

**Corporate Parenting Board**

**Agenda  
Item No.**

**Monday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

**6.**

**Children's Services Placement Sufficiency Strategy  
Update**

**Ward(s)** All

**Portfolios:** Cllr Stacie Elson

**Report:**

The placement sufficiency strategy outlines Walsall Local Authorities responsibilities in regard to providing sufficient accommodation for children in their care, within 20 miles of home and within local authority boundaries wherever possible and appropriate. This duty is enshrined within the Children Act 1989:

*“the Local Authority must take steps to secure, as far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the Authority’s area boundaries which meets the needs of children that the local authority is looking after and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority’s area.”*

Walsall has an ambitious Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2026 setting out the intention on how to fulfil these duties and meet the needs of our children in care and care experienced young people.

This report serves as an update to the progress of the strategic objectives set out within the strategy presented to Corporate Parenting Board on the 4<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

**Recommendations:**

To note the updated progress of the placement sufficiency strategy.

**That:**

1. CPB to note the report and actions taken to increase placement sufficiency.

## Report detail

### Finding the Right Home

We recognise that our children and young people who are in our care have different needs when it comes to finding a home, and we want to support all our young people to live in a safe place where they can thrive.

Whilst we believe our homes and families are the best place for our children and young people, we also recognise that to meet the needs of some of our children and young people, we need to commission homes from other providers. However, increasing our range of homes locally is our biggest priority.

Walsall is responding primarily in two ways; improving internal sufficiency in fostering and children's residential care and developing a strong practice-led improvement approach in the identification of placements for children and young people.

Our vision is for all children in foster care to have stable placements, establish trusted relationships, to feel cared for and to benefit from high quality foster care for as long as they need it. We will meet the individual needs of the children and young people living with fostering families, including their racial and cultural needs, in line with their age, stage of development, abilities and learning style.

Walsall currently supports around 200 fostering households offering short-term, permanent, short break and foster-to-adopt fostering households. A significant number of our carers are family and friends of the children they care for (also known as kinship or connected foster carers). For young people transitioning into adulthood, our staying put scheme offers the opportunity for them to remain with their foster carer after they have reached their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and left care.

Our Fostering for Adoption scheme with Adoption@Heart ensures that more children can be placed with their potential permanent carers on a fostering basis while the Local Authority seeks a legal order from the courts.

We are committed to improving the quality of foster care and its availability, to ensure our children in care are able to remain in Walsall, live within a family environment and experience the support and stability they need. To support our recruitment needs, we have implemented an improved marketing strategy and improved our support offer to increase the recruitment and retention of foster carers. These improvements include:

- **An improved marketing strategy:** We have a dynamic and evolving marketing strategy to support the recruitment of foster carers.
- **Becoming 'Foster Friendly':** Walsall Council is accredited as **Fostering Friendly Employer**, and we are working with local employers to encourage them to seek accreditation so that Walsall becomes a **Fostering Friendly Borough**.

- **Providing enhanced financial support:** Fees and allowances for foster carers have been significantly enhanced to bring them in line with Department for Education (DfE) rates including council tax relief for all foster carers living in Walsall.
- **Offering a capital grant scheme:** Where accommodation is a barrier to foster carers meeting the needs of children in their care, we have implemented a capital grant scheme to fund adaptations to foster carers homes so that they can care or continue to care for children.
- **Ensuring more children can live in a family environment:** We are developing specialist fostering schemes to enable children to move from residential to foster care.
- **Reducing placement breakdowns:** A Support and Stability Team improves stability by providing bespoke interventions to support foster carers and offering a 24 hour help line that foster carers can call when they need support.
- **Specialist training for staff and foster carers:** Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) is offered to our foster carers and all our staff in the fostering teams are trained at DDP level 1 and some have achieved DDP level 2. We have established attachment training for foster carers and are embedding a therapeutic approach using DDP. We have already trained over 80 foster carers and will train more over time.
- **New Horizon Fostering Scheme:** to help children who are currently living in a Children's Home, to return to live in a nurturing family environment.

