

Update report to Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Scrutiny

Meeting on 13th September 2023 from Cllr Tessa Munt, Executive Lead for Children, Families and Education

Lead officer: Claire Winter, Executive Director, Children, Families and Education

In relation to:

Response of the Executive to the External Placements Task and Finish Group

1. Background

The Children and Families' Scrutiny Committee External placements task and finish group presented their findings to the Scrutiny Committee on 6 March 2023.

The group made the following recommendations to the Executive:

- That the Council enhances its own capacity and provision for placements by creating more homes in Somerset.
- That the Council should not make any placements in homes which are not registered with Ofsted (see paragraph 3.10 below for explanation of this term).
- That the Council considers buying local block (contract) places, to increase capacity/provision (see paragraph 3.13 below for more information on this).
- That the Council pledges that the language used in this area should always refer to 'placements' rather than 'children' when reporting on work to support our children who are looked after (CLA).
- That Council lobbies Government through the Local Government Association (LGA) to better support councils with guidance, help with forecasting and impact planning, review regulations and commission an annual 'state of the sector' review.
- That, along with the Homes and Horizons report, an update be brought to the Scrutiny Committee in 6 months. Prior to reporting back, the Corporate Parent Board should feed into the scrutiny meeting.

2. Response from Tessa Munt, Lead Member for Children, Families and Education,

- a) That the Council enhances its own capacity and provision for placements by creating more homes in Somerset.

As part of our strategic partnership with the Shaw Trust (Homes and Horizons), the Council has committed to 8 homes for Somerset children, in Somerset. In addition, plans are underway to construct 2 "pods" for semi-independent accommodation and 2 crisis annexe buildings, all of which are planned to be open by the end of 2025.

There are currently already 5 homes open and 6 children living in them, with plans for a further 4 children to move into these homes over the next few months.

A capital bid will be made this Autumn to create the potential to develop homes 9 and 10, as set out in the business case for this project in 2021.

The Council's sufficiency strategy is being redrafted to take into account the significant changes in demand, capacity and costs of care and will address how best to develop and engage with care providers locally, alongside our own provision to ensure that Somerset's children have the homes they need, as locally as possible.

- b) That the Council should not make any placements in homes which are not registered with Ofsted (see paragraph 3.10 below for explanation of this term). *The Council takes seriously its duty to provide high quality, regulated care for the children we look after. Sadly, the lack of capacity locally and nationally has led in recent years to a small number of children being placed in unregistered and therefore unlawful placements, for short periods of time.*

These children often have very high levels of need, involving serious and life-threatening self-harm or violence to others. No provider locally or nationally has been willing to provide care, in crisis, despite repeated and frequent searches.

The children in this situation are typically subject to Deprivation of Liberty orders, so their situation is well known to the Family Proceedings court, who monitor the timescales and quality of care while registered provision is identified. Each child also has a Court Guardian who represents their interests in the court arena.

The situation of any child in these circumstances is reviewed weekly by the Service Director, Children and Families and the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Leavers and presented to a panel chaired by the Executive Director, Children, Families and Education monthly. Any child who has been in an unregistered home in the previous quarter is also discussed with the Chief Executive, the Leader of the Council, and the Lead Member for Children, Families and Education on a 3 monthly basis.

There are currently 5 children in unregistered homes (reduced from 11, as the highest number in the last financial year). 3 of these children have clear plans to move to Homes and Horizons homes shortly.

- c) That the Council considers buying local block (contract) places, to increase capacity/provision (see paragraph 3.13 below for more information on this). *Where it is appropriate block contract places are purchased locally with external providers. This way of procuring homes is regularly reviewed, to consider the quality of providers and the needs of children who need homes to avoid costly "void" bed spaces where children of different needs cannot be placed alongside each other due to Ofsted regulations.*
- d) That the Council pledges that the language used in this area should always refer to 'placements' rather than 'children' when reporting on work to support our children who are looked after (CLA). *Our children in care and care leavers have asked that we refer to where they*

live as their home rather than their placement. All children deserve to have a home where they feel they belong, and the word “home” supports that ambition.

- e) That Council lobbies Government through the Local Government Association (LGA) to better support councils with guidance, help with forecasting and impact planning, reviewing regulations and commissioning an annual ‘state of the sector’ review.

This council is working to find effective solutions to the many problems and challenges faced by our children in care but will need further support from government in order to achieve the very best for those children and young people.

The Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) is in regular conversation with central government about the lack of sufficiency of homes for children in care, including the quality and costs impacts on Councils.

The Stable Homes, Built on Love report - [Children's social care: stable homes, built on love - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/111111/Childrens-social-care-stable-homes-built-on-love-GOV.UK-2023-02-23.pdf) commissioned by government and published in February 2023 sets out a pathway to reimagine high quality care.

- f) That, along with the Homes and Horizons report, an update be brought to the Scrutiny Committee in 6 months. Prior to coming back, the Corporate Parent Board should feed into the scrutiny meeting. *We would welcome the input of the Corporate Parenting Board.*