

Slough Borough Council

REPORT TO:	Cabinet
DATE:	20th November 2023
SUBJECT:	Approval of Children and Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy
CHIEF OFFICER:	Sue Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services. Chief Executive of Slough Children First
CONTACT OFFICER:	Ben Short, Director of Operations Slough Children First
WARD(S):	All
PORTFOLIO:	Councillor Kelly – Lead Member Children's Services
KEY DECISION:	YES
EXEMPT:	NO
DECISION SUBJECT TO CALL IN:	YES
APPENDICES:	Appendix 1 - Children and Young People's Placements Sufficiency Strategy Appendix 2 - EIA

1. Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1. The Council has a duty to ensure that its children in care have suitable accommodation within the local authority's area that meets the needs of its children.
- 1.2. The Children and Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy sets out the intention to achieve good quality and value accommodation through five key priorities which are set out below. It is important to recognise that the sufficiency of accommodation for children who are looked after and those who are care experienced is a challenge across England for all local authorities in the context of a rising number of children being looked after from 64 per 10'000 in 2018 to 70 in 2022. This rise coincides with several national challenges including the cost of living and inflationary pressure in relation to the cost of children's placements. Additionally, Slough has faced significant pressure arising from the placement of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and a resulting increase in care experienced young people who are entitled to support.
- 1.3. In order to deliver the Children and Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy, the following 5 key areas have been identified.
 1. Strengthening Early Help and developing 'Edge of Care' and reunification support.

2. Fostering Recruitment and Retention and developing options for children to exit residential care.
3. Ensuring robust commissioning arrangements
4. Achieving permanence for children at the earliest opportunity
5. Providing care experienced young people with a variety of placement options and support to independence.

Recommendation:

- 1.4. To approve the Children & Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy at Appendix 1.

Reason:

- 1.5. The Council is required to set out its strategic intentions with regards to sufficiency in accordance with Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 and in line with the 2010 Statutory guidance *Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked-After Children*.
- 1.6. The Sufficiency Strategy supports the delivery of the Slough Children First Business and Improvement Plan.

Commissioner Review:

"A significant amount of careful work has gone into producing the Sufficiency Strategy. The financial model works on an invest to save basis. The costs and immediacy of the charges are certain whereas the savings are contingent upon a number of factors. Accordingly, Slough's S151 officer will need to monitor the implementation of the proposed projects diligently to ensure that the strategy remains within budget. Members will wish to be kept regularly updated as the strategy is rolled out."

2. Report – Introduction

- 2.1. The Children and Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy sets out the strategic vision for how the Council and Slough Children First will ensure that children and young people who are looked after, and those who are care experienced will be provided with suitable places to live.
- 2.2. The strategy sets a clear focus on supporting children and young people to remain at home with support where this is safe and appropriate to do so (edge of care) in favour of admitting children into cared for arrangements. However, when children and young people do need to be looked after the strategy places a focus on achieving permanence at the earliest opportunity to prevent drift and delay for children. It also sets out the intention to ensure that children receive good quality accommodation whilst also looking for good value for public money. It will achieve this by providing local accommodation in fostering homes where possible, and by setting up a 'Resilience' Fostering option to support children to live with foster carers rather than in residential accommodation by providing specialist fostering options and support to those carers.
- 2.3. Where children do require residential accommodation, it is SCF's intention to scope and explore the feasibility of creating our own internal residential home(s). This is to ensure high quality care for our children looked after and care experienced young people who have experienced complex trauma, to ensure they receive the optimum care, remain close to home whilst maintaining family contact, education,

friendships, and links to their communities. This is in recognition of the current reliance of high-cost residential placements, mainly at more than 20 miles, where care and outcomes for children are variable, in a competitive and saturated provider market.

