

Divisions Affected – Countywide

PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE]

13 JULY 2023

Children's Social Care Placement Sufficiency, Market Management and Fostering

Report by Anne Coyle, Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Committee is **RECOMMENDED** to
 - Note the pressure on children's placements over the past financial year
 - Receive assurance on the management actions put in place to have oversight of placement decisions
 - Receive assurance on the implementation of the short to medium term plans for placements to ensure good value for money, placements near home and how the Council's actions are improving outcomes for Children in Care.

Executive Summary

2. This report provides an overview of how Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) will fulfil the sufficiency duties and meet the needs of our Children in Care and Care Leavers. It includes the Council's commissioning intentions and supports our vision for children and young people.
3. The sufficiency duty requires each local authority to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that it can offer enough suitable accommodation in its area to meet the needs of children who are looked after.
4. The needs analysis undertaken by analysing brokerage referrals and placement outcomes along with wider data available to us has enabled OCC to understand children's needs and identify the gaps we have in our resources. The Council has created a live Sufficiency Strategy Action Plan which provides an overview of all the commissioning workstreams to grow the specific resources we need to meet the needs of Oxfordshire Children and Young People.
5. We have also been assessing on an on-going basis the impact of wider factors affecting children and their families such as the pandemic, inflation, and the financial crises. Specific impacts in terms of sufficiency have been:
 - An increase in placement demand for children with complex needs resulting in a financial overspend on the placement budget and use of un-registered arrangements.
 - A reduction in foster carer placement availability due to a combination of carers shielding and because of the financial crises many potential foster carers are now seeking full time employment.
 - Disruption to the availability of residential placements due to staffing pressures
 - The cost of placements has been increasing due to rising inflation
 - Increased risk of placement instability due to increased pressure on families, lack of respite opportunities and schooling, reduction in support services.

6. The service is preparing a detailed Financial Strategy which will set out:
 - Greater understanding of what is driving the overspend of £19.1m in 2022/23 and ongoing overspend forecast of £3.1m in 2023/24)
 - Insight to the extent, scale and depth of the improvements implemented in the second half of last year and particularly the underlying indicators which very positively demonstrate an underlying drive in financial recovery
 - Assurance and confidence of the improvement recovery plan based on trends over the last 10 years, comparison, and benchmarking with national, regional, and statistical neighbours
 - Improvement Plan service delivery and investment strategy for the next 5-10 years outlining the timescale for full recovery, release of better value and savings

The Financial Strategy will be brought forward through SLT and Cabinet in the next quarter (July-Sept).

Introduction

7. For the majority of children, the right place for them is to be at home with their family. Some families may need support, and this support would potentially be provided through:
 - Partnership early help / early intervention services
 - Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) Locality Community support Service
 - Family Solutions Plus service that provides specific and targeted support to families facing particular challenges that can impact on their parenting ability such as mental health issues, substance misuse and domestic abuse.
8. For those children who need to be in care, OCC recognises and takes seriously its responsibility as their Corporate Parent. Ensuring that children are placed in the most appropriate setting is a key part of this responsibility, as it has so much impact on their outcomes and ability to thrive.
9. The report includes an overview of placements for Children We Care For (CWCF), including how the Council ensures that:
 - (a) placements are purchased at reasonable weekly rates
 - (b) we increase residential and fostering placements within Oxfordshire and surrounding LA boundaries
 - (c) we develop placements to meet children with complex needs to reduce and eliminate our reliance on un-registered arrangements
 - (d) We are improving outcomes for Children We Care For

