

Report from: Simon Fisher

Executive summary

The duty to provide or procure placements for Children and Young People 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 (implementation April 2011) has provided further clarity on the implementation of section 22G of the Act.

The Statutory Guidance (CA1989) sets out a requirement for local authorities to work with key partners to be in a position 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. The Guidance requires local authorities to do more than simply ensure that accommodation be 'sufficient' in terms of the number of beds provided. They must also have regard to the benefits of securing a number of providers and a range of services. (Goes beyond number of beds to providing a range of providers and services)

The Guidance also includes securing sufficient accommodation for children in need who are at risk of care or custody (referred to as children on the edge of care). This is important since it is preferable (where it is in the best interests of the child) to provide support to avoid the need for them to become children in care.

The City of York Sufficiency strategy has recently been updated and covers the period 2020 – 2023. It sets out how the local authority and its partners will work together to provide the best outcomes for children and young people. We are focused on providing the best environments for children in care and care leavers over the next three years. This strategy is underpinned by our local approach and vision for our children in care. For children who cannot remain in their parents care, the first consideration should be timely permanence through a placement with

extended family or a connected person through, Special Guardianship or A Child Arrangement Order.

The Strategy covers the following main objectives and is underpinned by an action plan: -

1. Children and young people will be supported to stay with their families where it is safe to do so
2. We will focus on achieving permanency in a timely manner through adoption and special guardianship
3. More children will live in a local placement
4. All children will be matched with good quality placements which meet their needs
5. All children in care will be prepared for independence and a healthy adulthood
6. We will review all commissioned placements

The strategy coincides with the Covid 19 pandemic and which has impacted on our ability to deliver some aspects of our sufficiency, in particular, the creation of local residential and semi-independent living provision. During this time our sufficiency has been kept under constant review by the Director of Children's Services and which will continue to be the case while we deal with the impact of Covid 19 during the lifetime of this strategy. We recognise that our plans to develop care provision locally are more likely to be achieved over the second half of the strategy. We also recognise that there are a number of uncertainties regarding demand for placements as Covid 19 restrictions are eased and so this strategy will be responsive to changes in the broader environment.

Progress against this strategy will be monitored by the Strategic Partnership for Children in Care and Care Leavers and the Corporate Parenting Board.

Background

Most children in York are brought up in their own families but a small number of children become looked after require the help and support of additional services. When children come into care, they become the responsibility of the local authority as the corporate parent. As Corporate Parents, we need to ensure that we can offer and provide appropriate accommodation to support our children and young people through their journey to adulthood and beyond. This means we will ensure that their

welfare, emotional, and physical wellbeing is protected and promoted within environments which will support them to reach their full potential and into adulthood

Where placement within the family is not possible we will ensure: -

- All children are placed in the local area, except where this is not consistent with their needs and welfare.
- There is a diverse range of universal, targeted and specialist services working together to meet children's needs, including children and young people who are already looked after, as well as those at risk of care or custody.
- Children and young people will be looked after in our commissioned children's home or in good quality children's homes if they are not able to live within a family.
- In addition to meeting relevant National Minimum Standards, services are of high enough quality to secure the specific outcomes identified in the care planning process for children and young people.
- Placement providers (including private, voluntary and public sector providers) are linked into the wider network of services and work with these services to offer appropriate support to deliver identified outcomes for looked after children.
- When a child is placed within a residential setting due to their complexity of need there is active consideration to step down to foster placement.
- Recognising the importance of children and young people understanding what is happening to them in terms of care.
 - Children and Young people not being separated from their siblings unless it is part of the child's plan.
 - Children and Young people have a say in their placement.
 - Children and Young people visiting before they are placed.
 - Listening to and acting upon what children and young people tell us about their experiences of being in care.

- Where a young person is in school years 10 and 11 (Key Stage 4) there is an expectation that a young person's education should not be disrupted other than in an emergency. Particular efforts should be made to avoid disruption to their education as a result of a placement move, given the importance of stability whilst studying for GCSEs or equivalent qualifications, and that the disruption may have a negative impact on their chances to enter further education or to get a job in the future.

