



Addendum - Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2025

Introduction

From October 2021 onwards there has been unprecedented changes to the placements market caused by multiple factors, the impact has been significant for children coming into care/residential schools and for those whose placements breakdown because the carers/schools can no longer meet their needs. This addendum report focuses on the current challenges and anticipates future changes following the Care Review in 2022, it provides an overview of the challenges and our additional priorities to ensure we continue to meet the needs of our children. This report should be read in conjunction with the 2021 – 2024 strategy which provides our overarching strategy.

Current Situation

On 28th February 2023, we had 521 children in care and 272 care leavers. An increase in the age of the care population is one of the most significant recent changes in the cohort. Adolescents are now the largest and fastest growing age cohort in the care population. A system which was designed to meet the needs of younger children is now needing to adapt to a different set of risks and needs. This coincides with a crisis in the private children's home market with demand outstripping supply. We have agreed to develop an edge of care service from April 2023, the aim is to work intensively with adolescents and their parents/care givers to negate the need for them to come into care.

Complexity of children requiring care/residential schools

Buckinghamshire is not unique in its experience of increased demand for social care and educational support. Post COVID we have had a significant increase in the placement requests for children with mental health challenges and those who are being exploited. Our children in care population has changed with children increasingly coming into care aged 12+ and requiring a higher level of care/support from the outset.

Challenges: Impact on Children

Brexit

In January 2020, the United Kingdom withdrew from the European Union. One of the consequences of this policy is the impact on the workforce. Historically, children's homes, domiciliary care agencies and semi-independent providers have relied heavily on recruitment of European workers to ensure they could meet the demand. However, with high numbers returning home there has been a noticeable impact on supply.

Impact on children:

- Due to the shortage of domiciliary carers, we have not been able to provide agreed packages of care for our families who have children with additional needs. Some families have waited over 12 months for the domiciliary care packages to be delivered. This has subsequently impacted on the waiting lists for children requiring respite at our residential respite units, all three units now have waiting lists of 12 months plus.
- The lack of residential workers and workers for semi-independent placements has led to some providers closing or reducing the number of children they can offer placements to. Over recent months domiciliary care agencies have commenced sponsorship of migrant workers, but this is not possible for children's homes due to the Ofsted regulations regarding employment and references. With the reduction in children's homes spaces available nationally and locally competition for placements is high with searches taking many weeks. Emergency residential placements are impossible to find for any child 12+ and it is now taking on average 4 to 6 weeks to identify a suitable placement.

National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

In March 2022, the Local Authority was directed by the Home Office to accept 7 referrals for UASC's each month until we have 128 under 18-year-olds in our care. We have forecast that we will reach the allocated number by April 2025, and we will then have 150+ UASC care leavers. Prior to this direction we would have on average 6 to 8 UASC's (under 18) at any one time and approx. 20 over 18's. Currently Home Office asylum decisions are taking 3 to 4 years, during this time the UASC's care leavers are unable to work, claim benefits or access social housing and the Local Authority, therefore, must provide financial and practical support until this is resolved.

The National Transfer Scheme (NTS) has confirmed that over 75% of the UASC's that require care are aged 16+ therefore, we have forecast that it will take until April 2025 to reach our current target. It is, however, highly likely that the number each Local Authority is expected to rise in line with the numbers of asylum seekers travelling to the UK.

In October 2022 an asylum hotel was opened in Buckingham, we were advised by the home office that this would be used for adult males only. However, since opening we have received 6 referrals for Unaccompanied Children that had been placed at the hotel. They are now in our care.

Impact on children:

- It has not been possible to identify foster placements for most of these children, due to their ages they have been placed in semi-independent placements despite having limited semi-independent skills. Semi-independent placements are not able to provide care despite the high levels of trauma experienced by the children.

- Once a positive asylum claim is received, we support our Care Leavers to access social housing. The increase in care leaver numbers requiring appropriate housing provision and limited supply delays the moves taking place and therefore, they are left in transient arrangements for many months.

