the diversity of children, older children and sibling placements. • Increasing the number of our children living in both internal and externally commissioned foster families. • Developing an increased choice of homes across Walsall with providers of choice
4.3	<p>This will be delivered through the action plan and underpinned by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our commissioning approaches, funding and governance across health partners (TCP, ICG and BCMHT), education, children and adults social care. • Ensuring we are not duplicating resource but adding value, planning together and developing co-production models of commissioning. • Implementation of Care Review Recommendations, regional contract and sufficiency models