

CORPORATE PARENTING REPORT

Sufficiency of Accommodation for Children in Care in Gloucestershire

1 Introduction

Gloucestershire is committed to sourcing *the right placement at the right time* for all those children and young people who need to be cared for away from home. For most children this will require them to be placed within Gloucestershire where we are best placed to meet their needs. Securing sufficient accommodation that meets the needs of children in care is a vital step in delivering improved outcomes for this vulnerable group and is a vital factor in improving placement stability, which in turn is a critical success factor in relation to better outcomes for children in care.

2 Legislative background

Section 22G of The Children Act 1989 Act requires local authorities to take strategic action in respect of those children they look after and for whom it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation within their local authority area. In those circumstances, section 22G requires local authorities, so far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for those children that meets their needs and is within their local authority area.

The sufficiency duty must be seen therefore as a core part of how local authorities meet their broader duties to ensure that the needs of children in care are fully assessed, that effective matching takes place so that these are met within an appropriate placement, and that regular reviews are held to evaluate whether the child's needs are being met and to address any emerging issues.

High quality assessment of children's needs, care planning and placement decisions constitute the fundamental building blocks of effective commissioning. It is therefore crucial that those involved in working with individual children in care work hand-in-hand with those who have responsibility for commissioning.

3 The Gloucestershire context

Previous briefings to Council have reported that the number of children in care in Gloucestershire has steadily increased over the past 2 years or so:

- As of the 4 September 2017 there are currently 638 children in care
- There were 614 children in care at the end of March 2017
- There were 599 children in care at the end of Dec 2016
- 566 at the end of December 2015

This increase creates substantial pressure within the system in terms of the Council's ability to source ***the right place, at the right time*** for every child who requires a placement away from home. It has been increasingly difficult to meet the needs of our children within in-house resources as the increase in the population has been at a rate which is not commensurate with the recruitment of Gloucestershire foster carers.

- Currently (as at 4 September) there are 249 children and young people in care who are placed with external providers.
- This comprises 39% of the overall cohort of children in care
- 72 of the 249 are placed outside Gloucestershire's boundaries
- Of those 72, 11 children are in independent fostering placements and are aged 10yrs or under.
- Of the 249 placed outside Gloucestershire's boundaries, 139 are placed in independent fostering placements.
- 60 are in residential homes, 9 placements of which are sole funded by Children's Social Care.
- The remaining 51 are placed in residential homes which are funded jointly by education and in some cases health too.

The current pressures in terms of placement availability has resulted in little to no choice of placements for all children and young people referred, even when these placements are commissioned externally. This results in inevitable placement moves for children because placements are not always best served to meet their needs and they break down. Other adverse impacts relate to difficulties with contact arrangements with family and disruption in education. Placement stability is vital for children to secure permanence, enable them to feel safe, secure and in turn, reach their full potential.

Of all Gloucestershire children in care who are fostered, 42% are placed in Independent Fostering Agency Placements which is high in number and cost. In addition, placements for children aged 10yrs and under are being commissioned externally - these are children for whom the County should almost always be able to provide in-house resources.

4 Priority action

Due to the increase in children in care, a priority for the Council is to re-draft the Sufficiency [of Accommodation] Strategy in respect of the current and predicted cohort of children in care. Gloucestershire must be in a position to secure, where reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for children in care within the local authority area. Section 22C of The Children Act 1989 sets out the additional factors (in no order of priority) which the local authority must take into consideration when deciding the most appropriate placement:

- Allowing the child to live near his/her home
- Not disrupting the child's education or training

- Enabling the child and a looked after sibling to live together
- Meeting the particular needs of disabled children
- Providing accommodation within the local authority's area, unless that is not reasonably practicable.

The Strategy has a number of priorities to drive forward, including:

- Growth within the in-house fostering service (which will be drafted in line with an in-house fostering review looking at the structure for delivery of fostering services).
- Ongoing development of The IRIS Project
- A residential review (which will inform the residential component of The IRIS Project).
- Care Leaver's accommodation (responding to legislative changes)

The development of an up-to-date Sufficiency Strategy is a key priority within Gloucestershire's Improvement Plan and the aim is to have this drafted and signed off by the end of March 2018. This will comprise a detailed Action Plan for 2018-20 based on current and predicted need. It will identify key activities, including required commissioning activities to enable the County to provide choice of placements and associated support services for children in care in Gloucestershire.

Cllr Richard Boyles

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