

Children Looked After, Sufficiency Strategy

Date: 19th June 2024

Report of: Director of Children and Families

Report to: Executive Board

Will the decision be open for call in? Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

Brief summary

Leeds City Council has a legal duty under the Children Act 1989 to make sure we have enough placements, and a mix of placements, within the Council's area, to meet the needs of Children Looked After.

This report provides a draft Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy which aims to set out, in some detail, the Council's approach to meeting its Sufficiency Duty and the needs of children in its care.

The Leeds sufficiency strategy 2024 -2027 is focused on families first, family valued and creating loving and stable homes. The Strategy highlights Leeds commitment to keeping children and young people in the city, close to their families, friends, local communities and school and their support networks. Working in partnership and cooperating with partners is key to ensuring the provision of a range of high-quality placements that meet the needs of Children Looked After.

Detailed three-year profiles and implementation plans will sit underneath this strategy and will be monitored monthly and updated annually to ensure that the ambitions and targets set out are achieved.

The strategy has been informed by the views, voices and lived experience of children and young people and a measure of its success is that we deliver on the promises made to them as their corporate parents.

The strategy is set within the wider national context where there is significant pressure on local government finances, caused in part due to increasing demand, demography pressures and escalating cost of social care and education external placements. This is a very significant issue for the City Council's financial sustainability and the activity emanating from the delivery of this strategy is a key deliverable for the Council as a whole.

The strategy seeks to provide a framework to deliver the significant change and development required to respond to the challenging national context but also to seek to make a material impact upon the Council's overall financial sustainability by delivering reduced costs of external placement provision within the Children and Families Directorate.

Recommendations

Executive Board is recommended to:

- a) Comment upon and agree the proposed Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy.
- b) Note that the document will be subject to regular review and any significant changes may mean that the Sufficiency Strategy is represented to Executive Board for endorsement.

What is this report about?

- 1.0 All Local Authorities have a legal duty under the Children Act 1989 to make sure they have enough placements, including the correct balance of placement type, to meet the needs of the children they look after. Whilst the Council has the lead role, there is also a duty on local partners such as Health to cooperate in this work, to make sure that children's needs are met. Led by the local authority, all local areas are expected to produce a plan, the 'Sufficiency Strategy' that sets out how children's need will be best met.
- 2.0 **Draft Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy**
- 2.1 The draft Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy is attached as appendix one.
- 2.2 The drafting and development of the Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy has been overseen by a Sufficiency Board comprising a range of Officers from within Children and Families Directorate and from the wider Council and health and education partners.
- 2.3 The strategy is set within the wider national context where there is significant pressure on local government finances, caused in part due to increasing demand and escalating cost of social care and education external placements.
- 2.4 The strategy seeks to provide a framework to deliver the significant change and development required to respond to the challenging context but crucially by changing the mix and model of provision deployed within the Children and Families Directorate with a particular focus on diversifying our model of provision and delivery and seeking to reduce the cost of external placements.
- 2.5 The strategy is focused on family first and creating stable homes in the city, where children can be close to their local school, communities and support networks
- 2.6 Ensuring the right approach and providing the right support and provision at the right time, in the right place provides the Council the best opportunity to deliver affordability, best value and existing within agreed budgets.
- 2.7 The Strategy sets out a key number of principles which will drive the implementation of the Strategy:
 - Ongoing commitment to working 'with' family, to identify family-based settings, family-based solutions (eg through Family Group Conferencing and Family Plans) maintaining Family Links for children and reunification back to family where possible.
 - Reduce the need for children and young people to be in care. This will be implemented through evidence-based developments in early help and prevention and a continued focus on support and planning to help children move on from care.

- To achieve wherever possible family-based placements for children who need to be looked after.
- Effective permanency planning through the childcare review process, supporting applications for a Special Guardianship Order, reunification to family or ensuring that children are matched with identified long term carers
- Supporting the transition to adulthood and independence by providing a range of options for Care Leavers. The implementation of Staying Put and Staying Close, ensuring support is close in proximity and provided through trusted relationships.
- Stronger relationship-based commissioning and market management and shaping with a focus on 'home grown' Leeds based providers. Working alongside care, education and health to collaboratively commission external placement provision that meets needs, delivers child outcomes at the right cost.
- Implement learning from the National Review of Complex Health Needs in Residential Settings by ensuring a robust, multi-disciplinary and tenacious approach to quality assurance across all care health and education residential settings.
- Address the 'broken market' and escalating external costs by developing more high-quality evidence based internal in-house provision (residential and foster care) that enables Council and partners to gain more control over cost, quality and outcomes for children and families.