Background

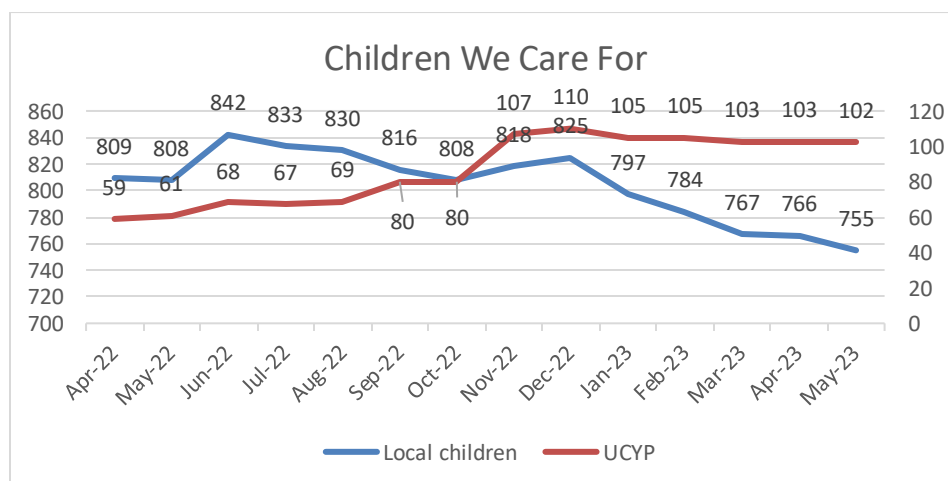
10. There are a variety of placements that are used for Children We Care For. These include:
 - (i) Kinship placement – for children who cannot live with their parents but who are able to be permanently cared for by family members or friends
 - (ii) Adoption placement – for when a Placement Order is made by a court that allows the local authority to find an adoptive home for a child.
 - (iii) Fostering placement – there are a variety of fostering placement types – for example: Long-term fostering; short-term fostering; parent and child; short breaks for children with disabilities and special needs; emergency foster care. These are either delivered in-house using OCC approved Foster Carers and kinship carers (537% of placements in 2022/23 were in-house) or externally using Independent Foster Care (IFA) agencies which represents 47% of placements in 2022/23.
 - (iv) Residential placement - This may be arranged under a care order or a voluntary accommodation arrangement, including short breaks for disabled children. OCC have 3 internal children's homes however the majority of placements (92%) are purchased from the external market.
 - (v) Supported Accommodation – for children in care and care leavers aged 16 and 17, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), that gives the

- young person chance to develop their independence as they prepare to leave care and start adult life.
- (vi) Bespoke packages of support have been set up to support children where no registered provider can be found.
11. The cohort of CWCF that the local authority has responsibility for comprises both of children and young people who are resident in Oxfordshire and also unaccompanied young people who are transferred to the care of the local authority through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS).
 12. The report focuses on residential and foster care placements, as these two categories comprise the majority of placement decisions and of financial spend.
 - (a) Adoption placements are not under the direct control of the local authority and are overseen / managed by Adopt Thames Valley - the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) which covers Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and Swindon.
 - (b) Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Order issued by the Courts. Special Guardianship cares are entitled to a means evaluated allowance as part of their SGO assessment.
 - (c) Supported Accommodation and 18+ arrangements are also out of scope of this report; however, these types of provision are covered in the July 2023 Sufficiency Strategy.
 13. The commentary and findings set out in the report are based on review of placement referral, support and placement activity and costs in the last financial year 2022/23, and the first two months of this year 2023/24.

Placement Pressures 2022/23 and Year to Date

14. The Deputy Director for Children’s Social Care has a focus on ensuring that the service is looking after the right children for the right length of time under the right care plan.
15. An extensive exercise to review every care/permanence plan was undertaken to ensure we are working in a timely way has been completed and each Head of Service and Service Manager reviews this on a fortnightly basis to ensure timely decision making and throughput. The IROs are also required to monitor and oversee this as well. This is an ongoing issue for the whole system to support and ensures best practice in terms of quality and the cost of care.
16. We experienced an increase in number of children we care for in 2022/23. This in part reflects a doubling of unaccompanied young people as we move towards supporting up to 0.1% of our local under 18 population (148).