Homes for Ukraine

In March 2022 the government launched the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, seeking support from families to offer rooms/homes for Ukrainian's fleeing the war zone. The response from Buckinghamshire residents was immense, over 1000 families came forward and have offered their spare rooms for longer than the initial 6-month request. This campaign has significantly impacted on the recruitment of foster carers both by the Local Authority and by Independent Fostering Agencies due to there being a finite number of households with spare rooms. This is a local and national issue. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care have assessed there is a 9000 shortage of foster placements.

Impact on Children:

- We have not been able to meet our foster carer recruitment targets in 2022/2023 and therefore, have been unable to place children locally with carers in their communities. For many children this has led to them being placed out of county and requiring changing schools, CAMH's and health support.

Cost of Living

The cost-of-living crisis is impacting on staffing and foster carer recruitment and retention, alternatively qualified staff from our homes, external placements and dom care agencies are seeking alternative roles with higher levels of pay. 80% of the placements market is privately owned, providers are reporting significant staffing recruitment challenges, many have reduced the size of their provisions, and some have closed. Providers are regularly reporting over 200 referrals for each vacancy. From our own foster carers, we have seen an increase in resignations due to adult children returning to the family home and carers who have had to return to employment and therefore, feel no longer able to commit to full time fostering. Some of our full-time carers have returned to work and are now only able to offer respite.

Ofsted have amended their inspection criteria of children homes to permit the use of a small number of agency workers being permitted on each shift. Providers are reporting that this has not had the desired impact due to agencies also struggling to recruit staff to cover these roles.

Impact on Children:

- The shortage of foster carers locally and nationally is leading to children being placed in residential care, providers are reporting a significant increase in referrals for children aged 6+.
- Residential placements are choosing to take the children who would have previously been placed in foster care as they are easier to show improved outcomes and less likely to impact on Ofsted ratings.

Lack of registered managers – Ofsted registration of semi-independent placements

Over the last 2 years there has been a national shortage of registered managers for children's homes. Many providers have not been able to progress plans to open additional homes due to not having a manager in place. Residential managers are reporting they are leaving the profession or potential managers are not stepping up into these positions due to the implications of an 'inadequate' judgement on them personally.

In April 2022, Ofsted launched a new initiative where registered managers could dually register for a satellite home linked to their main home. Satellite homes in the main would be for one or two complex children. However, this has not had the desired outcome due to the implication that if either of the homes was judged as inadequate both homes would receive the same judgement.

Ofsted inspections have focused heavily on matching of children, where it is viewed that children have not been matched appropriately this has affected Ofsted ratings (most LA's will not place unless rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding'). We are receiving between 10 and 15 Ofsted notifications per week of suspended use of Children's homes which impacts on availability.

From April 2023 Ofsted are commencing the implementation compulsory registration of semi-independent placements, they will also have to have a registered manager in place by October 2023. This is impacting on the number of registered managers available for children's homes.

Impact on Children:

- There has been a significant reduction in the number of residential placements available, historically there has been a choice of placements however, now it is taking 4 to 6 weeks to find a placement, there is usually only one option which can lead to children being placed a significant distance from home.

- For our more complex children no residential placements have been identified and we have had no option other than to place them in an unregistered provision (illegal).
- We are anticipating that the shortage of registered managers will impact on the number of semi-independent providers who are able to meet the Ofsted registration requirement by October, this will lead to closures and less placement options for 16+.

Placement Stability

Over the last 12 months we have seen an increase in the number of children being asked to leave their placements, this is from foster care and residential placements. This in the main has been due to a change in their needs/risks which the care providers do not feel able to meet their needs or they are concerned about the impact of the child's behaviours/risks on their Ofsted judgement. Residential providers and foster carers are aware that there are more children than placements available so they can choose which children they wish to care for.