- 2.4. Underpinning much of the strategy is a need to strengthen and improve commissioning arrangements and provide engagement to shape the local market. This will support better value homes for children looked after and will underpin the ambition to provide local good quality homes for care experienced young people.
- 2.5. The sufficiency strategy will be delivered through a Sufficiency Board reporting to the SCF Executive Group and is shaped by the Slough Children First Business and Improvement Plan.
- 2.6. The following options were considered:

Option	Pros	Cons	Recommendation
<p>Option 1: Approval of Sufficiency Strategy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic approach to providing high quality/value for money homes for children looked after (CLA) and care experienced young people (CEYP). • Intensive support to prevent children coming into care and to reunify children home; reducing the number children looked after. • Reducing reliance on high cost/spot purchase provision; presenting savings to the accommodation budget. • Reducing the number of children in residential care and placed at a distance from Slough. • Creating more homes for CLA in Slough, remaining close to home/communities, and reducing reliance on external, high-cost provision • Meet our statutory responsibilities/duty relating to sufficiency planning • Sets a clear direction and expectation on all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial upfront investment in specific areas of activity required, with savings achieved in the medium (6-12m) to longer term (12m+). • Challenge in identifying additional financial resource when SCB/SCF are required to identify financial savings. • Risk in ability to recruit therapeutic foster carers in a competitive market. 	<p>Recommended</p>

	Departments about the importance of our children and the planning needed to best meet their needs and reduce spend.		
Option 2: Do not approve the Sufficiency Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business as usual approach - no financial investment required, and no additional officer resource required to deliver workstreams/projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council will need to revise the sufficiency strategy and present this at a later date building in delay. • Continued spending on higher cost accommodation provision without agreement to move to the Business and Improvement Plan objectives. • Delayed opportunity to provide evidence based, intensive support to prevent more children coming into care and returning home • Increased cost of placements as a result of lack of strategic plan. • Inability to place children in most appropriate accommodation in-borough, leading to continued reliance on out of borough accommodation. 	Not recommended

3. Background

3.1. The Children and Young People’s Placement Sufficiency Strategy (appendix 1) provides a comprehensive overview of demand and accommodation needs in relation to our looked after and care experienced young people, Whilst in line with national indicators, there has been an increase in the number of children looked after in part led by the number of children requiring accommodation as a result of fleeing their country of origin (UASC), This demand in looked after children then transfers to demand for accommodation support for children who are care experienced placing demand on the local housing market as well as a need to provide suitable accommodation, often in supported accommodation options.

3.2. Whilst Slough's numbers of looked after children are slightly below national indicators, there has been an increase from **49 per 10, 000 in 2017/18** to **58.4 per 10, 000 in 22/23** (an increase of 19%). It therefore remains important that plans continue to support children to remain living within their family (edge of care) as well as providing suitable and best value accommodation when there is no other option. The strategy relies on commitment from partners in health and also colleagues within the Council, such as Housing, to work alongside SCF to provide accommodation options for care experienced young people to move into their own homes when they are ready in support of their readiness for independence, and which is often better value for the Council and SCF.

3.3. In summary, the strategic priorities to respond to the Sufficiency Strategy are:

3.4. **Strengthen Early Help. Develop Edge of Care and reunification**

3.4.1. SCF is working with the partnership to develop our wider approach to early help, intervention and prevention services. As a service SCF will provide more intensive 'targeted' support, including multi-disciplinary interventions, to vulnerable individuals and families to prevent escalation. Officers will also develop the support offer for those children and families with significant need to provide practical help early on to reduce family breakdown.

3.4.2. For children judged to be at the edge of care SCF intends to develop a range of intensive support to prevent the necessity for long term care. This provision will consider the potential of a short period of accommodation with a clear objective to return home following intense work within an agreed time frame (edge of care). The edge of care definition will extend to include children and young people returning home from care. It will be expected that all plans for children in this circumstance will include a provision from the edge of care service in recognition that children in the early stages of reunification remain vulnerable to further disruption. The wrap around support will seek to prevent the 'revolving door.'

3.5. **Key priorities**

3.5.1. Provide proportionate early help and edge of care services that will support families to make changes and sustained improvements in their lives, preventing their situation from worsening further to the point that they require specialist services or intervention, for example their child/ children being taken into care.

3.5.2. Create an edge of care resource to support children and families to stay together and to support the successful reunification of children from care arrangements back home.

3.5.3. Seek to resist all admissions to care for children aged 15+ years in recognition of compelling research that care solutions do not positively impact upon this cohort unless there are significant and critical child protection issues to address.

