

2 September 2024

Placement Sufficiency Strategy Update

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: Children's Social Care

1. Aim

- 1.1 This report will give an update to Corporate Parenting Board regarding the progress of delivering the outcomes within the Placement Sufficiency Strategy. Offering reassurance that the statutory duties the Council has regarding this are met.
- 1.2 The Local Authority has a duty, under Section 22 of Children Act 1989 to, as far as is reasonably practicable, to secure sufficient accommodation within the authority's area, which meets the needs of children that the Local Authority are looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is local.
- 1.3 In September 2021, the law changed to require that children aged under 16 years who are placed in registered care settings which includes foster care, residential care or other care setting, must be placed in a Ofsted registered setting. From the end of October 2023, all supported accommodation providers to children in care must be registered with Ofsted or have made an application to do so.
- 1.4 The quality of care strongly relates to children and young people 'doing well' and having stability in our care. It is our aspiration to provide the best possible home, accommodation and support provision for our children and young people in our care. Securing sufficient accommodation and support that meets the needs of children in our care and those leaving care is important in delivering improved outcomes.
- 1.5 Walsall has an ambitious Placement Sufficiency Strategy setting out our intention on how to fulfil these duties and meet the needs of our children in care and care experienced young people.

2. Recommendations

The Board members review the update within this report of the Placement Sufficiency Strategy (2003 – 2026) and are asked to consider and comment on progress to date.

3. Consultation with Young People

Consultation with children and young people is focused on key areas of delivery of the strategy, such as tenders for accommodation or service design, involvement in the development of new homes. The Children in Care Council has continued to meet regularly and be consulted on a wide range of issues. The voice of the young person is at the heart of the assessment process ensuring that their wishes and feelings are included. Whenever possible children and young people can give their views when homes are being found for them. Advocacy is available to support children and young people in this process. As contracts and placements are monitored for effectiveness and quality children are asked to give their views on where they are placed and the experience of living there.

4. Report detail – know

4.1 At 30th July there were 637 children in our care which is at a rate of 92.6 per 10,000. The number of children in care has reduced over the last 3 months (as at 31/03/21 the number of children in care was 665). This reduction is due to several factors including the number of children returning to the care of their parents due to the discharging of a care order, special guardianship and or adoption order being granted.

4.2 The table below sets out where our children in care live as at end of July 2024.

Children living with their parents/family	45
Children living in residential settings (children’s homes, supported accommodation, parent and child residential assessment centres and secure children’s homes)	138
Children living in foster care	425
Children living with adopters	28
Children living independently	1
Total	637

Valuing Care Approach

4.3 We are currently implementing the Valuing Care Needs Assessment tool, an approach which allows the team around the child, commissioners and leaders to identify, articulate and track a child’s (or a cohort of children’s) needs and outcomes. It will also enable a more effective match with foster carers, by understanding the needs of the young person. On an individual level it provides a holistic, nuanced picture of needs and strengths and at a population level, provides an understanding of needs for all children/cohorts.

4.4 Valuing Care is an approach to practice and commissioning which embeds a focus on children’s needs, strengths, aspirations and outcomes to enable more effective conversations around how care can best meet individual children’s needs. The aim

of Valuing Care is to better match needs with homes wherever possible and maximise the efficiency of spending.

4.5 Valuing Care will in due course provide an analysis of data on needs and cost across our children and young people in care. This will support a better understanding of the impact of care on the needs of children and young people overall, and by different demographic features. It will provide an improved understanding of the connection between needs of children and young people and the costs.

4.6 There is a comprehensive work plan with 4 clear areas of focus which involves the working with our social work teams to embed the Valuing Care approach in planning for children in our care, the Home Finding Team's ways of working, the Commissioning Team's responsibilities in working with providers to build relationships to meet our needs and applying this approach in the recruitment, assessment and understanding the capabilities and confidence of our foster carers.

Fostering

4.7 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. At the end of July the majority of our Children in Care were living in foster care (66.7%) either with In-house foster carer or through commissioned Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's). Of all the children living in foster care 50% live with internal foster carers.

Children living with in-house foster carers	211
Children living in independent foster carers	214

4.8 A key priority for us is to increase our internal sufficiency of foster carers. There remains an intense focus on our recruitment and retention strategy. We know that for us the majority of our enquires come from our promotional work in the community by engaging prospective foster carers in a conversation about fostering. In 2023/24 we approved 8 new Mainstream Fostering Households. To date in 24/25 we have approved 5 new households and a further 2 will be approved by the end of September 2024. There are a further 18 households in the early stages of the recruitment journey

4.9 We launched the New Horizon Fostering Scheme to enable more children to live in a family environment. The scheme attracts foster carers with the skills and experience to enable children to move from residential care to a foster family. To date 3 children now live with their New Horizon foster carers.

4.10 The Fostering Marketing Strategy is updated dynamically to reflect on changes required to generate enquiries. We have increased our marketing budget to enable us to undertake a more diverse range of marketing activity including community events; engaging faith groups; a radio campaign; advertising in bus shelters, buses, banners and on lampposts; and roundabout signage. We have also updated our website to improve the user experience.