Impact on Children:

- More children are experiencing placement moves. Transitional arrangements for children and young people negatively impact on their ability to form loving and trusted relationships with their care givers leading to poorer outcomes.
- There are limited options available for complex children with carers/providers being aware that they can choose less challenging/complex children.

Lack of Secure Beds

Children who are a significant risk to themselves or others meet the criteria for secure accommodation. The secure estate has faced significant challenges for the last 3 years, the waiting list for beds has been at 70+ each week with 1 or 2 vacancies. We have been advised by the secure estate that some of our children are too high risk to meet the criteria for a secure bed. For the children who we have successfully placed in a secure bed it has taken on average 6 weeks to identify a bed. The Dfe have acknowledged the shortfall and secure provision to meet need and have announced plans to increase the secure estate beds by 125 additional beds by 2025.

Impact on Children:

- Children who are assessed as high risk are being held in placements (often unregistered) where their needs are not met.
- To manage the risk in the community we have to apply for a Deprivation of Liberty order (DOL's), very few registered provisions will accept a placement with a DOL's, and some have given notice when a DOL's was required stating they do not have sufficient staffing to meet the requirements of the DOL's.

Reduction in the number of inpatient mental health beds

During and following the Pandemic there has been a noticeable increase in the number of children experiencing mental health challenges at a time where the number of inpatient mental health beds has been cut. This has resulted in an increase in referrals for placements for children requiring social care placements where their mental health needs can be met. There are a limited number of specialist provisions across the country who if they have capacity will offer placements for those under 16. No providers are offering residential placements for children aged 16+ so we are using semi-independent placements to solve this challenge, this however does not always reduce the level of risk and we are not able to provide care in these placements.

Impact on Children:

- Children are not placed in provisions where their complex mental health needs are met, this can lead to multiple short term hospital admission
- Children are placed in placements who do not have the skills/knowledge/experience to meet their needs.

Unregistered provisions

One of the unintended consequences of the lack of placements is that we have had no choice than to place children in unregistered provisions. In the last 12 months 21 children have been placed, they are all aged 13+ and mostly males. These have either been 28-day activity-based provisions or rented properties with care agencies providing staff.

Some of our children have been in unregistered provisions for over 12 months, they are our most complex high-risk children. Placement searches have continued with over 500 IFA's and residential placements contacted but no formal offers received.

Impact on Children:

- Children are held in a transient position whilst placement searches continue.
- Children can experience disruption to their education due to the duration of the provision being clear.
- Engaging with external services, i.e., CAMH's can be challenging due to the transient nature of the provision.
- There is an additional burden on social care budgets to fund food, clothing and activities which would ordinarily have been covered by placement costs.

Access to social housing

Housing colleagues are reporting a 65% increase in referrals for social housing over the last 12 months. Last year we successfully moved 34 care leavers into their own tenancies, this year we have currently progressed 31 with 8 under offer however, there is still a backlog of care leavers who are bidding/waiting for social housing and due to the lack of social housing availability alongside the increase in Care Leavers (UASC's) this will impact on the availability of local placements as they become full of care leavers who are ready and able to live independently.

Conclusion

There is a legal duty on Local Authorities to provide sufficient high-quality placements for its looked after children. Therefore, we have agreed the below priorities to address the challenges we are facing.

Our priorities

Priority 1 –

Increase our local residential capacity through in-house development and increasing our cross regional project beds, whilst exploring other alternative residential options including a secure unit.

Actions:

1. Increase our in-house provision by 8 additional beds (2 x 2 bed, 1 x 4 bed) in 2023/2024
2. Extend our cross regional project by 2 years (until 2025) and increase the beds by an additional 4 to 8 beds in 2023/2024
3. Increase in our in-house provision by 12 additional beds (3 x 4 beds) in 2024/2025
4. Participate in the Thames Valley Project to collaborate in the creation of 1 or 2 bed homes for complex children in 2024/2025
5. Explore options for developing a cross regional secure project for 16 children.
6. Broaden our residential options in partnership with Spurgeon's who are seeking to open not for profit homes in Buckinghamshire in 2024/2025.