- 3.5.4. Support re-unification of children to their family homes. This will enable a positive impact and reduce the numbers of children in the 8-13 age group who have 'return home' plans.

3.6. Fostering Recruitment & Retention

- 3.6.1. SCF will revise our communication and marketing strategy for the recruitment of foster carers and adopt an ambitious and targeted approach to increase the number of in-house carers. This will also include the potential to further develop collaborative approaches with neighbouring boroughs, and the creative use of media.
- 3.6.2. We will also develop a fostering model specifically focused for children with more complex needs with the intention of preventing the need for placement in residential care, or to support children 'stepping-out' of residential care.

3.7. Key priorities

- 3.7.1. Increase the number of 'in house' specialist care foster placements to meet the needs of sibling groups; children over the age of 10 including adolescents with more complex needs and / or high levels of safeguarding concerns; and children with disabilities.
 - 3.7.2. Ensure foster carers reflect the diversity of the looked after population.
 - 3.7.3. Increase training and development opportunities for foster carers to strengthen their skill set and to support them to care for children with more complex needs.
 - 3.7.4. Ensure assessments of connected persons are timely and robust and that children, young people and their carers receive appropriate support.
 - 3.7.5. Reduce, where possible, the number of agency foster placements purchased by increasing and maximising the use of our internal capacity.
 - 3.7.6. Develop and put in place a 'step-forward/ Resilience' fostering model to provide opportunities for children and young people with more complex needs, to remain in a family environment rather than being placed in residential care.
 - 3.7.7. Re-brand our fostering service to create a clear vision and imagery to support our recruitment. 'Our Slough Family.'
- 3.8. Provide a robust commissioning approach and reduce use of out of area placements.**

- 3.8.1. 26% of children looked after are placed more than 20 miles from the borough. Most of these placements are commissioned fostering and residential placements which have been steadily increasing over the past 3 years.
- 3.8.2. SCF will introduce a robust commissioning framework for all provision types; to improve arrangements with local providers to meet the needs of children looked after and decrease reliance on placements beyond 20 miles. The council will significantly reduce its reliance on spot purchased provision.
- 3.8.3. SCF will aim to provide homes for children and young people in Slough and its local area (within 20 miles) to ensure they are not isolated from their friends and family and ensure they have access to services and networks to improve their outcomes. If a child must be placed out of the borough, officers will ensure they are not disadvantaged and have the same chances as all our children and young people.

3.9. **Key priorities**

- 3.9.1. Work in close partnership with local providers to re-shape the market and increase the availability of all placement types for Slough children at the point of need.
- 3.9.2. Improve the commissioning and contract monitoring of all care placements through an External Placements Panel and tracking process.
- 3.9.3. Work with independent residential care providers to improve standards of care.
- 3.9.4. Work with health partners and providers to develop a range of appropriate services that ensures that the emotional and mental health needs of children and young people are met appropriately.
- 3.9.5. Review Continuing Health Care contribution for all children in care.
- 3.9.6. Reduce the number of residential placements purchased, and to develop and increase the number of highly skilled resilient foster placements, through closer working with local providers across the mixed economy of council and independent service providers.

3.10. **Ensure that we achieve permanence for our children**

- 3.10.1. Where possible all our children must be in homes which will provide them with long-term placement stability, and where appropriate to leave care, return home or seeking legal permanence via other arrangements such as special guardianship. This is described this as achieving permanence for that child. Although it is sometimes necessary to move a child to provide them with a home more suited to their individual needs our aim is to minimise the number of times each child moves home as this can be very disruptive. To achieve permanence, it

is essential that all our teams work effectively together to support each child in their home ensuring high quality of care attuned to their individual needs.

3.10.2. Permanence can be achieved in several ways, not simply through adoption, for example a child can move to a special guardian or be matched for long term fostering. Each of these options gives the chance for the child to achieve stability and achieve their potential. Officers will:

- Review and redesign the placement finding service.
- Strengthen our assessment of connected carers at the point of viability. (review of Reg. 24 process)
- Implement a new centralised Permanency Monitoring Group.
- Review stability meeting process in practice.
- Ensure transition planning arrangements with adults' services are robust and provide early identification of need.