Chart 1: Children We Care For numbers for the last 12 months



17. Following changes to the level of senior manager and leader oversight and monitoring, the overall number of children we care for has reduced again, moving us back in line with other similar authorities, although we still have more progress to make here. Increased scrutiny regarding decisions about children becoming looked after is now in place as well as a renewed focus on permanence planning to support children to leave local authority care via a range of permanence options, ranging from adoption to reunification is also in place. Some of the challenge we have faced is linked to the legacy of the pandemic as well as delays in care proceedings ending for several children, where permanence plans would end their looked after status via special guardianship, placement orders, CAOs and reunification with their parents following positive progress. We are working to resolve these issues with our judiciary, legal and CAFCASS colleagues.
18. This increased check, challenge and support resulted in the number of children becoming cared for dropping from 160 in the first six months of the year to 117 in the last six months of the year (1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023). This approach is now our practice approach. As a result of this increased Deputy Director scrutiny, the six months July to December 2022 led to less children becoming looked after than in the first three months of that year. This trajectory has been sustained and continued in a gradual, purposeful, and managed way since that time. Managers within each service have supported and progressed this purposeful work to ensure the right children are cared for and for the right length of time.
19. The number of Unaccompanied Children and Young People has grown (102) due to changes in the National Transfer Scheme requirements, and we have seen a significant uplift in the last financial year. We have an upper limit of 148 children that we could be required to support (0.1%) of the population.

Placement decision making

20. We have reviewed our decision-making structures for children and in March 2023 we implemented a refreshed approach to our 'Children's Resource Panel' process. The Children's Resource Panel uses the panel referral, supporting documents and presentation of the child's circumstances at panel to scrutinise the plan and management decisions made in relation to any child becoming looked after. The aim being to ensure there is clear evidence for, and analysis of, the reason for the recommendation, and that the plan for the child or young person gives due regard to their safety, wellbeing, and long-term outcomes.
21. The panel ensures full consideration is given to maintaining, where possible, a child or young person safely within his or her home environment or extended family. The panel applies value for money principles when allocating resources to prevent children or young people becoming looked after or in making certain that their needs are properly understood and planned for.
22. The review of panels is beginning to strengthen our approach to children and young people who are on the edge of care and those where we are considering care proceedings.

Bespoke placements

23. Bespoke packages to support children where no registered provider can be found have become more prevalent across the country during the post-Brexit, post-COVID period. They have grown out of a backdrop of greater complexity of needs and shortage of market capacity to provide the right package of support. Services responded by commissioning bespoke care arrangements with spiralling fees and costs.
24. In the first quarter of the last financial year the service saw the number of bespoke packages grow to a peak of 27. The Improvement Plan implemented in the second half of the year has very successfully addressed this by a planned programme of collaborating more robustly with partners to review each package, identify better quality, better value

registered alternative placement settings and rigor in oversight to ensure effective and completeness in the step down and transitioning arrangements.

25. The programme has successfully reduced the number of Bespoke packages from 27 to 5 reducing the overspend from over £8m in last year to a £2m forecast overspend in this year based on successful implementation of the planned arrangements to transition the remaining five packages to better quality, better value registered settings.

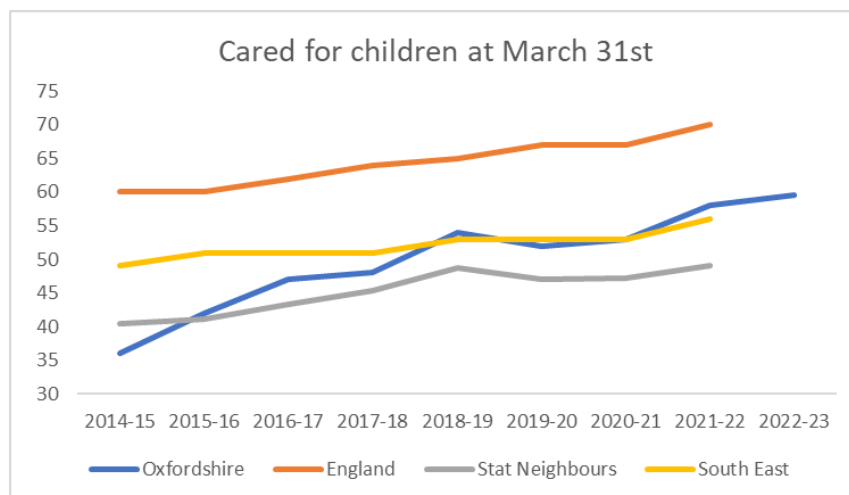
Placement Sufficiency Board

26. The Placement Sufficiency Board (previously known as the third-party placements and savings board) has a focus on the delivery of the Sufficiency Strategy Action Plan to address the gaps and growing need across our CWCF population. Issues and risks are escalated to this board for mitigation and to further escalate to DLT if required (Appendix 1).