Expected Outcomes

We will have additional 24+ residential placements for our local which will enable them to remain living locally within their communities and if appropriate to remain at their schools. We will be afforded the opportunity to work in partnership with education colleagues to deliver bespoke education packages for children who are unable to attend education provisions.

It will also enable us to ensure that as corporate parents all partners are able to provide high levels of service to meet the needs of our children.

Increasing local capacity will decrease the need to place children in expensive external provision, all of which is out of county. In March 2023 we had 49 children placed in external residential placements.

Priority 2 –

Develop a residential academy to address the challenges in the recruitment and retention of residential staff.

Actions:

1. Recruit an assistant operations manager to ensure we have sufficient capacity to deliver on our residential projects detailed in priority 1.
2. Devise a robust induction and career progression plan for residential staff
3. Submit a retention proposal to include financial benefits for residential workers.
4. Utilise residential staff from the academy to provide care and support in our unregistered placements to ensure our high standards are maintained.

Expected Outcomes

We will be able to staff our residential homes with fully permanent staff, which we can evidence has positive impact on the outcomes for our children.

Whilst the academy plan is progressed, we aim to utilise the staff recruited for any unregistered provisions we have, this will enable us to maintain the high standards of care that we provide in our children's homes.

A competitive financial package, robust induction and clear career progression programme will give us a strong platform for a positive recruitment campaign.

Priority 3 –

Increase the post 18 offer of accommodation for UASC's to offer a variety of accommodation and support options whilst they await the outcome of their asylum claims that negate the need for them to remain in placements.

Actions:

1. Build on our Redwood House project by adding a 3-bed house of multiple occupancy and a 4-bed semi-independent placement to our portfolio of options for post 18 in 2023/2024

2. Submit a bid for Dfe staying close funding by Feb 2023, this will provide 2-year funding for project workers to support UASC's and other care leavers to be tenancy ready and provide intensive support for the first few weeks after they move to their own tenancy.

Expected Outcomes

Due to the length of time, it takes for the Home Office to decide on an asylum claim we will be able to provide a range of placement options in-house that will negate the need for Care Leavers who are assessed as tenancy ready to remain in high-cost placements. If successful with the staying close bid we will be able to provide intensive support to care leavers at the critical time when they are preparing to and move into their own tenancies, we will be able to evidence the positive impact this has on the long-term success of care leavers maintaining their tenancies.

Priority 4 –

Improve the stability and support to foster carers, special guardians, and adopters by developing a dedicated placement support and life story team to a consistent offer of life story work to all children with a permanency plan of adoption, special guardianship, or long-term fostering alongside improved training and support from the fostering support team.

Actions:

1. Create a life story work team to deliver life story work for all children who have a care plan of adoption, special guardianship, and long-term fostering in April 2023.
2. Develop a placement support team to ensure we can provide intensive hands-on support to inhouse placements that are at risk of breakdown in April 2023.
3. Re-start the weekly CAMH's consultations for foster carers/special guardians and adopters from February 2023 and ensure that fast track access to CAMH's is provided where required.
4. Strengthen our placement stability processes to ensure we identify placements at risk of breakdown at the earliest opportunity and provide the necessary support to prevent this.
5. Review our training offer to special guardians to ensure they have the same opportunities as our foster carers.
6. Expand our family finding capacity in the family and friends' team to ensure that reg 44 foster carers and special guardians receive the background information and guidance to be able to care for their relative both now and in the future.

Expected Outcomes

Strengthening our placement support offer will enable us to identify children who are at risk of experiencing a placement disruption so that we can provide the right support at the right time. We will be able to evidence that preventing a placement disruption will improve the outcomes for our children.

Ensuring that we provide the same high level of support to special guardians will reduce the risk of breakdowns and children coming back into the care of the Local Authority.