York Council and its partners are also committed to the seven principles of corporate parenting outlined in the 2017 Children and Social Work Act. As a result, a number of the key actions within this strategy reflect the priorities in our Corporate Parenting and Children in Care Strategy. These 7 principles of corporate parenting are: -

1. To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.
2. To encourage children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings.
3. To consider the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people.
4. To help children and young people gain access to and make the best use of services provided by the local authority.
5. To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for children and young people.
6. For children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and,
7. To prepare children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

Current position

Context

Historically York had low numbers of children and young people in care (CYPIC). Recalibration of the service during 2019/2020 resulted in an increase in the number of children coming into care, including from a

child protection plan. Previously, there had been low numbers in pre proceedings, children had been subject to plans and repeat plans for too long without sustained changes being made. External Peer Review in autumn 2019 determined that the right children were now coming into care and strengthened the view that previous decision making York did not always bring the right children in to care when they needed to have done.

We have reviewed our approach to Permanence Planning and are implementing a refreshed policy in order to reduce drift and delay. We are also strengthening our tracking systems to support more timely permanence planning.

City of York has unique challenges when it comes to foster care sufficiency. As a City there are a number of alternatives to being a foster carer due to the student and home stay market. This, together with most adults in the City being in work and house prices being high, creates a challenging environment in which to recruit foster carers. As a result, there is a lack of internal foster placement sufficiency.

The number of teenagers coming into care increased over a number of years but has slowed in the past 2 years. This means that approximately one quarter of the children in care population are between the age of 15 and 17. We therefore, need to review our accommodation provision for care leavers as children move through the system and into adulthood.

Demand regionally for external residential and IFA provision has increased and we have increased external spot purchasing. The diversity and complexity of placement requirement is changing.

Placement stability has fallen over the last 2 years but has remained roughly in line with the national figure.

Profile of City of York Children and Young People in Care

There were 265 children and young people in care in York on 31st March 2020. This equates to a rate of 70.81 per 10,000, which is slightly above the national average of 65.

- The age profile of children in care has changed over 2018/19 and 2019/20 with a decline in the proportion of 10-15 year olds in York's care. At the end of 2017/18, 43% of CYPIC were aged 10-15. At the end of December 2019, this had decreased to 31%. Nationally, the

proportion of 10-15 year olds in care has held at 39% for the last three years.

- The proportion of CYPIC in the age group of 1-4 year olds has nearly doubled since 2016/17 – from 11.8% to 22%. This difference has not been seen nationally, with 13% of children in care aged 1-4. This trend reflects the recalibration in the Safeguarding Intervention Service.
- One quarter of our CYPIC are age 15 to 17 and so over the next 2/3 years we will see a large cohort of children leave care
- Our use of foster placements is 68.32% just below the national average of 73% nationally but down from 78% in March 2019.
- York has 114 fostering households, 60.5% are mainstream foster carers, 28.9% are Connected Carers and 9.6% are short breaks carers
- 9% of Children Looked After are placed with Independent Fostering Agencies.
- Use of residential placements is 9.92%. The England Average is 9%.
- 16% of children and young people in care are placed with their parents which is higher than the England average which is 6%.
- 6.8% of CLA discharged from care were adopted at 31/01/20 which is lower than the previous 2 years (14%).
- 56% of children looked after are placed outside of York. This is due to the relatively small geography of York.
- It is becoming increasingly hard to find placements for York children as the overall demand across all sectors is outstripping supply. This has been further impacted by Covid 19.

Our Objectives For the next 3 years

1. Children and young people will be supported to stay with their families where it is safe to do so

The recently updated Early Help Strategy sets out how we are supporting children within their families through the provision of high quality, timely, early help support and therefore prevent concerns from escalating and needing specialist interventions. Any organisation or agency working with children, young people and families should have mechanisms to identify emerging problems and potential unmet need.