## Achievements

- **A Stable Workforce that is growing in confidence:** This makes such a difference to the support we can offer to our Foster Carers. Just one part time post is being covered via secondment opportunity and from January 2024, one post in the Connected Person's Team is being covered by an agency worker. As the recruitment and retention of social workers is notoriously challenging, maintaining workforce stability is a significant achievement for the Fostering Service and one that makes such a difference to our Foster Carers and the children they care for.
- **Mockingbird:** The Fostering Service has recruited its 6<sup>th</sup> Mockingbird Hub Carer and the 6<sup>th</sup> Hub is close to be launched. For a Local Authority the size of Walsall, operating this number of Hubs is a significant achievement of which we are very proud of. In November 2023, we were visited by Fostering Network and Mockingbird USA – both were very impressed with how the model operates in Walsall. As Walsall's Mockingbird Model has such a good reputation, in January 2024, Fostering Network asked if the team could host a ministerial visit.

Whilst the team were thrilled to have the opportunity to showcase their work, unfortunately, due to other ministerial commitments, the visit did not go ahead.

- **Launch of New Horizon Fostering Scheme:** We currently have 2 fostering households caring for 2 children under this scheme. These 2 children now live in a family environment rather than a children's home. Whilst providing young people with the opportunity to live within a family environment is the main driver for the creation of this scheme, a spin-off is that it comes with a significant cost avoidance and helps reduce the pressure on the council's budget.
- **SGO Support Hub:** In 2023, we secured funding and recruited additional staff to support our Special Guardians. The SGO Support Hub was launched during Kinship Care Week in October 2023. This development should put us in a better position to secure permanence for children with their carer, it also enables us to respond to the requirements outlined in the recently launched Kinship Care Strategy (2023).
- **Promotional Work:** The Recruitment & Assessment Team have done a significant amount of promotional work in the community this year. We know this is an effective way to engage prospective foster carers in a conversation about fostering and the majority of our enquires come from our promotional work in the community.

We have been far more diverse in the range of promotional work we have undertaken in 2023. We ran a radio campaign, advertised in bus shelters and on the back of buses and we have replaced and increased the number of banners we have on lampposts. In 2024, we have arranged for some signs to be added to a traffic roundabout and commissioned another radio campaign which will run throughout 2024.

**Increased number of Prospective Foster Carer Enquires:** In 2022/23 we received just 66 enquires from prospective foster carers. At the end of December 2023, we have received 112 enquires – so we are on track to have 100% more enquires this year than in 2022/23. This creates more opportunity for the service to recruit more Foster Carers. As of the 11/1/24 we have approved four foster carers, we have 9 in the fostering pipeline with an aim of approving by the 31st March 2024 and 8 current applicants undergoing assessment.

- **Impower:** Although the number of prospective foster carer enquires for this year is an improvement on the previous year, given the national and local challenges to the recruitment and retention of foster carers, we are aware there is still more to do. To help with this, Impower are currently working with the Fostering Service on a deep dive exercise. Any learning from this will be used to shape our recruitment strategy, promotional activities, and internal processes going forward.

- **Fosterlink:** In February 2024 the Fostering Service will be participating in a diagnostic with Fosterlink. Fosterlink is the new diagnostic service to support Local Authority fostering recruitment and approval services funded by the Department for Education. They will be working with up to 40 local authorities on this over the next six months. In the first year, they will work with us to review and examine our current processes and help us identify areas for service and practice improvements. This will be a collaborative problem-solving exercise and relies on the depth and breadth of social work practice and knowledge in our teams. In year two, they will work with all local authorities by developing and sharing promising good practice. This includes disseminating examples of effective fostering recruitment practices, facilitating peer-to-peer support and creating networking opportunities.
- **Marketing Strategy:** To strengthen our approach to the recruitment and retention of foster carers, the Fostering Service are working with internal colleagues from marketing, communications, and behavioural insights team to refresh the Marketing Strategy. Any revised strategy will also make use of the learning from Impower and recommendations from the diagnostic with Fosterlink.
- **Awards for the Fostering Service:** In November 2022, the Team Manager for the Connected Person won the Proud - Outstanding Leader category at the Staff Recognition Award event.

