



# Northumberland

## County Council

### **FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:**

**DATE: 3<sup>RD</sup> FEBRUARY 2022**

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### **TITLE OF REPORT: - Children's Homes Build Progress**

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

Cabinet Member: Guy Renner Thompson

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#### **Purpose of Report**

To provide Members an update on the progress of the children's homes builds/plans.

#### **Recommendations**

The Committee is recommended:

1. To note the contents of the report and make any comments for further scrutiny.

#### **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 Statutory duties and placement sufficiency duties for children who need to be cared for away from their birth families.
2. To ensure that key actions are in place that will support the provision of residential placements for children in care and care leavers.
3. Placement sufficiency and availability is a key element of the national 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**

The Council's Children in Care and Care Leavers Sufficiency Strategy 2022 –2024, acknowledges the Sufficiency Duty requirements of Northumberland to have a range of appropriate quality accommodation options for children in care and care leavers. The type of accommodation where a child is placed will depend on their assessed needs. The suitability of the accommodation for each individual placement is an important component to improving placement stability. Placement stability is one of the highest priorities for us and there are a range of wrap-around services being piloted and developed to improve the child's experience and support placement stability.

Having a range of options and identifying the right placement for each child is key to stability, permanence and improving outcomes for children. Children living in care in Northumberland experience an average of 3.8 placements in their first two years of their care experience. For the 44% of children entering a residential placement, it is at least their 5th placement whilst in care. The impact of this further compounds their already lived experiences of trauma, potentially impacting on any existing behavioural and emotional difficulties, resulting in the possibility of further placement disruption.

The average duration of a residential placement operated by Northumberland County Council (NCC) over the previous four years is 845.5 days, compared to 457.5 days of a non-NCC operated home. 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 children who are placed in a NCC residential provision receive a greater resilience and commitment, providing evidence that NCC needs to expand and further develop our residential provision offered to our most vulnerable children.

An increase of commissioned placements has significantly increased over the last 2 years which has coincided with the increase in our overall children looked after population. This supports our vision to increase our own residential placement to ensure value for money however most importantly so that children can stay local to their own support networks, communities and families. Additional NCC owned children's homes within the county would allow for the provision of more "in-house" care at a reduced cost compared to commissioned placements. NCC owned provisions are at a lower cost however this does not and should not compromise the quality of care and that the level provided is equal to or greater than a commissioned provision.

An update was provided to the Family And Children's Services scrutiny committee on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 2021 that gave an overview of the current position within Northumberland in relation to placements for children in care and the Children in Care and Care Leavers Sufficiency Strategy 2022 – 24 was presented to the board on the 5<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

## **Sufficiency Duty**

The duty to provide or procure placements for Children Looked After (Children in Care) is explicit at section 22G of 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 the Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked-After Children Guidance (2010) and the Care Planning, Placement and Case

Review Regulations 2010 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.

## **Residential Children Homes Developments**

An extensive search of properties and land that were within NCC's ownership was completed, resulting in two sites being identified as viable. They both offered good infrastructure to the wider authority and the communities, whilst providing a safe environment for our children to develop the skills to help them recover from their early childhood trauma.

The first scheme achieved planning permission for the development of a 4 bedded property, following a delay in the planning process due to the impact of Covid-19. NCC were required to develop an appropriate planning process to ensure that a sufficient level of governance was applied to all applications. During the initial ground investigation work, two mined coal seams were identified under the proposed site. Following further investigation undertaken by structural engineers it was recommended that this site was no longer viable due to the costs associated to the remedial work and it would not offer good value for money.

The second site achieved planning consent on the 6 July 2021.

As both sites had the same building plans, the tendering process had commenced for the first site (prior to being identified as not a viable option) with the returns identifying a significant shift in development costs, showing an increase of between 40 – 50%. This increases from the original costings were linked to the impact of the pandemic on the building trade, the time span from the quantity surveyor pricing the project and progression to the tendering process and the two projects now being developed separately.