The strategy aims to develop and improve the identification of need in families across the city and we know that particular groups of children and young people are known to be at greater risk of poor outcomes. The strategy emphasises the importance of local organisations and agencies working together to:

- identify children and families who would benefit from early help
- undertake an assessment of the need for early help
- provide targeted early help services to address the assessed needs of a child and their family which focuses on activity to improve the outcomes for the child

The strategy promotes a shared understating of need across the city, the provision of multi-agency training, the promotion of shared tools and the 'lead practitioner' role' and crucially, early help as a collaboration and not a service.

Through the use of data we will be able to assess the impact of the strategy over the course of the next 3 years

We are developing an adolescence strategy, the scope of which is to improve outcomes for children in the adolescence stage of life. It recognises that to do this effectively for young people going through adolescence, a range of other vulnerabilities need to be better understood and interventions adapted with partners, peers, families and communities being better placed to prevent and respond to the needs of young people in this time of increased vulnerability . The strategy also recognises the complexities of young people's lives and considers that the risk of abuse and exploitation can be exacerbated by a range of vulnerabilities with the impact of suffering such harm leading to life-long consequences unless effectively addressed. During the course of the next 3 years through better targeted support and evaluation of services based on young people's experiences, we anticipate fewer adolescents entering care and being supported with their families.

We are developing a strengths based Social Work Practice Model centred on systemic practice and linked to 'Frontline'. Systemic practice seeks to make sense of the world through relationships, focusing on the whole family system rather than individuals. Through a systemic approach, change can be achieved through exploring relationship patterns and how they impact on children. We have started to introduce systemic practice training to the workforce and over the course of this

strategy we will implement a Social Work Practice Model, which will build on family strengths and relationships. As a result, we anticipate more children will be supported to stay with their families.

Our number of S.20 voluntary accommodation cases has fallen as a result of active management and IRO oversight and led to a number of children's care status changing to care order. For those children where the plan is for a child in care to return home, we will ensure purposeful work is undertaken with the family so that it is safe for the child to return, a clear plan of support is identified and the appropriate senior manager decisions and oversight are in place.

City of York has an Immediate Response and Edge of Care team that intervenes with those children and families closest to breakdown and that are in need of intensive family support for a time limited period.

The 'edge of care' population can be identified as those children or young people who are at risk of being looked after (either immediately or during the timescale of a single assessment) by virtue of:

- Safeguarding concerns
- Breakdown in family relationships
- Risky behaviour towards self or others in the family.

The focus of the intervention of the Edge of Care service is one of de-escalation, prevention and diversion from care with the aim of keeping families safely together.

The service may also include children who we anticipate can be rehabilitated quickly following a short period of accommodation if intensive intervention takes place.

At 31st March the team worked with 120 cases involving 211 children, divided into:

57 Edge of Care cases:

61 Edge of CP cases:

Outcomes continue to be good overall, with 49% of CP cases and 64% of edge of care cases resulting in an outcome below the threshold of child protection at the point of involvement ceasing. Only 6 young people became looked after. IRT maintains close links with the CSA/E senior social worker and have added value to the response to children at

risk of exploitation via the FGC post funded by the trusted relationship project for 1 year, this has also increased involvement with partners in MACEM

We will build on the continued successes of the team and further increase Family Group Conference (FGC) capacity to support children subject to a Child Protection Plan, children on the edge of care and pre proceedings work. The team will also maintain close links with the recently formed child sexual exploitation team and through the FGC posted funded by the Trusted Relationships project continue to add value to the multi-agency response to children at risk of exploitation.

2. We will focus on achieving permanency in a timely manner through adoption and special guardianship

Through our updated Permanence Policy and associated training/workshops, we are focusing on improving social worker's understanding of permanence and the importance of timely permanence planning for children and young people and conversely the negative impact of drift and delay. Over the next 3 years we will improve the early identification and timeliness of children adopted from care. 6.8% of CLA discharged from care were adopted at 31/01/20 which is lower than the previous 2 years (14%). On average, approximately 10 children are adopted each year and we currently have a number of children in proceedings so we expect the number to rise. We are finding that proceedings are taking longer with more reliance on expert assessments which causes delay. We are strengthening our tracking systems through the implementation of a Permanence Tracker and improving understanding of the child's adoption journey by delivering workshops to social work teams, which includes early permanence. The forming of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), One Adoption North and Humber (OANH) has significantly increased the pool of adopters for York children allowing early linking and matching and enabling children to stay closer to their cultural heritage. Interagency fees are not paid between the Local Authorities in the RAA. If a match is not possible in the RAA this is known early and so families from the voluntary and private sector can be sought early to avoid delay for children as much as possible.

