

People Scrutiny Commission



13 December 2021

Report of: Ann James Director for Children, Families and Safer Communities (Acting DCS)

Title: Sufficiency of care placements

Ward: All

Officer Presenting Report: Tara Parsons, Service Manager, Placements;
Richard Pears, Business Manager Placement Finding

Recommendations

That Scrutiny note the content of this report relating to children in care, care leavers and the way in which the local authority meets its duty to provide sufficient homes for children in care.

That Scrutiny support the delivery of the Sufficiency Plan that sets out how the council aims to ensure that children who need our care have a well-matched and loving home.

The significant issues in this report are:

- Bristol is focused on ensuring that its investment in early intervention and prevention means that the majority of children in need of help and protection receive the right service at the right time and go onto grow up successfully in their family.
- Where children need our care, this should only be for as long as is needed, with moves to other forms of permanency achieved in a timely way (special guardianship, adoption, safe and supported reunification with parents/family members)
- This report outlines:
 - The increased pressure on provision of homes/foster carers for children in care and care leavers
 - National, regional and local context with a growing care population
 - Information for Scrutiny members setting out how Bristol meets its Children Act duty to provide sufficient care placements locally – risks, challenges and successes
 - Information on Bristol's care population, profile, needs and range of placements, focussing particularly on the strength of Bristol's fostering population, it's reprovisioning of children's homes, therapeutic support and resultant good performance in delivering stable placements that children remain in for as long as they need, often staying put with carers into adulthood
 - Information is also provided outlining our commissioning approach to the independent sector

1. Summary

- 1.1. The majority of children who need our care are best cared for within a foster family, either a family they know and are already connected with (often referred to as kinship care) or a foster family not previously known to the child but with whom the child's needs, background, culture and interests are matched is the next best option.
- 1.2. For a much smaller group of children who need our care, generally those with more complex needs, residential special school or a children's home is the better match, where care is provided by a team of people.
- 1.3. The local authority has a duty under S22G of the Children Act to secure sufficient placements for children in its care. Bristol does this through a combination of Bristol City Council provision (foster care, children's homes) and commissioned arrangements with the independent sector (independent fostering agencies, children's homes, including homes with education and residential special schools). For children entering adulthood, Bristol provides a range of supported lodging and young people's supported accommodation options.
- 1.4. Nationally the number of children in care has grown for the past several years and, whilst capacity has grown across the sector, it has not grown at the same rate of increase. In 2021 the number of children in care was at its highest, up 1% on the previous year to 80,850. In contrast to this year-on-year increase nationally, Bristol's care population reduced between 2017 and 2019 by 11%. However, since that time it has increased by almost 6%, largely as a result of COVID pressures.
- 1.5. The increase in care numbers in Bristol reflects a reduced rate of exit from care during the pandemic but also a changing demographic, with more teenagers and unaccompanied children requiring our care. Additionally, for those children in and requiring our care, there has been an increase in children's complex needs and those experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties.
- 1.6. The increasing number and needs of children and young people, can be seen to combine with reduced capacity amongst foster carers and in children's homes as a result of the pandemic, making this a critical time nationally, regionally and locally. Bristol has taken a number of additional steps to secure sufficient care homes for children and continues to deliver on its Sufficiency Strategy 2020-23¹, commissioning both its own and a range of additional foster care and residential home places from the independent sector.
- 1.7. Importantly, and at the route of Bristol's previously reducing trajectory, is our approach to family support and prevention of care (Strengthening Families Programme) as well as a relentless focus on supporting children to exit care to alternative forms of permanence when this is right for them. It is imperative that whilst we continue to do everything we can to secure a range of local provision for children in care, that we also continue to focus on preventing the need for care and achieving permanence through reunification, adoption, special guardianship whenever we can.

¹ [Final Sufficiency Strategy 2020–23 v2 May 2021.pdf \(bristol.gov.uk\)](#)

2. Context

- 2.1. The Council is committed to giving all children and young people the best start in life, whatever their background and wherever they live. Our vision for children and families in Bristol is that they get the right response, the right assessment and the right help at the right time.
- 2.2. In the first instance, we are committed to working with families and children in need to support them to stay together wherever this is safe and in the child’s best interest to do so. We will ensure that the children and young people in our care are only those who really need our care.
- 2.3. As Corporate Parents, we hold high aspirations for the children and young people in our care; we want to ensure that they receive the help and support needed to equip them for a successful life. Children in care in Bristol will be loved and have opportunities to learn, play and grow as is the right of all children. Our children will be able to access all that our city has to offer including cultural, faith based, leisure and social activities that will make being in care an enriching experience. Bristol’s Corporate Parenting Strategy² and or One City Belonging Strategy³ sets this out in more detail.
- 2.4. In 2019 we carried out a system wide transformation of children’s services, via the Strengthening Families Programme. The programme focused on the root causes of demand, sought to improve our partnership response to children and families in need of support, and enable us to deliver our vision. In order to achieve this, we invested in early intervention and services on the edge of care, as well as services to achieve permanency including supporting reunification with parents when this is the right outcome for children.
- 2.5. We want children and young people, wherever possible, to live in a family setting and we aim for children to live in residential children’s homes only when it is in their best interest.
- 2.6. Section 22G of the Children Act confers upon local authorities the duty to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority’s area which meets the needs of children that the local authority are looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority’s area (‘the sufficiency duty’).
- 2.7. Bristol’s Sufficiency Strategy 2020-23, approved by Cabinet in October 2021 sets out how the council will deliver a suitable range and number of high-quality placements for children.