Placement Analysis

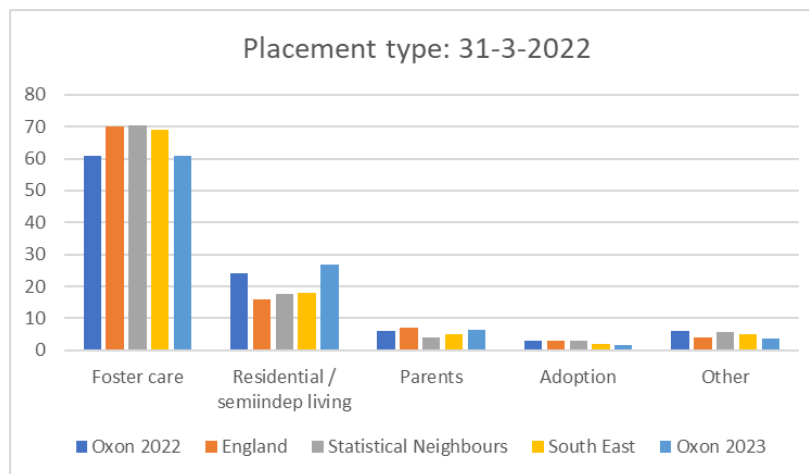
27. The latest published comparative data is for March 2022. This is shown below with Oxfordshire figures updated to March 2023.

Chart 2: Children we Care For numbers from 2014-2023



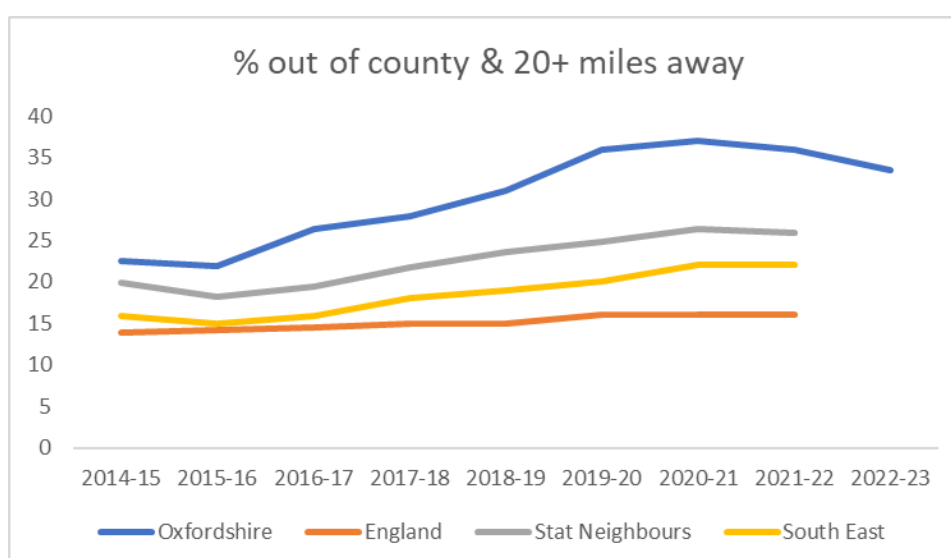
28. Although Oxfordshire's figure is above similar authorities it is below the national average. In March 2022 Oxfordshire's rate was the 51st highest of 152 reporting authorities. In 23/23 Oxfordshire's figure increased by 3%, but the number of Oxfordshire children fell by 2%, (796 to 777) and the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children rose by 70% (58 to 104). There has been lag since this report was run, as of May 2023 there were 857 looked after children within Oxfordshire, bringing us closer to the SE region.

Chart 3: Placement Type



29. OCC are lower than national average and the SE for foster care placements and higher for Residential Placements which represents 16% which is comparable with the National Average. 3% of Oxfordshire CWCF are placed for adoption, in line with national average. The proportion of children in foster care has fallen both locally and nationally, but at the end of March 2022 only 10 authorities had a smaller percentage of children in foster care
30. In 2022/23 just 8% of residential placements (11) were within OCC provision, for foster care this figure was 27% (142 placements)
31. There are currently 27 children in placements costing above £6k per week. The children placed in un-registered arrangements presented with 2-4 different need categories, all children identified as having SEMH needs, four children presented as having self-harm needs / were a suicide risk and four have ASD, one child presented with sexualised behaviour. This shows that our children in our most expensive placements are the most complex
32. Further analysis was completed on the type of placement requested and the outcome of where the child was placed.