In January 2024, the Fostering Service received an award for its involvement in the for “Any of Us” fostering film project. The message of the fostering film is simply that anyone can foster a child or young person if you have the capacity to care, and you can watch the film here: [https://youtu.be/TRHVHSwm\\_nY](https://youtu.be/TRHVHSwm_nY)

- **Improved Financial Support to Foster Carers via Fees & Allowance Scheme:** The Fostering Fee and allowances were increased in late 2022 and the allowances were increased again in April 2023 to match the new DfE rates. Further investment has been secured for 2024/25.
- **Council Tax Charge Exemption:** From April 2023, our foster carers who live in Walsall are exempt from paying the Council Tax Charge. This new initiative demonstrates how a council operated fostering service can work creatively across Directorates to offer something different and substantial to that on offer from an IFA. This is a significant benefit to this cohort of foster carers. Based on 2022/23 Council Tax Charge rates represents an annual saving to the Fostering Household of between £1,455.61 and £4,366.83.
- **Financial Support to help secure Permanence:** Earlier this year, the Directorate Management Team (DMT) agreed to a revision of our

financial policy that would see the removal of detrimental aspect to the existing policy. To make these changes, once again, significant investment was needed. This was agreed and the revised policy is to be discussed at DMT in February 2024.

- **Access to Capital Fund:** To help foster carers and special guardians respond to any emerging accommodation needs, they can make a request for financial support to the Fostering Service.
- **Delivered the Out of Hours Foster Carer Support Line for 12 months:** This trail was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2022. This is operated by a mix of staff from the Fostering Service and Foster Carers.
- **Foundation to Attachment Training:** The Fostering Service continues to deliver Foundation to Attachment Training to all Foster Carers. Cohorts 10 & 11 started in January 2024 and an additional hybrid session is being delivered for 1 cohort in February 2024. Feedback from those who have attended has been very positive and to afford foster carers with an opportunity to continue their learning, they are encouraged to join and participate in a 'Talking Circle'.
- **A Clear Approach to Practice:** The Fostering Service now has a clear approach to practice that is rooted in nurture and attachment and recognises the impact of developmental trauma. All but the 3 workers who joined us in November 2023 have completed DDP1, with a smaller cohort having completed DDP2 and Foundations to Attachment/ Nurture & Attachment 'Train the Trainer' training. We need to embed this approach and add to it with the learning available from the Theraplay Training and our forthcoming involvement with the Fostering Connections Programme (more information to follow in 2024).
- **Practice Improvement:** Our Practice Improvement Framework aims to pull together the learning from Case File Audits, Fostering Panel and any Learning Reviews. This work supports practice development across the workforce which in turn will strengthen the support to our foster carers and improve the outcomes for our children. **75%** of all case file audits were rated as 'Good' and **15%** were rated as 'Outstanding'. The feedback from Fostering Panel was also very positive with **82%** of our work being rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding'.
- **No External Assessments for 2 Years:** By having all the Connected Person Assessments completed within the service, means we now have a better grip of the QA process – this leads to improved quality and timeliness of assessments which importantly, impacts positively on the child's experience and outcomes. It also avoids any additional costs.

- **Foster & SGO Carer Newsletters:** The Fostering Service continues to produce quarterly newsletters for foster carers & special guardians.

## **Residential Children's Homes**

For some children and young people, depending on their individual needs and circumstances, a residential children's home will be the best placement for them. However, we believe that all children and young people have the right to grow up in a family environment, and that this is best for them and their life chances.

Walsall maintains five internal children's homes, including specialist respite support for disabled young people. Where out of area or more specialised provision is required, we commission bespoke packages for each young person.

Our current internal provision does not meet the more complex and challenging needs of children and young people and smaller homes (2 or 3 beds) with specialist support such as increased supervision or where therapeutic support is needed.

A capital development programme has an investment of £1.071 million to develop 2 new internal children's homes. This will increase the flexibility and capability of in-house provision to meet the increasingly complex needs of children requiring care for whom foster care is not appropriate, or suitable foster care is not available at that time.