3. The needs of the care population

- 3.1. Appendix 1 provides data on the range of placements utilised by the local authority and the rate, number and demographics of our care population.
- 3.2. It shows that we have:
 - **Increased rate and number of children in care:** Having reduced our rate of care as part of strategic intent of the Strengthening Families Programme, we have seen an increase under Covid. There are 3 main reasons for this:

² [Bristol+Corporate+Parenting+Strategy](#)

³ [One City Strategies – Bristol One City](#)

- Increase in complexity and need for care, with teenagers particularly impacted
- Increase in number/rate of unaccompanied asylum seeking children requiring our care
- Reduced rate of exit from care linked to teenagers who are less likely to exit care; the reduction in family/community and other agency supports impacting the ability for children to safely return to family or exit to other forms of permanency; and reduced availability in move-on housing and supported accommodation
- **Increased reliance on independent provision** as a way to meet the needs of our population.
 - Whilst we are investing in our foster carers and have increased the number of carer households overall and have delivered 3 new children’s homes (with a further 3 to be delivered over the forthcoming 18 months), the increased number of placements does not match the rate of increase in the population. Additionally, new carers are generally less able to meet the needs of children with complex trauma and require support and experience with which to develop their skills.
 - Bristol’s use of independent provision remains below that of statistical neighbours, core cities and the national average. This is good as it means we have more cost effective and local provision available however, the data shows an increasing reliance on the independent sector for the reasons outlined above. This has placed children’s services budgets under significant pressure as it is generally more costly provision and, during COVID, we have seen unit costs rise further. The Competition and Markets Authority is undertaking a review of the cost, quality and impact of regulation on the independent sector to which Bristol has contributed. It’s Interim Report⁴ identified a number of concerns (shortage of appropriate places; largest private providers could be earning higher profits than the CMA would expect in a well-functioning market; risk of private equity owned providers going into financial distress and ultimately having to exit the sector due to the high and increasing levels of debt). The Final Report is expected in 2022.
 - Bristol cares for more children post 18 years in ‘staying put’ with your foster carer or ‘staying close’ to your children’s home arrangements than most local authorities. This is something to be proud of, research shows that children and young people who stay put until prepared and ready to leave home, similar to their peers, are more likely to go on to achieve positive outcomes in adult life.
 - Similarly, placement stability is a good proxy indicator of outcomes for children. Bristol’s performance in terms of placement stability is above that of statistical neighbours, core cities and national averages. Our worry is that for those children who present with the greatest levels of trauma and complexity, we don’t yet have the level of provision locally to be able to meet need and for some, suitable care provision is not available on a regional or national basis. Children in this group are likely to move more often and experience poorer outcomes. This includes insufficient secure children’s homes (something commissioned by Government at a national level), when children require such a home in order to meet their safety and protection needs.

⁴ [Children's social care study – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/research-data-and-analysis/publications/childrens-social-care-study)

3.3. Pages 4-5 of the Sufficiency Strategy sets out the challenges in more detail, challenges which have been amplified and made more acute by COVID.

4. Sufficiency Strategy: Bristol’s fostering service

4.1. Bristol’s fostering Service has developed its recruitment strategy to respond to the increased need for fostering households and to ensure our foster carers are well supported and able to offer the best possible care.

4.2. Bristol has a skilled and committed group of foster carers who ably meet the needs of the majority of children in care in the city. However, many of our carers are more mature and approaching retirement, whilst recruitment of new carers is impeded by the fact that most families now need two incomes in order to meet the costs of living in Bristol.

4.3. To address this, we have a number of measures in place from a newly launched consultation on increasing carer fees and allowances to existing measures in Bristol’s Housing policy that prioritises foster carers and a business case that supports fostering families who will extend or adapt their property in order to care.

4.4. We know that it’s not just about the fees paid to carers but also about the support, training and development they receive. We offer an ‘added value’ package to carers as the city’s VIPs with an excellent training and development offer, therapeutic placement support and discounts or free entry into many of the city attractions, culture and sports life. Our foster carers are very much a part of the team and are recognised for the expertise, love and commitment they bring to children in our care. Our standards are high and we know we ask a lot of our carers, this report gives us the chance to recognise their achievements and say “thank you”.