Priority 5 –

Build on the work with the fostering support service to ensure the offer we provide to the carers matches or improves the offers they receive from independent fostering agencies.

This includes high levels of support from their allocated social workers, CAMH's consultations, life story work team, joint cross service training, enhanced training offer, increased financial package, access to PAM assist.

Actions:

1. Review the PAM Assist contract to ensure we are maximising the opportunities the contract offers for our carers, special guardians, and adopters.
2. Request higher levels of support from CAMH's in the contract negotiations ahead of the new contract from April 2024.
3. Review the financial package of support for our carers to ensure it reflects the cost of living increases by April 2024.
4. Expand our Mockingbird model to roll out a second constellation in the south of the county in May/June 2023.
5. Liaise with the Dfe regarding additional funding from April 2024 to expand the Mockingbird model for an additional 2 to 4 constellations in 2024/2025

Expected Outcomes

Increasing our support packages to carer will have a positive impact on our retention plan. Feedback from our carers has been positive about the increased financial package and training from April 2022 however, we need to continue to review our pay and support rates to ensure we remain competitive with the independent fostering agencies.

Mockingbird will be reviewed by the Dfe in April 2023, they will provide an independent report on the positive impact on outcomes for children to date and will provide a platform for additional funding to extend the project.

Our support package will feed into our unique selling points for the recruitment of new foster carers and support our retention of our current carers, both of which will enable us to place our children locally if they are not able to remain with their families.

Priority 6 –

Review our current comms arrangement/plan to ensure we are maximising the recruitment options for both fostering and adoption.

Actions:

1. Ensure that fostering and adoption recruitment are viewed as a high priority for the council and therefore, receive a priority service from our comms team.
2. Review our current comms plans to ensure they have considered our current challenges and the changes we have already made to our support offer.

Expected Outcomes

We will have a robust comms plan that is prioritised by the council and members to ensure we maximise all recruitment opportunities for fostering and adoption which will enable us to place our children with our foster carers and adopters, negating the need to place with external foster carers and adopters who have been approved by an external agency.

Priority 7 –

Enhance the package of support provided to children placed in unregistered provision and ensure there is senior management oversight of risks.

Actions:

1. Develop the residential academy to provide care staff in the unregistered provisions
2. Commission NYAS to provide an independent monthly oversight of the unregistered provisions.
3. Create a bespoke package of policies and procedures for unregistered provisions to ensure we have clear expectations about the standard of care delivered, recording and supervision.
4. Work in partnership with SEN and the Virtual School to deliver bespoke educational packages if the child is unable to attend and education provision.
5. Introduce a review mechanism chaired by a Head of Service to oversee the management of risk whilst working together with partners to ensure the outcomes for the child are promoted.
6. Provide in-house restraint training to all staff to ensure we provide a consistent accepted model of physical intervention should it be required.

Expected Outcomes

Should it be necessary to place a child in an unregistered provision it will mirror as far as possible the high level of care afforded to the children in our care homes. The senior management oversight will ensure that the risks are managed and that there are no blockages to accessing the services and resources required to keep the child safe.

Priority 8 –

Children with disabilities service to review and agree a threshold for service provision to ensure that services are consistently provided based on the needs of the child.

Actions:

1. Create a continuum of care document that clearly sets out what packages of support will be provided based on the needs of the child
2. Review of the Direct Payments system to maximise the opportunities this provides to families to commission their own care package
3. Review of the Action for Children contract to ensure the service delivered maximises the opportunities for our children.
4. Continue to work closely with the Dom Care commissioner on broadening the dom care agency commissioned to ensure we can meet the needs of our service users
5. Consider wider support options including expansion of respite such as community child minders, contract carers (take a break carers) and decide as to whether a business case is required to expand these services as part of our packages.

Expected Outcomes

We will have a clear pathway for accessing support for children and families, we will deliver a consistent and equal service based on the needs of the child. We will be able to ensure we have sufficient budget to meet the needs of our children.
