

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Cabinet

DATE: Monday 18th March 2024

SUBJECT: Children and Young People's (Placement) Sufficiency Strategy – update

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 Bedi – Lead Member for Education and Children's Services

KEY DECISION: NO

EXEMPT: NO

DECISION SUBJECT TO CALL IN: YES

APPENDICES: None

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. On 20th November Cabinet approved the Children and Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy and the **5 priorities** as identified below.
 - I. Strengthening Early Help and developing 'Edge of Care' and reunification support.
 - II. Fostering Recruitment and Retention and developing options for children to exit residential care.
 - III. Ensuring robust commissioning arrangements
 - IV. Achieving permanence for children at the earliest opportunity
 - V. Providing care experienced young people with a variety of placement options and support to independence.
- 1.3. This report also provides assurance that SCF is achieving the savings as identified within the SCF Business and Improvement Plan and progressing the sufficiency strategy approved by Cabinet. The work undertaken by the External Placement Panel provides a positive platform to reduce expenditure as we move into the financial year 24/25.

Recommendation:

- 1.4 That Cabinet notes the update on the implementation of the Children & Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy.

Reason:

- 1.5. The Sufficiency Strategy supports the delivery of Slough Children First's Business and Improvement Plan [2024-27] approved by Cabinet on 18th December 2023 and is a key part of ensuring financially sustainable services best meet the needs of children in Slough.

Commissioner Review:

DFE Commissioner

No Comments

DLUHC Commissioner

No specific comments to add.

2. Update

- 2.1. An update is provided against each priority area below:

- 2.2. **Strengthening Early Help and developing' Edge of Care' and reunification support.**

- Since July 2023, four children have stepped down from foster care; returning home with following a 'Placement with Parent' assessment and support package in place; this has both supported children to return home and evidenced the improved grip and oversight within the service and around our expenditure processes.
- The increased grip and control through our external placement panel has enabled two children to return home through an intensive support offer.
- The scoping and plans to introduce our Edge of Care team are being progressed through the establishment an Edge of Care workstream. Our commitment to supporting children to remain at home with families has enabled a more flexible approach to preventing care admissions and keeping children safely at home.
- The partnership approach to Early Help is being enhanced by the appointment of an Early Help Partnership Coordinator.
- We are working in collaboration with Lincolnshire as our Sector Led improvement partner, an arrangement brokered by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). This work is providing reassurance that our approach to Early Help is in line with nationally recognised good practice.

2.3. Fostering Recruitment and Retention and developing options for children to exit residential care.

- Five fostering households have been approved in this financial year including two fostering households approved since the Sufficiency Strategy was agreed at Cabinet in November 2023. This means there is a net increase the number of overall fostering households from 45 to 47 including the number of household resignations.
- An additional three households will be considered by fostering panel in February where we expect them to be recommended for approval.
- Two other households are expected to be considered by fostering panel by May 24.
- A resilience fostering framework and model has been developed, having been approved via Senior Management Team (SMT) and Senior Leadership Team (SLT), in January 2024. The resilience fostering model will be formally launched on 6th February 2024, when recruitment activity will commence.
- As part of our wider recruitment and retention strategy a policy proposal for Slough Children First and Slough Borough Council to become a 'Foster Friendly Slough' has been developed, with oversight and consultation SCF's leadership team. Cabinet is being provided an update on this via a separate report.
- Internal activity has taken place to review and re-design our Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) name and logo, to ensure that our fostering service stands out in the market and to support future recruitment activity. The name of the IFA will be, 'Foster with Slough', with the SCF and aligns with the Slough Children First vision that children will be: 'Happy, Safe and Loved, Thriving'. Children and Young People were an integral part of this process.

2.4. Ensuring robust commissioning arrangements

- The commissioning service have reviewed and implemented a robust Quality Assurance (QA) process to ensure that our homes for children meet the high standards we expect for them. Since October 2023, 15 provider reviews have been carried out and associated actions agreed.
- A robust process has been introduced which enables the commissioning service to work with providers when specific issues arise that impact on the standards of care they provide. This supports partnership working and collaboration thus enabling providers to reach the required standards and regulations.
- Our commissioning service has reviewed individual contracts with a 16+ semi-independent provider to ensure quality of care and value for money, at competitive rates. This has resulted in improved rates and charges, for 16+ young people presenting with complex needs, reducing some unit costs.
- A feasibility study is being undertaken, by an independent consultant, to scope options and opportunities for SCF to consider opening its own residential children's home(s). This is scheduled to be completed by end of February 2024 although initial observations indicate that the project seems worth pursuing. Any requests for capital funding for such a project will be accompanied by a robust business case

demonstrating the invest to save basis for such funding. Any use of Council buildings will be considered as part of the wider Estates Strategy work.