- 4.11 We have improved our support and financial offer to foster carers and retention of foster carers remains a priority and this includes:
- Fees and allowances for foster carers have been significantly enhanced to bring them in line with Department for Education (DfE) rates.
 - 100% Council Tax relief is provided to all foster carers living in Walsall.
 - A capital grant scheme offer is available to fund adaptations to foster carers' homes so that they can care or continue to care for children.
 - Support and Stability Team works with internal foster carers to provide bespoke interventions to support foster carers to overcome challenges and prevent placement breakdown.
 - We offer a 24-hour support line for foster carers.
 - Foster carers are supported by therapeutically trained social workers using the Dyadic Development Psychotherapy (DDP) model at level 1. A further 25% of the workforce is trained at DDP2.
 - We have appointed a training officer to enhance and strengthen the training offer for our foster carers.
- 4.12 In early 2024 a deep dive was undertaken by Impower, and a diagnostic of the Fostering Service also undertaken was undertaken by Fosterlink (DfE), which identified strengths within the service as well as further improvements which is informing our recruitment and retention activity for 2024/25, We are implementing the recommendations of the 2 reviews with oversight of the Regulated Management Board. The recommendations have focused on enhancing our performance information and improving our digital marketing footprint that targets our recruitment across a wide range of social media platforms. In addition we are working with behavioural scientists to improve our recruitment material and enhance staffing skills to ensure that we make every contact count based on specific behaviours and values.
- 4.13 In July 2024 we commenced using the Valuing Care approach with our foster carers and over the next 12 months will be incrementally applying this approach in our foster carer assessments to inform family-finding. We will be aiming to use Valuing Care with newly approved foster carers and newly placed children. We are keen to use the analysis of which will be provided by Valuing Care population level data to shape foster-carer recruitment and foster carer training which is focused on specific skills to develop/ targeted areas to support carers and children and shapes the annual workforce development plan.

Children's Residential Services

- 4.14 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.
- 4.15 The key priority for our service has been to provide children with good and outstanding care and to reduce the need for children to be placed in unregistered accommodation. Walsall maintains five internal children's homes, including specialist short breaks respite support for disabled young people. In addition, we commission provision through the West Midlands Residential Framework or bespoke packages for each young person. All five Homes are judged to be Good

by Ofsted and offer places for up to 13 children. We have maintained over 90% of occupancy levels in our homes over the last 6 months.

- 4.16 Our new home has enabled us care for 3 children who were either previously in unregistered children's homes or at risk of entering unregistered provision. In addition, a further 5 children have returned to internal provision from external residential homes where their needs were not being met. Our children are progressing well and achieving significantly improved outcomes and children are better connected to their communities.
- 4.17 Our support and training offer is improving staff retention and we are beginning to see good progression planning to develop future managers for our children's homes. Our Homes are embedding a trauma informed PACE approach to caring for our children. All staff have undertaken 4-day PACE training. Four children's homes are supported by clinical supervision from a psychologist from CAMHS. We have embedded robust quality assurance and monitoring of our internal residential children's homes to support them to achieve good or outstanding outcomes for our children as well as meeting Ofsted requirements.
- 4.18 Recruitment and retention of staff requires a relentless focus. We have established senior Residential Child Care Worker roles, and we have reviewed management arrangements, establishing assistant managers in each of our homes. We are developing a career progression pathway to attract experienced registered managers, retain staff and develop future managers.
- 4.19 A sixth children's home will be established In 2024/25 for up to three children in Walsall which increases internal sufficiency to 16 children. A residential sufficiency review is currently underway to consider our future needs and demands and this will be concluded in October 2024.

Supported Accommodation

- 4.20 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.
- 4.21 Ofsted is regulating provision for 16/17-year-olds from 28th October 2023 which will come under a quality standards framework. We welcome the new regulations framework and dedicated work is underway to ensure that we continue to work closely to support independent providers currently providing accommodation for 16 and 17-year-olds to register accommodation under the new regulations' framework.
- 4.22 We are currently working with 16 providers and of these 4 are now registered with Ofsted, 3 have been inspected and are awaiting the outcome of the inspection visit and 9 providers have submitted their applications and awaiting an inspection visit. We track all Supported Accommodation providers to ensure that the have applied to Ofsted to register and their application process is tracked.
- 4.23 We capitalise on collaborations regionally to address specific gaps in provision by working with our local market and with the regional commissioning framework to

ensure that provision is meeting the needs of our children through the West Midlands Framework providers. We expect some fluctuations in provision because of the new regulations. We aim to undertake a short review of Supported Accommodation sufficiency once Ofsted inspections have been completed to assess the quality and quantity of providers in Walsall and The Black Country and where these are meeting our sufficiency needs..

5. *Financial information*

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 2024/25 set out in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, is £47.25 million. Commissioning strategies should include where relevant plans for meeting the sufficiency duty. Appropriate procurement legislation and process will need to be followed.

6. *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.

7. *Decide*

The report provides an update on the progress against the key areas of delivery.

The Board members are asked to consider and comment on progress to update within this report of the Placement Sufficiency Strategy (2003 – 2026).

8. *Respond*

The progress of the Placement Sufficiency strategy will mean that children will be provided with homes locally and at controlled cost. There is continued focus on understanding the needs of children requiring our support in order that we can target need at the earliest possible opportunity

9. *Review*

The delivery of the strategy is monitored through the Corporate Parenting Board and progress against its action plan is reports to the Regulated Board which is chaired by the Director of Sosial Work.

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 the number of children requiring our care.
- 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.

Background papers

Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2006 approved by the Corporate Parenting Board
- 4th September 2023

Placement Sufficiency Strategy Update Report – 12 February 2024

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