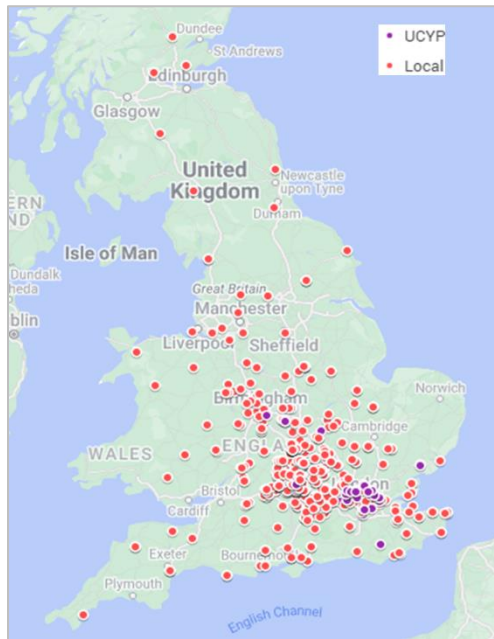
Chart 9: Children placed more than 20 miles from their home up to April 2023:



33. OCC are higher than the national average, statistical neighbours and across the South-East for placing children more than 20 miles from their home address. As of March 2023, just over a third (33.5%) of children were placed out of county and more than 20 miles from home. This is down from 36% in 2022 and 27% in 2021. The latest comparative data is for March 2022, where Oxfordshire's figure of 36% was the 2nd highest in the country.

This is due to the expensive property prices in Oxfordshire and workforce recruitment difficulties, properties appetite to enter the Oxfordshire market is low due to these factors.

Map 1: Children We Care For on 31st March 2023 by location of placement



34. Residential, INMSS (Independent, Non-Maintained School Settings) and foster care placements mapped out on a GIS map - as of 31st March 2023 - a large proportion of OCC placements are in neighbouring LAs to keep the child as close to their family home as possible. However, at times there is a need to place a child away from Oxfordshire either due to their needs or availability of placements.
35. In Oxfordshire in June 2023, 63% of children we care for were in foster care, and 16% were in residential placements (increased from 11% in 2015), consisting of 92% (132 placements) in external placements and 8% (11 placements) in internal placements. The number of external residential and IFA placements increased, against a decrease in OCC foster carers since 2012-13

Foster Care

36. Oxfordshire has a mixed market in fostering where we both commission and directly provide foster care through our foster and kinship carers. OCC market research during 2019 records one registered IFA office based within the County and a couple of other providers who have carers based within Oxfordshire, in addition to OCC's own internal service.
37. The overall percentage of children we care for who live with OCC foster parents decreased from 38% in 2017/18 to 27% in 2022/2023. In the same period, children with IFA carers increased from 39% to 47%.

Table 1: Placement type for children between 2017-2023

		2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
CWCF on 31 March		684	779	767	782	855	881
Foster Placement	No.	471	538	479	493	525	534
	%	69%	69%	62%	63%	61%	61%
Kinship*	No.	110	180	139	144	137	142
	%	23%	33%	29%	29%	26%	27%

OCC Provision*	No.	177	163	142	133	135	142
	%	38%	30%	30%	27%	26%	27%
External Provision*	No.	184	195	198	216	253	250
	%	39%	36%	41%	44%	48%	47%

