



Northumberland

County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 4TH NOVEMBER 2021

TITLE OF REPORT: Children's Homes Placement Sufficiency

Report of Cath McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson

Report prepared by Liz Spaven Senior Manager for Residential & Family Placement Services.

Purpose of report

This report is presented to outline the key issues and challenges in relation to placement sufficiency for Looked After Children. The sufficiency strategy is currently being reviewed and updated and will be presented to FACS in January 2022.

Recommendations

To note the contents of the report and make any comments for inclusion in the 2022/24 Sufficiency strategy update.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report links to the Living priority of the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2022

Key issues

1. To ensure that NCC is meeting its sufficiency duties.
2. To ensure that key actions are in place that will support the provision of placements for looked after children and care leavers.
3. Placement sufficiency and availability is a key element of the independent review of children's social care with an interim report noting that the challenges and shortfalls of the current system in providing timely placements for some children.

Background

Northumberland County Council's (NCC) Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy 2019 - 2022 sets out the Council's approach to meeting its responsibilities to provide secure, safe and appropriate accommodation to children in care and care leavers.

We aim to provide the right service at the right time for the right families recognising that at times families require additional support to help them stay together. Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that we do. If it is

not safe for children to stay at home then we will intervene to ensure they are given the care, support and stability that they deserve.

As corporate parents, underpinned by our leadership pledge, we will strive relentlessly to provide the best quality care and support to our looked after children and care leavers that we can. We recognise the importance of safe and secure placements to ensure children in our care live happy, healthy lives and achieve the best possible outcomes that they can. This is provided through well supported placements that meet the child's needs. We will place our children in a family setting wherever we can, unless their needs are better met in residential or other care settings.

We offer a range of placements tailored to meet the individual needs of children. This can include special guardianship (SGO), foster care, children's homes, adoption or supported accommodation.

We know we are faced with several challenges which are highlighted below and we detail some of the actions that we are putting in place to address them. The sufficiency strategy once it is completed will give a much more detailed overview of the range of needs and the actions we will take and how we will measure our success.

Sufficiency Duty

The duty to provide or procure placements for Children Looked After (Children in Care) is explicit in the Children Act 1989. These regulations require a strategy to be in place that describes how local authorities intend to provide sufficient care placements for its children in care. The introduction of Sufficiency Statutory Guidance (2010) and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations has provided further clarity on the implementation of section 22G of the Act.

The Statutory Guidance sets out a requirement for local authorities to work with key partners to be able to secure, where reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for children in care which meets the needs of children 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.

Placement of children in care

Northumberland's children in care population as at the end of September 2021 was 399 (rate of 70 per 10,000 of under 18 population). The placements of these children are:

LAC at year end by placement (31st March)	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	Current (Sep-21)
Foster placements	73.0%	71.4%	65.5%	66.0%
Placed for adoption	5.0%	3.0%	5.5%	5.0%
Placement with parents	6.0%	8.3%	13.9%	12.0%
Other placement in the community	x	3.9%	2.7%	3.0%
Children's homes, secure units and hostels	11.0%	9.9%	7.7%	9.0%
Other residential settings	2.0%	2.8%	3.6%	4.0%
Residential schools	0.0%	0.2%	0.9%	0.8%
Other placements	x	0.5%	0.2%	0.2%

The number of children in care has reduced over the last 6 months (as at 31/03/21 the number of children in care was 444). This reduction is due to several factors including the number of children placed at home being reduced due to the discharging of a care order, special guardianship or adoption order being granted. However, the overall percentage of

children looked after who are placed in foster care has been impacted by the increased numbers of children who have been placed with parents.

NCC have continued to maximise the in-house provision of foster carers with the reliance on Independent Fostering Agency placements remaining low. Despite the ongoing challenges due to the pandemic, the fostering team have been creative and resourceful in securing children with in house foster carers and recruitment activity has been positive. Foster carers have also worked collaboratively through the pandemic challenges and showed great resilience and commitment to children in care.

The COVID-19 pandemic did impact on the timeliness of care proceedings with, for example, a delay in proceedings concluding, adoption hearings being deferred. As new ways of working have become established this has enabled cases to conclude and the court is progressing through delayed cases.

An increase in the number of children accommodated in residential provision is due to the complex needs of some children whose needs could not be met in a family environment. Meeting the placement and support needs of these young people in a timely way remains the biggest challenge for our placement provision and this is reflected nationally through the independent review of children's social care. Further to this, the availability of emergency accommodation particularly for children and young people with complex needs also remains a challenge on the occasions when this is needed.