3.11. **Providing young people who are leaving care with a variety of placement choices and support to independence.**

3.11.1. There is a need to further develop effective partnerships with housing providers across the borough and a joint strategy for the provision of cost effective, safe, and good quality housing for care experienced young people, as well as increase the range of supported accommodation options to develop their skills for successful transition into adult life and independence.

3.11.2. There is also a need to develop out of borough options for those who are unable to remain in the borough and for those who have settled outside of Slough.

3.12. **Key priorities**

3.12.1. Develop a Care Leavers Strategy to include commissioning intentions, in partnership with housing providers; and to improve the range of supported accommodation to support independence, as well as improving the quality of shared accommodation for care leavers.

3.12.2. Support and encourage young people to remain in their placements at least until the age of 17 ½ or until they are ready to move on. For a number this will mean 'staying put' with their foster carer. At the other end of the spectrum, it is anticipated that there will be a small cohort of young people for whom earlier transition to supported accommodation is in their best interests.

3.12.3. Ensure transition planning for children with complex needs commences at 16 or before and involves partnership working with the adult services.

3.12.4. Develop our 'Staying Close' offer for children moving to independence from residential care.

3.12.5. Undertake market warming and look for opportunities to support access to private let homes for care experienced young people recognising that access to social housing is limited at this time. This will include the provision of a 'protected' time period where those people can re access the homeless route if problems arise.

3.13. **Edge of care**

3.13.1. The priority of the strategy must be to support our looked after children and care experienced young people to be able to access the right home for them at the right time. However, in a nationally challenging financial environment and in a competitive provider market, the strategy has a clear focus on prevention of the need to become looked after by providing support to a family at the earliest opportunity to prevent care admissions unless they are absolutely necessary. To do this, some investment and focus is needed to provide edge of care which supports cost-avoidance. We also widen the definition of edge of care to support reunification and therefore also look to support children to return home when it is appropriate and safe to do so, which also supports savings in some children's placement costs which we model below. This was identified as a high priority within the Mutual Ventures report and is identified within the SCF Business and Improvement Plan.

3.13.2. The initial investment in an edge of care resource described above would be £304K, for staffing, including on-costs. The annual cost difference between the average residential placement and external fostering placement is £200k,635. Based on this cost, 1.5 children being reunified in this circumstance would cover the cost of the edge of care service.

3.14. **Therapeutic/ Resilience Fostering**

3.14.1. SCF has identified a 'Step-forward/ Resilience' fostering model is needed to provide opportunities for children and young people with more complex needs, to remain in a family environment rather than being placed in residential care. This would provide foster carers who are skilled and experienced in supporting children with more complex needs, providing therapeutic support to prevent escalation to children requiring residential care. The model would require the recruitment of experienced foster carers or professionals, undertaking a successful fostering assessment, being paid at a higher rate, and receiving wrap around therapeutic support from a specialist team.

3.14.2. *Example delivery model:*

- Therapeutic Fostering Support team consisting of a Senior Social Worker, Clinician and Family Support Worker to provide support, guidance, training and supervision to therapeutic foster carers, support and guided intervention with children cared for, ensuring delivery of the therapeutic model to support children with complex presentation, preventing step-up to residential care.
- The model would require the recruitment of 5 therapeutic foster carer households. The initial investment of a therapeutic fostering team as described above would cost £17K, for staffing, including on-costs. In addition, at least 5 foster carers would need

to be recruited and paid at a higher fostering allowance of £750 pw. However, an external therapeutic foster care placement costs on average £1500, creating a £750 saving per week.