The proportion of children with a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) has fluctuated over the last three years and there is a need to strengthen our Special Guardianship Offer and reduce the number of children in connected placements. Our current practice results in a number of

children ending proceedings as 'looked after' in a connected placement. Focus on ensuring family assessment are always available prior to issuing proceedings will reduce the number of connected placement alongside strengthening the SGO offer, reviewing the financial package and increasing the social worker capacity to offer ongoing support to these case. Once this is operational we anticipate significant reduction in connected care placements and increase in SGO's.

Connected care placements will be promoted where children cannot be at home but should be with family members and where a Special Guardianship Order is not possible. This is why we have a dedicated support group for connected carers, alongside a specific skills to foster training course.

Where appropriate, we will actively seek to discharge Care Orders on children in Connected Care placements in favour of a Special Guardianship Order, linked to our new SGO offer.

3. More children will live in a local placement

The proportion of children living with foster carers has decreased over 2019/20 to 68.32% linked to the more recent increase in children and young people entering care but also due to the trend of falling numbers of foster carers. We also know that our sufficiency need is changing and that we need to target placement sufficiency in the following key areas: -

- City of York foster carers - generally and specifically for children with more complex needs and also mother and baby foster placements
- Block IFA procurement to enable effective step down from residential to foster care.
- Placements that support children with complex needs.
- Placements that support older children in care to move into independence, such as semi-independent living placements.

We will continue to build our foster carer sufficiency through our ongoing recruitment efforts which will be especially focused on securing in-house carers for the most complex and challenging children. We aim to recruit long term, stable and secure family homes for children with more complex needs, those who can offer step down from residential care, mother and baby placements and those who can take larger sibling groups. In February we commenced a digital recruitment campaign with

the aim of recruiting 15 new foster placements by the end of the financial year. The campaign was temporarily halted in March due to Covid 19, but was re-started in June.

We will also continue to support foster placements through our refreshed core training and developing foster carers knowledge and skills through the following: -

- Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for Foster Carers
- NSPCC Reflective Fostering training
- Mental Health and E Safety training

York's use of residential care (not including Residential Special Schools) extends to 9.92% of the Children Looked After population. Our residential strategy is based on a gap and needs analysis that identified the following cohorts of children and young people whose needs are not being met: -

- Children aged between 9 and 11 years who have experienced trauma, struggle with behaviours, attachment and outcomes at school. They have experienced significant moves and disruption, which has compounded the trauma.
- Young people aged 12 to 16 years who have experienced a number of breakdowns and who experience significant challenges living in a family setting and achieving positive outcomes.
- Young people aged 16 plus, who have 'out grown' foster placements or residential provision and are ready to be supported into independence with a flexible and individual package.

Consequently the following provision was identified as being needed locally, with lots 1 and 2 dependent on purchasing residential properties and adapting them into children's homes. Lot 3 is currently a children's home owned by York Council and providing 4 beds for York children and run by a commissioned provider (Hexagon care)

Lot 1 – Residential 9-11yrs

A two bedded block contract with one provider, consisting of two beds across one home in a property provided by City of York Council.

Lot 2 Residential 12-16yrs

6 bedded block contract, consisting of two homes with 3 beds in properties provided by City of York Council.

Lot 3 Semi-independent living placements

The development of 6 semi-independent living beds through the conversion of Wenlock children's home.

Due to Covid 19, our plans to create this provision have been severely impacted. To mitigate this, we are seeking to extend the existing contract at Wenlock for a further 12 months and we will purchase semi-independent living beds via the White Rose Regional Framework or spot purchasing. Linked to Covid 19 restrictions easing, we are monitoring the state of the property market closely whilst also reviewing our plans to develop lots 1 and 2. We have seen a fall in the number of adolescents who have entered care in the last 2 years and in the interim, will purchase these beds as required when placements at Wenlock are full. We do however need to be prepared for potential increases in adolescents at risk of entering care and also existing children in care who may need a residential placement as the impact of the pandemic becomes clearer. We are undertaking further analysis in this area. There is also the possibility of further lockdowns in the future.