2.8 Over and above the key principles set out in 2.3 the Strategy seeks to set out:

- The context within which the Council is, with partners, seeking to address significant challenges in increasing numbers of Children Looked After; increasing challenges on ensuring the correct and appropriate mix of placement types (internal fostering, Independent Fostering Agencies, internal residential accommodation, external residential accommodation etc.); increasing cost of and scarcity of external residential accommodation and increasing poorer outcomes for children.
- The need to consider location of provision and the ability to ensure that children and young people are where appropriate accommodated in provision as close to Leeds, family, school and wider support networks as possible.
- The need to keep the strategy child centered and to ensure the needs of the child, young person and family remain central to all activity and decision making.
- The need to ensure that there is a 'mixed economy' and continuum of provision which can best meet the needs of children and young people.
- The financial implications and cost pressures related to providing and securing options for accommodation which are best matched to need.
- The key issues which the Strategy needs to be cognisant of and the changing context within which complexity of need and demand are rising both locally and nationally.
- The need for the Strategy to be aligned with the Council's values and behaviours and its wider corporate planning arrangements i.e. aligned to the Best City Ambition.
- That taking a Team Leeds approach to working in partnership with other agencies within the city is the correct approach.

- The criticality of early help, prevention and a family first approach and its vital role in securing better outcomes for children and young people, avoiding escalation and achieving de-escalation where possible.
- The need to reflect the overarching perspective of Government through its Stable Homes Built Upon Love Plan and the perspective of Ofsted as the principal regulator of Children’s Social Care.
- A strategy which is evidence based, grounded in data and committed to using insight to develop responses to identified issues and need.

2.9 The implementation of the strategy will be accountable to Children and Families Leadership and Corporate Parenting Board. The implementation plans will involve.

- Three-year profiles and action plans across fostering, residential and supported accommodation.
- The profiles will set out direction of travel for the next 3 years and targets required for each area of provision.
- The implementation plans will outline what is needed, by when and who is responsible. These plans will be monitored monthly and updated annually based on progress, changing need and financial and budget implications.

What impact will this proposal have?

- 3.0 The Strategy and its implementation will have a key impact in ensuring that the needs of Children Looked After, by definition some of the City’s most vulnerable children and young people, continue to be prioritised and met. The Strategy will ensure that the Council’s arrangements for supporting Children Looked After are based on a robust strategic assessment of need.
- 3.1 An Equality, Diversity, Cohesion and Integration Screening (EDCI) form is attached as appendix two.
- 3.2 The Strategy will align and contribute to the developing Child Poverty Strategy for Leeds 2024.

How does this proposal impact the three pillars of the Best City Ambition?

Health and Wellbeing Inclusive Growth Zero Carbon

4.0 The Strategy and its implementation will have a direct impact on the ability to deliver improvements to the health and well-being of children and young people across the City. The Strategy will enable more children to live locally in Leeds, supporting them to become active citizens. It will reduce the need for children to be placed outside of Leeds and the associated travel for Social Workers as they fulfil their statutory duties.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

Wards affected:		
Have ward members been consulted?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

- 4.1 The strategy has been the subject of considerable internal officer consultation and engagement and has also been discussed with Children Looked After through our Voice and Influence team, looking at previous views and information shared by children and young people and specific focus group discussions. In addition, three public facing sessions were held in Spring 2024 whereby a range of professionals including the Council’s Placement team and Social Worker, Partners, including Health and Third Sector could engage with the Council on the draft strategy.
- 4.2 The consultation and engagement undertaken to date has generated the feedback set out below which has been accommodated into the draft Strategy now presented to Executive Board for approval.

Consultation and Engagement Feedback

Issue raised	Incorporated into draft Strategy	Additional Comments
Strategy needs to align with and be set in the context of other Council strategies, priorities and initiatives	Best City ambition and children and young people’s plan highlighted	
Needs to benchmark data against core cities	Core city data added into data section	
Focus on family needs a higher priority	Commitment to family-based settings first priority in priority section	
Simple summary on a page for children and young people	Plan on page developed for children and young people	This will be developed into an infographic
Need to reference corporate parenting promises	Promises and pledges added	

What are the resource implications?