3.15. Independent accommodation – focus on Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

- 3.15.1. The sufficiency strategy identifies the need to seek opportunities to support our care experienced young people to access private let homes, recognising that access to social housing is limited at this time. Of our care experienced young people we currently have 30 adults (18+) who are seeking asylum and consequently have no recourse to public funds (NRPF), and therefore all housing and living costs are met by SCF. This model would require significant time investment from colleagues within the Council to work with private landlords, alongside SCF, to encourage and enable the private sector to provide homes for our care experienced young people, in this example, UASC.
- 3.15.2. To provide appropriate and safe accommodation for these young people their needs are met by procuring homes with external semi-independent providers. Of these young people many have adequate independent living skills to live independently but have no access to social housing pending the outcome of their asylum applications.
- 3.15.3. The External Placement Panel has identified a number of these young people (9) who would be able to live in shared accommodation, if private rentals were available. Therefore, SCF will seek to identify such options with independent semi-accommodation providers (satellite properties with floating support) and private social landlords.
- 3.15.4. *Example Delivery Model:*
- By seeking legal and contractual agreements with private social landlords, with SCF as guarantor, a number of 2/3 bedroom properties could be identified in Slough for our young people as shared accommodation.
 - An estimate of shared housing costs has been calculated at £230. per person per week (e.g., 3-bedroom house). As an example, if this were achieved for 3 young people with NRPF an annual saving of £75K could be achieved.

3.16. Internal Childrens Residential Home model

- 3.16.1. The Sufficiency Strategy identifies Slough Childrens First's intention to scope the potential of creating our own internal residential home(s). Whilst the number of children requiring homes in residential settings decreased between 2021 and 2023, from 25 to 16 respectively, as of March 2023 there was an increase of a further 4 children requiring homes in residential settings (20). Predominantly, this is due to children's complex needs, based on their experiences of trauma and a lack of market availability/skill/experience to meet these needs in foster care

settings. Hence, the proposal above to scope a therapeutic fostering model to prevent escalation.

3.16.2. However, there are children who do require care and accommodation delivered through a residential setting. Most of our children being cared for in residential homes are placed at more than 20 miles and are generally high cost (average £5,500 pw). Further, the quality of care is variable and the impact one would deem appropriate to improve children's lives and impact their recovery, not always of a high standard.

3.16.3. *Example Delivery Models:*

- Following the development and scoping of the model of delivery, for example, number of homes, target group, size of home, purpose, each example option detailed below would require initial investment, regarding:
 - Capital outlay - planning, premises, building works, conversion, refurbishment, furnishings costs etc.
 - Staffing costs – Salaries and on-costs for a Registered Manager, Deputy Manager, Residential care staff (numbers to be determined), business support.
 - Running costs – Utilities, repairs, maintenance etc.
- Each option would present an invest to save/cost avoidance model in the medium to longer term.

3.16.4. To explore existing internal SBC housing/building stock, conducting feasibility studies and surveys regarding conversion and adaptations to become a children's residential home. To explore the current Registered Manager of the Short Breaks Breakaway Service seeking dual registration (Ofsted) to manage and oversee a new residential home; this would require the recruitment of a new staff team.

3.16.5. Given that the above is an intention to scope the feasibility of all options, specific and accurate costings are not available at this stage. However, we know that initial set up and outlay could range from £200k to £500k dependent upon building premises and adaptations required. Staffing a residential home could range between £450k to £700k per annum dependent upon model implemented. The average cost of seeking an external children's residential placement pa is £286k, therefore requiring at least a 2-bed home to make this financially viable. However, the impact for a child would be considerable as SCF, as the Corporate Parent would be able to develop a model of best practice to achieve optimum outcomes for our children, identify the right children and matching and keep children near home in Slough, providing their education and maintaining family contact.

3.16.6. This model is still very much in its infancy and any proposals to progress options will be the subject of a further business case setting out any capital requirements if needed in the future.

3.17. Timeframe to delivery

- 3.17.1. The following provides a high-level timeframe for delivery relating to the invest to save and cost avoidance models highlighted above.
- 3.17.2. The Sufficiency Board will be established in December 2023; 5 project workstreams relating to the 5 key areas of sufficiency planning will be established in tandem, reporting to the board monthly.
- 3.17.3. Edge of Care Team -
 - The Edge of Care Team scope and delivery model will be developed by the end of December 2023.
 - The Edge of Care team will be established and functioning as of April/May 2024 to deliver during the financial year 2024/25.
- 3.17.4. Resilience Fostering:
 - The Resilience Fostering scope and delivery model will be developed by the end of December 2023.
 - Targeted therapeutic foster care recruitment and campaign and team recruitment will commence January 2024.
- 3.17.5. Scope establishing an internal Residential Childrens Home:
 - SCF in partnership with SBC to consider and/identify any internal housing/building stock options for consideration of feasibility/conversion by end of December 2023.
 - Business case to be developed and presented through the Council's Governance/Financial framework for consideration/approval by end of April 2024.