Furthermore, the proportion of children returning home to parents (or somebody with parental responsibility) has steadily increased since 2017/18 from 19% to 30%. Ensuring the renewed practice of frontloading proceedings at Letter Before Proceedings stage should further reduce the number of children on Placement with Parents.

We will proactively seek to discharge care orders for children placed with their parents within 12 months of the order being made where this is safe and appropriate to do so, so that children living with their parents can do so where the involvement of the local authority is no longer required.

4. All children will be matched with good quality placements which meet their needs

We know that to secure the most appropriate placements for children in care, we need to understand their needs and capture their views effectively and make decisions for placements that will meet those needs/wishes. This will help to prevent and reduce the risk of placement breakdown.

We recognise that in order to do this we need to identify, gather and supply good quality information which details their needs and views accurately. We now need to continue involving social workers in improving the quality of information supplied to the Placement Finding and Commissioning team so that providers fully understand the needs of the child in order to achieve good matching. We will also continue to work with social workers so they understand what their responsibilities are before, during and after a placement.

We will also review our internal decision-making processes to assure ourselves that there is no duplication or unnecessary hurdles that might introduce undue delay to the timeliness of securing placements on offer. As part of this work we will also review the capacity of the Placement Finding and Commissioning Team, linked to the increased demand for placements.

5. All children in care will be prepared for independence and a healthy adulthood

Young people approaching adulthood need nurturing care, positive boundaries and guidance to make that transition. We will continue to promote Staying Put and also ensure our foster carers have the skills and knowledge to support young people prepare for independence.

We will review Post 18 accommodation provision in light of the increase in CYPIC transferring to the Leaving Care Service (Pathway team).

We will improve access to specialist emotional/mental health support for CYPIC, which includes recruiting to a psychologist post.

We know that for the small number of young people who enter care when they are 17, not all social workers understand Leaving Care entitlements. We will therefore, deliver briefings to social work teams on Leaving Care entitlements.

We know that we have work to do to improve the mental health and well-being support to care leavers and we will work with our care leavers and health partners to achieve this.

We are also working with Adult Social Care to improve the pathways for those young people who will need support transitioning to adulthood

6. We will review all commissioned placements

We want to strengthen our oversight of children placed in a residential setting and ensure that children and young people are supported to move on where this is in their best interests. We will implement a sustainable model of track and challenge to ensure there is no drift in stepping children and young people down to foster care or semi – Independence where appropriate.

Furthermore, we will review all young people in residential care with a view to stepping down to semi independence or supported lodgings where this is safe and appropriate.

Improving further

Action Plan:

To ensure a sufficiency of support for children and families and placements for children in care over the next 3 years we will: -

- Deliver a Strengths based Social Work Practice model
- Increase Family Group Conference capacity to in order to strengthen our edge of care offer
- Implement an adolescence strategy
- Implement the revised Permanence Policy and deliver the training/workshops
- Implement a revised SGO Support offer and increase the number of children exiting care via SGO
- Improve the timeliness of children exiting care via adoption
- Recruit more foster carers, in particular, those who can support our more complex young people.
- Develop local residential care provision and semi-independent care provision over the course of the strategy and have contingencies in place due to Covid 19.
- Proactively discharge children placed with parents from care where appropriate to do so

- Improve the quality of information provided to support placement finding and matching and review capacity within the placement finding service
- Review care leaver post 18 accommodation provision.
- Improve mental health and emotional wellbeing support for children in care and care leavers
- Ensure a more consistent approach to preparing children in care for adulthood and also ensure clear pathways are in place for young people who will need the support of adult social care
- Implement a system for reviewing, tracking and challenging commissioned placements

Progress against this strategy will be monitored by the Strategic Partnership for Children in Care and Care Leavers and the Corporate Parenting Board.

END

Simon Fisher

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