38. Currently we have 175 mainstream carers as opposed to 217 in 2018 and 96 kinship carers as opposed to 118 in 2018. The average cost of an IFA placement is £1000 per week compared to £388 per week for an in-house foster care placement.
39. Over the last 5 years we have had a decline in numbers of 42 mainstream carers. Service records show that enquiries, applications, and approvals have also fallen significantly and COVID and the cost-of-living crises of 2022/23 has contributed towards this.
40. In 2017/18 we had 147 enquires, leading to 35 approvals. In 2022/23 we had 114 enquires leading to 27 approved.
41. The decline in children living with OCC mainstream carers is partly offset by the increased numbers of children living with kinship carers from 110 in 2018 to 142 in 2023. In effect there are 32 more children living with Kinship and 35 less living with mainstream carers.
42. Due to rise in the children we care for numbers there has been a rise in children living with agency carers. In house foster placements available have not increased in line with the numbers of children we care for against national figures.
43. In 2022/2023 we approved 18 new carers who could offer 27 placements for children on a short- and long-term basis. We approved 15 carers for relief care/short break There were 24 foster carers in total de-registered last year. In the main deregistration arose from a change in family circumstance. In order to bring us up to national average for inhouse placements we need to recruit at least 33 carers (52 placements).

Residential Children's Homes

44. OCC also has a mixed market for residential placements, though only a small proportion of provision is internal. OCC spends approximately £30m on residential placements each year and an average cost of a residential placement has increased from £4800 per week to £5500 per week in 12 months.

Internal provision

45. OCC currently has three internal OFSTED registered children's homes; one is a long-term children's home and two are assessment homes. The total number of beds in the three homes is 18 and each home has six beds. All OCC homes are mixed-gender and can accommodate young people aged 12-18. Having internal homes provides OCC with flexibility and space to assess children's needs before moving on to more long-term placements or returning home. As the table below shows, the current internal capacity represents only 8% of CWCF.

Table 2: showing use of residential children's homes placements since 2018

		2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
CWCF on 31 March		684	779	767	782	855	881
Children's Home	No.	97	100	110	116	113	143
	%	14%	13%	14%	15%	13%	16%

OCC Provision*	No.	8	8	8	10	12	11
	%	8%	8%	7%	9%	11%	8%
External Provision*	No.	89	92	102	106	101	132
	%	92%	92%	93%	91%	89%	92%
Un-registered arrangements**							15

*% of those in a Children's Home Placement

** data collected from 2022/23

External provision

46. The majority of children in residential care are in external residential homes. OCC market research during 2023 records a total of 16 children's homes with 96 beds, plus three residential schools within the County. If all beds were used for Oxfordshire children this would meet 67% of our demand for residential placements, however only 42 (33%) of children are placed in residential children's homes in the county. OCC has three block contracts with providers for 37 beds however and is a member of the South Central framework. However, OCC still relies significantly on spot purchasing for residential placements (47% of residential placements in June 2023), which suggests that current frameworks and block contracts are not able to provide the number of placements required.
47. There are also no solo / small homes to accommodate children with high and complex needs who cannot share, which has resulted in out-of-county placements and setting up un-registered arrangements, resulting in the use of un-registered arrangements from which OCC had 15 un-registered placements at the peak however this has reduced to five in 2023. Costs for these placements range between £7k-64k per week dependent on the child's needs and staffing ratios. The updated sufficiency strategy predicts that OCC require an estimated seven placements p.a. in solo or smaller (2 residential settings operating a clinically validated therapeutic model for trauma-experienced children and young people).
48. OCC has developed a Sufficiency Strategy action plan which is a live document updated monthly and presented to the Placement and Sufficiency Board to track progress and escalate issues / risks where required. This plan gives an overview of the workstreams to increase the type of placements OCC requires to meet our sufficiency duties. (Appendix 2 - Copy of the June Action Plan)

Management Response

49. Our immediate focus to make the biggest difference in addressing the need and the budget is on the following areas
 - New children's homes
 - Recruitment of in-house foster carers
 - Tendering for specialist residential solo placements to meet children with complex needs
 - Engagement with external residential providers and IFA based in Oxfordshire to increase our use of local providers.
50. Influencing factors on placement decision making include:
 - Placement suitability and stability
 - Placement closest to home and improved outcomes for children

- Health and wellbeing, and the conditions to thrive
- Support networks available
- Placement value for money

