



Scrutiny Committee – Children and Families Meeting on 18th September 2024

Update report in relation to the External placements task and finish group that presented their findings to the Children and Families' Scrutiny Committee on 6th March 2023

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

1. Background

- 1.1 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
- That the Council considers buying local block (contract) places, to increase capacity/provision
- 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.

- 1.2 Councillor Tessa Munt, the then Lead Member for Children's Services, presented a response from the Executive to the Scrutiny Committee on 13th September 2023.

The response is set out in full here - [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Supplement 2 - External Placements T&F Group - Executive response - agenda item 9 Agenda Supplement for Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families, 13/09/2023 10:00 \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

2. Further update

2.1 *That the Council enhances its own capacity and provision for placements by creating more homes in Somerset.*

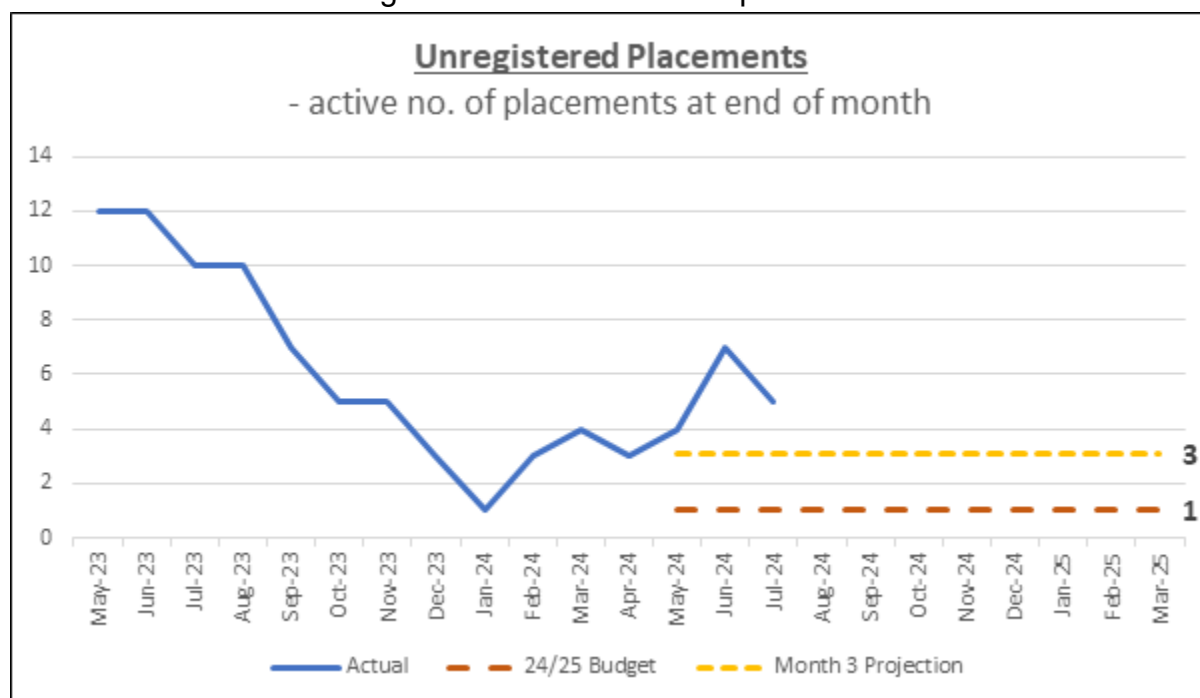
As Councillor Munt reported in September 2023 there are 5 Homes and Horizons homes currently open, and caring for children. The plan to open a further 3 homes by April 2024 has not been possible due to capacity in the planning team and construction delays. Homes 6 and 7 will now open in September 2024 with home 8 planned to open in early 2025. 2 Annexes are due to be in place by the end of September 2024. There are children earmarked for these homes, who are waiting for these provisions to be in place and are mainly currently in unregistered provision.

The Council is also exploring other alternative models of delivery such as social capital and joint ventures with other Local Authorities. These are at a very early stage of development.

2.2 *That the Council should not make any placements in homes which are not registered with Ofsted*

Due to a lack of capacity in the external market locally and nationally, children have continued to be placed in unregistered provision for short periods.

The graph below sets out the numbers and trajectory. It is clear that numbers reduced significantly as Homes and Horizons homes opened in the initial phase and have started to rise again as planned new homes were unable to open. This will course correct to some degree as the new homes open in the next few weeks.



Our aim and aspiration remain that no Somerset children will live in unregistered provision.

2.3 *That the Council considers buying local block (contract) places, to increase capacity/provision.*

We are making progress in setting up block contracts. For young people in supported accommodation, we recently commissioned the Thrive 16+ service which is a block contract across Children's Services and Housing. Alongside the core contract, we are letting smaller blocks through a dynamic purchasing system, further reducing the number of spot-purchased placements.

Block contracts are a guarantee of a specific number of places for Somerset children but it is often not possible to fill all the places, due to the Ofsted requirement to match children's needs. This can result in higher cost places when the economy of scale a block contract offers cannot be fully utilised.

The Children's Commissioning service is exploring small local block contracts again, at lower levels of need, where matching is less complex. If this proves viable it will enable us to bring children home to Somerset, when they are placed at a distance with a small level of saving attached.

2.4 *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).*

This was agreed by Councillor Munt on behalf of the Executive and continues to be normal practice.

2.5 *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.*

Under the previous government, Children's Services nationally, lobbied government on this issue via the LGA and the Association of Directors of Children's Services. We await policy direction from the new government on this issue.