This cost increase and the recommendation from Property Services prompted a review of the current children's homes build/development plan. This resulted in the design team revisiting the original specification, focusing upon a more traditional build. The new plans offered a five bedded property with an estimated projected savings of 28.4% over the returned tendering process. Concurrently there was a review of our children's homes properties, which identified that there would be one property suitable to extended, creating two additional bedrooms to the first floor and additional living and office space to the ground floor.

These outcomes influenced the first scheme being replaced by the extension to our existing property and scheme two progressing with the alteration to a five bedded property, providing a best value project.

The decision was made to postpone the development of the building work to enable an application to the Department for Education's (DfE) new capital funding programme (announced in July 2021 with a submission date in October 2021). This funding was designed to support local authorities to establish new children's homes provision via expansion, refurbishment, or new building work. The successful application was confirmed

on 17 December 2021. The awarding of this grant will enable the homes build/development plan to further support the Children in Care and Care Leavers Sufficiency Strategy 2022 – 24.

## **Future Actions**

The 2 bedded extension to one of our current homes is being progressed with the aim being to have the building work completed by September 2022. The tendering process will begin in January 2022 regarding the new build.

Running parallel to the building plans we will review our short break care provision to ensure it sufficiently supports children with a range of complex disabilities and mental health needs from within the community as well as supporting placement stability for children in care. We will continue to encourage multi-agency partnership working, offering a more proactive approach at an earlier stage to try and continue to support children in their family home where appropriate.

Following a Government consultation in early 2021 in relation to the number of vulnerable children in unregulated placements, an amendment was made to the 2010 Regulations, adding a new Regulation 27A as part of a series of reforms to drive up standards in children's social care. **The effect of this is that a placement by a local authority in an unregulated setting is now unlawful for any looked after child who is under 16 years of age.** While the aim of this legislation is to ensure the most vulnerable children 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. A review of our emergency provision will be completed to ensure the strategy focuses, specifically on the right solutions, identifying appropriate planning and delivery of sufficient high-quality placements and associated support, so that every child who is Looked After achieves their potential.

## **Conclusion**

In total 69% of our children currently living in a residential placement have previously lived in a residential or foster placement, again reinforcing that the resilience of placement is key to creating stability for children. We know that our residential provisions in Northumberland maintain placements by an 88% average better than any other type of placement. We do not end placements, due to a child's presenting behaviour, ensuring that all transitions are planned.

The building of new NCC owned residential provision within the county is an important part of the sufficiency strategy as it allows more children and young people to be cared for in our own provision with the potential of staying closer to their birth family connections and support structures.

The sufficiency strategy should be seen alongside our continuous improvement plan and our corporate parenting strategy and action plan.

## Implications

<b>Policy</b>	Children in Care and Care Leavers Sufficiency Strategy 2022 – 24
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	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.
<b>Legal</b>	Statutory responsibility as corporate parents Children Act 1989  Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021
<b>Procurement</b>	Procurement processes will be followed regarding the awarding of building contractors
<b>Human Resources</b>	HR implications for staffing new residential units
<b>Property</b>	
<b>Equalities</b> (Impact Assessment attached)  Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	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
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	
<b>Customer Consideration</b>	
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	These schemes have been designed to address sustainability as follows. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CO2 Emissions:</li> <li>• High levels of insulation</li> <li>• High levels of airtightness</li> <li>• Good levels of daylight</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superior double glazing</li> <li>• Heating and hot water will be provided by an air source heat pump.</li> <li>• LED lighting.</li> </ul>
<b>Health and Wellbeing</b>	Improvements to the health and wellbeing of our children in care and care leavers
<b>Wards</b>	All

### **Report Sign Off**

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal (	Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	Cath McEvoy-Carr
Chief Executive	Daljit Lally
Portfolio Holder	Guy Renner-Thompson

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