Update on the new children's home DFE programme

51. OCC have been successful in a DFE bid worth £5m which has been match funded by the OCC Capital funds to purchase 4 houses to be used to increase the Council's internal residential capacity. The homes will be able to support the following cohorts of children:
- Solo/ Small Homes: Two four-bedroom houses to accommodate and support 1-2 children who require at times solo provision or can only share with one other child
 - ASD Home: One six-bedroom house to accommodate and support four children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)
 - EBD Home: One six-bedroom house to accommodate and support four children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences who are now displaying elevated levels of dysregulated behaviours as a result of trauma and attachment

Expected Outcome/benefits

52. To provide Children We Care For with complex needs a homely and nurturing environment with specialist trained staff including access to the Council's Clinical Psychologists to enable them to thrive close to their family and friends.
53. These schemes will support the department to meet their duties under the Sufficiency Strategy to increase the provision of in-county residential placements.
54. The internal residential expansion programme is an invest to save initiative whereby CEF aim to save between £0.5m and £5.6m per annum which is a cost comparison on current un-registered arrangements and out of county placement spend for children who would be accommodated in these homes based on a 75% occupancy rate.

Solo/ Small homes savings rationale:

55. The cost of a placement in the new OCC solo/small home is costed at £9,300 per week due to the high needs of the children. It is anticipated that these provisions will require staffing 24/7 on a ratio of 2:1 (staff: child). This would save £5700 per week against external placements such as block booking a three-bedroom children's home. This could also have the potential of saving of between £15-£20k p/w against the cost of an un-registered arrangement, which cost an average of £25k per week.

ASD/ EBD homes savings rationale:

56. The average cost of an external specialist EBD or ASD placement is £5,500 to £6,000 per week, which involves placing the child out of county due to the lack of specialist residential provision in Oxfordshire. Based on recent costs, the weekly placement fee in the new internal EBD and ASD homes is about £4,200 per week, meaning a potential of up to £1,500 per week against an out of county specialist placement. Enabling children to remain within Oxfordshire has additional value for money in the time saved on travel. In line with the Council's commitment to tackle the climate emergency, it is planned to include the use of renewable energy sources. Staff will have access to pooled electric vehicles with inbuilt electric points in the home.

Foster carer commissioning intentions and update

- OCC continue to work to address the decline in in-house foster carers, which has included increasing fees, the introduction of a co-produced Foster Carer Charter and the implementation of a Tiered structure to categorise carers and provide targeted

training and support at various levels. OCC has also expanded its Mockingbird hubs to provide further support to in-house carers.

- OCC are in discussions to be involved in a regional foster carer recruitment and retention programme funded by the DfE.
- Implementing the 12% market uplift in fees for foster carers to ensure foster carer payments are in line and comparative with external providers.
- Market management of IFA providers to increase the supply of foster carers in Oxfordshire and to increase the number of Oxfordshire children placed into Oxfordshire based IFA foster carers. Brokerage and Commissioning are working closely with local IFA providers, holding brainstorming events for more difficult to place children and looking into incentives for prioritising Oxfordshire children where possible.
- Reshaping the fostering service to ensure activity around recruitment and retention is expedited with efficiency and co-production with carers and the wider council
- Foster Carer recruitment strategy to focus specifically on local provision for UASC under 16. Currently, 10 of 13 under 16 foster care placements for UASC are IFAs.

Update on the placement sufficiency strategy progress

- We have had to develop a financial strategy first that would provide the financial envelope for placements for 3,5,9 years ahead
- There have been gaps in intelligence that we have had to cover in our understanding (e.g., demographics in JSNA)
- With that insight we are now finalising the placement sufficiency strategy to be launched in July 2023.

Next steps

57. The Financial Strategy will be presented to SLT and Cabinet during the second quarter (July to Sept).
58. The completed Financial Strategy will inform the commissioning budget and the placement Sufficiency Strategy. It is expected that the Placement Sufficiency Strategy will be presented to SLT and Cabinet during the second quarter (July to Sept).

Appendix 1 Placement Sufficiency Board – Terms of Reference



TOR Placement &
Sufficiency Board

Appendix 2 Sufficiency Strategy Action Plan



sufficiency strategy
action plan 2023

Corporate Policies and Priorities

59. This report outlines how the Council is delivering placements for Children in Care, including what the Council is doing to ensure good value for money, placements near home and how the Council's actions are improving outcomes for Children in Care.