As of the 04/10/2021 52 children are living in children's homes. Of these, 11 live in 3 provisions operated by NCC and are located within the County. Children placed within our in-house children's homes continue to thrive. The staff teams within the homes have positively managed the pandemic and continued to support and deliver a high and robust level of care to the children in placement. The remaining 41 children live in children's homes operated by independent providers of whom 18 are located within Northumberland

The average duration of a residential placement operated by NCC over the previous four years is 845.5 days, compared to 457.5 days of a non NCC operated home. As permanence supports children having a sense of security, continuity, commitment, and identity to support them through childhood, this 84.8% increase in placement stability reinforces that placements operated by NCC offer a greater resilience and commitment to our children therefore, providing evidence to support plans to develop our NCC provision for our most vulnerable children. (see section below)

The Kinship Assessment and Support Team (KAST) have progressed a number of key areas regarding support to special guardians. Virtual monthly training sessions are taking place, a support and advice line and support is also commissioned from SGO Support Service, Family Action.

The Accommodation Service within NAS takes the lead in securing appropriate accommodation for young people open to services and works jointly with children's commissioning, housing and framework providers to source appropriate accommodation. A new accommodation framework has been in place in January 2021 increasing the availability of appropriate accommodation for this group of young people.

Work continues to take place to promote staying put as a positive option for young people including the development of a new in-house staying put policy, living together agreement and future awareness raising sessions for current foster carers.

Future Actions

Northumberland is collaborating with the 11 other local authorities in the North East (NE) Region to implement the Mockingbird programme. The Mockingbird programme is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model which provides sleepovers and short breaks, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities. The programme improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families. This model will help to reduce the current pressure by supporting placement stability and foster carer retention at scale and compliments the strategic aims of NE LA's to grow in-house fostering provision and keep children close to home.

Strengthening support to our in house foster carers is also being progressed by the delivery of training that will use the foundations of a Non-Violent Resistance Parenting Approach and will include attachment based parenting principles to support connection and co-regulation. This will impact positively on placement stability regarding more complex children that have experienced trauma and loss and as a result can present with challenging behaviours.

In 2018, a business case was submitted and agreed with the proposal being to build 2 new four-bedroom children's homes within Northumberland, which will provide medium to long term care for children aged 6 - 17 years old. This was to be funded from the Childrens Homes Provision in the MTFP. Due to various complicating factors the progression of the new builds has been delayed. A bid has also been made to the DfE to match fund the project of the total build costs. This will give the local authority the opportunity to further maximising opportunities for meeting its sufficiency duty.

To achieve best value, the designs have been altered to accommodate 5 children in each of the new builds. In order to maximise sufficiency a review of our current children's homes was carried out. During this review it was established that one of the homes would be suitable to provide a 2-bedroom extension. This will improve our sufficiency in Northumberland by 12 residential placements, reducing our dependency on independent providers.

New legislation came into force in September 2021 in relation to placing vulnerable children under the age of 16 in unregulated accommodation as part of a series of reforms to drive up standards in children's social care. Children in care under 16 years of age will no longer be allowed to be accommodated in unregulated independent or semi-independent placements. Northumberland have not placed any children under 16 in bespoke accommodation in this year. While the aim of this legislation is to ensure the most vulnerable are cared for in settings that best meet their needs, this places even more pressure on already scarce resources needed to accommodate young people who need emergency accommodation and where authorities have used this, it is in the absence of any alternative placement options.

National standards are likely to be introduced for unregulated settings that are accommodating 16 and 17-year-old children in care and care leavers, to raise the bar for the quality of this provision and ensure consistency across the country. This will create further challenge for NCC when all registered placement provision options have been exhausted when a child needs to be accommodated. Opportunities to develop emergency provision are underway with consideration being made to a 2 bedded emergency home.

Conclusion

Updating the Sufficiency Strategy is a priority to ensure this reflects Northumberland’s vision and priorities for children in our care. This should be seen alongside our continuous improvement plan and our corporate parenting strategy and action plan. Once the Sufficiency Strategy has been updated, it will be presented back to the committee in January 2022

Implications

Policy	Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy
Finance and value for money	Capital funds have been agreed corporately in relation to children homes new builds. Revenue for staffing the new builds has been proposed through an invest to save proposal. All budgets are closely monitored to ensure value for money regarding the placements and provision it provides.
Legal	Statutory responsibility as corporate parents
Procurement	
Human Resources	HR implications for staffing new residential units
Property	
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	
Risk Assessment	This report is part of the Risk Management systems in place to check on the standards and service provision for looked after children and care leavers
Crime Disorder &	

Customer Consideration	
Carbon reduction	
Health and Wellbeing	Improvements to the health and wellbeing of our children in care and care leavers
Wards	All

Background papers:

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

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