2.5. Achieving permanence for children at the earliest opportunity

- An External Placement Panel was established in July 2023, whereby all children who are living in a Residential Placement or Supported accommodation are regularly reviewed by a Senior Manager through this panel. This has increased our financial grip and oversight of children's plans resulting in improved efficiency as children are supported to live in the right home for them.
- Through the panel, there has been a reduction in children living in residential children's homes from 24 to 13; stepping children down to semi-independent provision when appropriate to individual needs. We have also supported children to return home when safe and appropriate. This has achieved significant reductions in costs and also efficiency savings. The full year effect in placement savings has been incorporated into next year's budget.
- We will have implemented our Permanency Monitoring Group in March 24 where children's plans will be reviewed to ensure that they move to their forever homes the earliest opportunity – this includes:
 - Those children waiting for adoptive families to avoid drift and delay.
 - Children looked after without a court order to make sure this is the right plan for them or to progress their return home as soon as possible.
 - Those children with plans to be looked after long term where they are not matched with their carers on a long-term basis. This will enable us to find the right home for them.
 - Those children who have or can return home following a 'placement with parent' assessment.
 - Children who are currently in our care long-term living with foster carers, who could become legal guardians for the child, via a Special Guardianship Order.

2.6. Providing care experienced young people with a variety of placement options and support to independence.

- The External Placement Panel reviews all care experienced young people who live in semi-independent provision and are approaching adulthood. This oversight, rigor and grip has supported effective transition planning whereby several young adults have moved to homes to support them in becoming tenancy ready.
- Through the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel and our sufficiency planning, relationships with housing partners are improved, which is enabling both operational and strategic approaches to housing for care experienced young people to be reviewed. For example, a joint housing protocol for care experienced young people will be developed by April 2024.
- To support care experienced young people (CEYP) in developing their life skills a range of group sessions are being organised in a safe and accessible space to enable them to come together in supportive workshops.

3. Summary

- 3.1. As a reminder, the Children and Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy provides a comprehensive overview of demand and accommodation needs in relation to our looked after and care experienced young people.
- 3.2. The strategy was approved by Cabinet on 20th November 2023.
- 3.3. Although progress has been made SCF's leadership team is aware that there is more work to progress the work to fully deliver the Sufficiency Strategy. This includes:
 - Continuing to recruit and retain fostering households.
 - Rolling out the Resilience Fostering model and evaluating its impact on Slough's most vulnerable children.
 - Seeking agreement for SCF and SBC to become 'Fostering Friendly Slough'.
 - Agreeing, implementing, and embedding a joint housing protocol between SCF and SBC's housing services.
 - Implementing and embedding a Permanency Monitoring Group.
 - Rolling out the group sessions for care experienced young people and evaluating their impact.
 - Making a final decision on whether permission should be sought from Cabinet to set up the Council's own children's home.

4. Implications of the Recommendation

4.1. *Financial implications*

The proposals in the sufficiency strategy are covered within the business plan agreed by Cabinet in September 2023 as part of the overall contract sum between Slough Borough Council and Slough Children First.

- 4.1.1. There are no additional financial implications arising from this update and the priorities outlined in the report are expected to deliver savings as planned in line with budget.

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 several 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.

4.3. ***Risk management implications***

4.3.1. There are risks that the company will not achieve the savings as identified in the Sufficiency Strategy. This is mitigated through the Sufficiency Board which retains oversight of the delivery of each priority under a workstream lead. The Board is chaired by the Director of Operations and reports 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 and this has been progressed.

4.7 **Implication for Corporate Parenting Responsibilities**

4.7.1 The Children and Social Work Act 2017 sets out the corporate parenting principles that the Council must have regard to when conducting its functions. A key priority is to ensure that the children we look after are safe and have stable home lives, preparing them for adulthood and independent living. The Sufficiency Strategy sets out our statutory duty, and details our intention of how we will, as far as reasonably practicable, provide the right homes for the children that we look after, supporting us in meeting our statutory responsibilities as a Corporate Parent also.

4.7.2 The 5 priorities of the Sufficiency Strategy require wider partner collaboration and co-delivery to deliver on our legal responsibilities as Corporate Parents.

5. Background Papers

None