4. Implications of the Recommendation

4.1. *Financial implications*

- 4.1.1. The proposals in the sufficiency strategy are covered within the business plan agreed by Cabinet in September as part of the overall contract sum between Slough Borough Council and Slough Children First.
- 4.1.2. The Edge of care model will fund itself, with savings in placement costs through reunification home, or avoidance into care, paying for any additional staffing costs of the team.
- 4.1.3. The Therapeutic fostering model again will be funded through longer term placement savings and placement stability, with upfront costs of marketing and recruitment funded through current posts held vacant to cover the lead in time to go –live of the model.
- 4.1.4. Due to increasing numbers of Care Experience young people, particularly from the Asylum-seeking cohort, Slough Children First envisage growth in the requirement for placement costs. Some of our young adults have no recourse to public funds and rely on us as corporate parents for financial support but are capable of independent living. Through collaborative work with housing colleagues, it is envisaged that these increasing costs can be contained within the contract sum, by identifying and negotiating for private rented accommodation for those young adults who are more independent and just require accommodation options.

4.2. *Legal implications*

- 4.2.1. The Children Act 1989, s.22G contains a general duty to take steps that secure, as far as reasonably practicable, the provision of accommodation within the Council's area and meeting the needs of looked after children. In taking steps to secure this outcome, the Council must have regard to the benefit of having a number of accommodation providers in their area that is sufficient to secure that outcome and a range of accommodation in their area capable of meeting different needs that is sufficient to secure the outcome. Accommodation providers means local authority foster carers and children's homes.
- 4.2.2. The statutory guidance refers to best practice commissioning arrangements including the need for individual assessment and care planning, a commissioning decision based on the right decision at the right time, a strategic needs assessment to inform commissioning strategies, collaboration between partners, including options to pool budgets and securing services through a range of procurement and other commissioning mechanisms and avoiding the use of spot purchasing.
- 4.2.3. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 set out the corporate parenting principles that the Council must have regard to when conducting its functions. These include acting in the best interests and promoting the health and wellbeing of looked after children and care experienced children, helping these children and young people to gain access to services, ensuring these children are safe and have stable home lives and preparing them for adulthood and independent living. The strategy has particular relevance in that we seek to support children to remain at home or to return home from care where it is safe and appropriate to do so. The strategy will also support the procurement and provision of accommodation for care experienced young people. The strategy requires SCF and Council Departments to work closely together to ensure that young people can access a home which will lead to a better service for care experienced young people and also deliver cost reductions for SCF.

4.3. *Risk management implications*

- 4.3.1. There are risks that the company will not achieve the savings as identified. This will be mitigated by implementing a Sufficiency Board which will retain oversight of the delivery of each priority under a workstream lead. The Board will be chaired by the Director of Operations and will report to the Executive Group (SLT) on a quarterly basis. The cost implications identified have been highlighted as priority areas within the Business and Improvement Plan and will therefore be reviewed as part of the Council and company contractual management.

4.4. *Environmental implications*

- 4.4.1. None

4.5. *Equality implications*

- 4.5.1. The Council has a duty contained in section 149 of the Equality Act to have due regard to the need to:

- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, and other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

4.5.2. The broad purpose of this duty is to integrate considerations of equality into day-to-day business and to keep them under review in decision making, the design of policies and the delivery of services.

4.5.3. High quality and cost-effective children's services are critical to supporting both the Council and SCF to meet their equality duties, particularly in relation to advancing equality of opportunity by way of reducing inequalities that exist between certain groups of vulnerable children and their families and the wider population.

4.6. **Procurement implications**

4.6.1. There are no procurement implications from this proposal. However, it should be noted that priority 3 focuses on improving our commissioning arrangements and relationships with the provider market to access better value homes for children in care and those who are care experienced.

5. **Background Papers**

None