- 5.0 The consideration of the Strategy itself and the work done so far raises minimal resource considerations and all activities associated with bringing forward the Strategy for approval have been delivered within existing resources.
- 5.1 Implementation of the Strategy does have the potential for a change in resource deployment between individual placement types but more crucially it should deliver positive financial benefits to help address the significant financial pressure the Council faces on the costs of Children Looked After by ensuring that a) a mixed economy of provision, suitable for need exists and b) individual children and young people’s needs are matched to accommodation and support. In addition, the continued focus on ‘family first’ and supporting children to remain within stable family arrangements will bring beneficial outcomes for children and young people.
- 5.2 Given the general financial pressures being experienced within the Directorate, as referenced in the 2023/24 Financial Outturn reported elsewhere on today’s Executive Board’s agenda, and in particular the very high costs of external residential placements for Children Looked After, the Strategy will play a key element in the Directorate’s plans for reducing expenditure on Children Looked After, by:
- Ensuring that a holistic systems wide approach to forecasting likely demand

- Seeking to provide effective child centred provision based upon principles of 'family first'
- Ensuring that effective care planning processes are in place and that the correct provision is available for each child or young person, with provision meeting need and reflecting a balance of cost and positive outcomes for the child young person
- Having the correct balance of provision including LCC supported foster carers, Independent Foster Agencies, internal provision, commissioned provision and external provision
- Maximizing LCC foster carer provision and supporting more kinship care and SGOs
- Brining forward new levels of LCC supported foster care aimed at children and young people with more complex needs
- Supporting an agile approach to matching the needs of children and young people to available provision
- Ensuring that a mixed economy of provision exists so that the council can respond to changing external market conditions including the potential of joint arrangements with commissioned providers
- Reviewing entrants to care and the processes undertaken by LCC in that decision making
- Strengthening compliance and commissioning arrangements
- Consideration of 'block booking' and 'retainer' arrangements with external providers with a focus on Leeds based provision.
- Consolidating activity to consider reunification of children and young people with parents and carers
- Reviewing care plans for children with a view to supporting and enabling a more timely return to Leeds where this is in the child's best interests.
- Strengthening the work with health, education and third sector partners to bring forward positive outcomes for children and young people whilst delivering financial savings to partners

5.3 The work on delivering the Sufficiency Strategy will be taken forward alongside a range of other activity across the Directorate to reduce its cost base and to maximise efficiencies.

What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

- 6.0 Sufficiency numbers and timescales in implementation plans may not be achievable, realistic or in line with budgetary expectations, this will be mitigated by regular review of the Strategy and by ongoing performance management arrangements.
- 6.1 Assumptions made around data and in particular forecast positions are incorrect, this will be mitigated by a regular review process and performance management arrangements which should allow for remedial action to be undertaken.

What are the legal implications?

- 7.0 There is a general duty arising under section 22G of the Children Act 1989 which requires local authorities to secure sufficient accommodation for children looked after. The Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy sets out how Leeds City Council aims to meet this duty. Executive Board's approval of the Strategy will provide executive oversight, monitoring and endorsement.
- 7.1 Executive Board's approval of the Strategy will assist in ensuring the Council is meeting its legal responsibilities. The Strategy will however not form part of the Council's policy and budget framework.

Options, timescales and measuring success

What other options were considered?

- 8.0 Given the risks associated with not having appropriate arrangements, and the legal duties to secure sufficient accommodation for Children Looked After, the 'do nothing' option was not considered a viable alternative.

How will success be measured?

- 9.0 A range of formal success measures have been constructed and will form the basis of ongoing monitoring and management oversight. Moreover, the Council, partners and stakeholders will know if the Strategy is successful if:
- Less children are looked after and more children live in loving, stable, family-based settings and local children's homes that are high quality and good value.
 - If children and young people tell us that we are delivering on the promises we made to them as corporate parents.
 - More children will be in stable, long-term care. Fewer children will see an unplanned end to their care.
 - Our children looked after and care leavers will have some of the best outcomes of any children, anywhere.

What is the timetable and who will be responsible for implementation?

- 10.0 The Director of Children and Families is responsible for implementation and is supported by officers across the Directorate. Implementation of the Strategy will be immediate.

Appendices

- | | | |
|------|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 11.0 | Appendix one | Draft Strategy |
| | Appendix two | EDCI screening |
| | Appendix three | Children and Young People Infographic |

Background papers

- 12.0 None.