Priority Seven: Create opportunities for children and	For those children who need to be in care, OCC recognises and takes seriously its responsibility
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young people to reach their full potential.	as their Corporate Parent. Ensuring that children are placed in the most appropriate setting is a key part of this responsibility, as it has so much impact on their outcomes and ability to thrive.
Priority Three: Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.	
Priority 4: Support carers and the social care system.	

Financial Implications

60. It is clear from the forecast for May that the underlying drivers of the overspend of £19.1m last year remain as a significant financial pressure in this year.

Service Area	2022/23			2023/24		
	Budget £m	Outturn £m	Overspend £m	Budget £m	Forecast £m	Overspend £m
Education & Learning	36.9	37.5	0.6	40.8	40.8	0
Children's Social Care	38.5	39.9	1.4	37.7	39.5	1.8
Children's Social Care Countywide	72.7	90.1	17.4	85.8	87.1	1.3
Children's Services Central Costs	4.9	4.6	-0.3	4.8	4.8	0
Total Children's Services	153.0	172.1	19.1	169.1	172.2	3.1

61. Though the Budget investments and improvement programme have addressed the pressure the drivers are deeper and more persistent and potentially at risk of being further inflamed by a volatile economy, spiralling inflation and shortfall in staff and market capacity. They are driven by a combination of:

- Continued workload pressure, increased vacancies, and recruitment difficulties within front-line services especially Family Solutions Plus
- Reliance on Agency staff to cover vacancies and consequential spiral in the costs
- While the number of children in care is reducing the rate is slower than required to address the financial pressure and are offset by increases in underlying unit cost rates especially the growing number of complex cases.

62. The improvement programme actions

Delivered:

- Relaunch of the Early Help Strategy focussing work with our partners to ensure earliest intervention for families.
- The Integrated Assessment / Family Solutions Plus (FSP) teams supporting the timely completion of assessments and intervention measures.

On-going:

- Refocussing thresholds and practice at the 'front door' (MASH) to ensure the right referrals, at the right time to statutory services.
- Fulfil our duty under the National Transfer Scheme to receive an upper limit of 148 children that we could be required to support (0.1%) of the population.
- Reducing the number of children in care and identifying those due to cease.
- Ongoing reduction in the number of children living in high-cost placements.
- Brokerage action plan to ensure timely, suitable, cost-effective placements are sourced.

In progress:

- Developing a robust recruitment and retention policy.

63. Evidence that the actions are having an impact is reflected in the continued downward trend in the number of Children We Care For (CWCF). The numbers are set out in the Chart 1 above.
64. Following a 14% increase from December 2021 (742) to August 2022 (849) the service, through the actions above, has reversed the previous upward trend and the number has reduced to 761 at the end of May 2023. Though the numbers are still higher than in December 2021 the downward trend is expected to continue through this financial year due to the actions being taken and in particular the new assessment procedures, resulting in a greater number of families and their children being supported in their own homes and fewer children entering into care.
65. Emphasis is also being placed on permanence planning and finding other more suitable (and usually more cost-effective) placements, including re-unification to the family home and adoption.
66. Though the activity is coming under control the underlying costs continue to rise and are offsetting and undermining the improvement in activity.
67. As highlighted in the executive summary above the service is preparing a detailed Financial Strategy which will set out:
- Greater understanding of what is driving the overspend of £19.1 in 2022/23 and ongoing overspend forecast of £3.1m in 2023/24)
 - Insight to the extent, scale and depth of the improvements implemented in the second half of last year and particularly the underlying indicators which very positively demonstrate an underlying drive in financial recovery
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The Financial Strategy will be brought forward through SLT and Cabinet in the next quarter (July-Sept).

Comments checked by:

Danny Doherty, Finance Business Partner, danny.doherty@oxfordshire.gov.uk
(Finance)

Legal Implications

68. Not applicable

Staff Implications

69. Not applicable.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

70. Not applicable.

Sustainability Implications

71. Not applicable.

Risk Management

72. Not applicable.

Consultations

73. Not applicable.

NAME Anne Coyle, Director of Children's Services

Background papers: Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2018 -2023

Contact Officer: Caroline Kelly, Lead Commissioner – Start Well.
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July 2023