## **Achievements**

**The Willows (The Crescent):** opened early in January and admitted their first child. The second child is planned to move to the home next week bringing the home to full occupancy. Both children admitted were previously in unregulated provision.

**Pine View:** All three children at the home are at the end of their Assessment periods and appropriate long-term homes are being identified. One child may be returning home (with support), there remains a live foster search out for a second child and the third is being considered for an internal home.

**Hilton Road:** There are currently three children residing at the home with exploration around a fourth child being admitted.

**Redruth Road:** There are currently three children residing at the home and, due to the complexities of the group, we are carefully considering a fourth child to join the home.

Both Hilton Road and Redruth have recently been inspected and both received an Ofsted rating of Good. Pine View has yet to be inspected. There is an increased demand for Registered Managers across the region. This is partly owing to many authorities adopting the position of developing their own internal provision in order to mitigate against the rising costs of private provision. This has meant that there is competition for Registered Managers and children's home staff. A career progression pathway is being completed to propose the introduction of Senior Residential Care Worker posts. This will support the career progression and development of existing staff and pave the way for future Registered Managers.

### **Supported Accommodation**

Supported Accommodation is secured through West Midlands Supported Accommodation Framework. However, there has been a shift toward spot contracting to identify suitable supported accommodation for those children who have more complex needs and where registered accommodation is not available.

The majority of our separated children seeking asylum live in supported accommodation. There is an increase in separated children seeking asylum presenting in Walsall and through the National Transfer Scheme and many remain in this provision post 18 whilst their immigration applications are progressing.

The new requirement for supported accommodation providers to register with Ofsted means that we expect to see sufficiency within this area starting to fluctuate and we are currently supporting local providers to secure Ofsted Registration under the new framework for Supported Accommodation Providers. We hold a tracker of all Supported Accommodation providers that have submitted an application to Ofsted to register.

We continue to support our care experienced young people as they transition into independence. Many young people will remain under our 'staying put scheme'. There are currently 40 children in such arrangements. We also have a number of children supported through our collaborative contract with WHG. Further to this, we will be looking at developing our offer to care experienced young people through exploring different commissioned options that support our children into independence by providing a safe home coupled with the range of life skills needed. There are 12 WHG properties that are all currently occupied.

### **Reducing Inequalities**

Children in care and care experienced young people, experience multiple disadvantages and it is incumbent on the Local Authority as the Corporate Parent to ensure that inequalities are redressed through the provision of stable homes that afford a child to develop and thrive.



## Respond

The increasing costs of children's home placements have led to an increase in Children's Services MTFO. The progress of the Placement Sufficiency strategy will mean that children will be provided with homes locally and at a controlled cost. There is continued focus on understanding and pre-empting the needs of children requiring our support in order that we can target need at the earliest possible opportunity. We continue to develop and extend our Family Safeguarding Model as a model that seeks to support families within their community and avoid the escalation into Local Authority care.

We have also developed an 'Adolescent with complex needs offer'. This is a pilot that looks at a multi-agency approach to meeting the needs of our most complex children and is a collaboration with the local authority the Integrated Care Board and Black Country Mental Health. Recruitment has been underway for the pilot with an anticipated start date of March 2024. It is hoped that this will enhance the already existing offer to adolescents to meet the needs of our more complex children, preventing the need for them being accommodated by the local authority.

## Review


We continue to implement and deliver on our strategic priorities that are underpinned by our WR4C vision:

- **Getting the basics right for children and reducing demand.**
- **Strong leadership informed by 'what works' to set our strategic direction and developing strong partnerships.**
- **Understanding the lives and challenges of real families and implementing evidence-based changes that work for Walsall children and families.**
- **Prioritising the stability of children in all aspects of their life.**
- **Creating a skilled and stable workforce and developing a culture of being proud of what we achieve with relentless drive to improve quality, impact and outcomes.**

We believe that all children and young people should have a safe place to live and thrive. We recognise that most children and young people do best when brought up within their own families, however for children and young people where this is not possible, it is our responsibility as corporate parents to find homes where they are safe, nurtured and which meets their needs and offers access to the support and opportunities needed for them to achieve success and happiness.

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