4.5. There are 349 foster carers households including 79 connected carer households currently registered with Bristol City Council. The majority of these carers have been with us for a number of years and are committed to the children in their care and loyal to Bristol.

4.6. The Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-23 sets a new priority, ‘caring for those who care’, stating that, ‘children and young people are nurtured by carers and workers who are well resourced, valued and supported.’ Our recruitment and retention strategy sets out how we will deliver on that priority:

- December 2021, consultation launched on plans to increase the fees paid to current foster carers and attract a minimum of 21 additional carer households over the forthcoming 3 years.
- Creating an additional supervision and support team to ensure we can meet the growing number of carers and respond to them in a timely way whilst also ensuring that we meet all regulatory requirements, providing routing support and moving away, wherever possible, from crisis intervention. An additional team will ensure that caseloads for fostering social workers are manageable and that trusting relationships between carer and social worker, with good oversight can be built.
- It will also mean that social workers have the capacity to offer the high support/high challenge to carers needed to achieve the best outcomes for children in our care and will enable swift transfer of carers from the recruitment team to a support team, leaving the

recruitment team with the capacity to focus on recruitment and training of new foster carers, meeting the targets set out in the sufficiency plan.

- Following an exceptionally successful pilot with two carer households, Children’s Services have worked closely with Housing colleagues to develop a business case to offer grants and loans that will enable some of our foster carers to extend their property in order provide additional space for children. This will enable brothers and sisters to remain together and more children to remain in Bristol.
- An annual communication plan that has a focus on increasing the number of people contacting the fostering team and increasing engagement with social media is in delivery and, having consulted with foster carers, a redesign of the fostering website⁵ is underway with the aim of making it more accessible for those who are considering a career in fostering.
- Monthly campaigns target particular groups of prospective carers with positive messages about fostering as well as myth-busting which are shared on social media – please follow the service on social media, like us and promote our messages.

5. Sufficiency Strategy: Bristol’s Children’s Homes

- 5.1. Bristol has retained a children’s homes sector, enabling I to be more resilient to changing costs and demands in the market. In 2018, Bristol brought forward a plan to reprofile its homes, moving from larger and more institutional looking 4-5 bedded homes that had been built as part of the City’s council housing estates in the 1950s and 60s, to smaller 2-3 bedded ‘house on your street’ homes.
- 5.2. The plan was predicated not solely on de-institutionalisation from a buildings perspective but on modernisation of the approach to deliver a more therapeutic model of care and the ability flex across an estate of eight smaller, rather than five larger homes, enabling occupancy to increase whilst continuing to meet the needs of children.
- 5.3. The children’s reprofiling programme was approved at Cabinet in June 2019 with an initial capital investment of up to £3.5m in new homes. The programme to date has delivered three smaller two and three bed homes and relinquished two larger properties for housing development. A further three homes will be delivered over the course of the next twelve to eighteen months, including a home for disabled children that was added to the programme in 2020 following the closure of St Christopher’s, local residential special school and care facility.
- 5.4. In response to changes experienced over the past two years which include changes to the care population, to the cost and supply chain for house purchase and refurbishment, to the supply of suitable care staff and to the regulatory framework, the leadership team has initiated a review of the business case that set out the plan to replace our children’s homes. This will ensure that plans remain cost effective and fit for the future needs of children in care. The review will be complete and will present a refreshed business case and plan for development In February 2022.
- 5.5. Bristol’s children’s homes are all rated Good or to Require Improvement to be Good, together they currently care for 12 children.

⁵ [Home – Foster with Bristol City Council – bristol.gov.uk](https://www.bristol.gov.uk/home-foster-with-bristol-city-council)

6. Sufficiency Strategy: Bristol Therapeutic Support Service

- 6.1. Bristol’s Therapeutic Support Service started life as a treatment fostering programme, funded through the DfE Innovations Programme in 2014/15. Since then it has grown to provide a service across our fostering and children’s homes sector and has added a family network team that supports children who can safely return to the care of their family.
- 6.2. The primary aim of the service is to improve stability for children who are in care. This is achieved via a range of prevention and intervention activities. The work undertaken by this team supports the further development of knowledge and skills of carers as well as in providing additional emotional support for both children and carers at difficult times.
- 6.3. The work of this team directly supports our good placement stability, both improving outcomes for children and containing costs that would be incurred should more children need to move more frequently.

6.4. Prevention

- 6.5. The team’s work in relation to prevention mainly focuses on training and group work with foster carers. The skill, knowledge and support of foster carers is fundamental to the care of children who have experienced trauma and achieving stability for them. The service delivers a range of training and groups for foster carers and has been developing a model of practice for the service. As part of this work the team have created core training in trauma informed parenting, supporting carers knowledge of attachment, trauma, positive behaviour support and therapeutic parenting. Other training delivered currently includes building relationships with birth family and carer wellbeing.
- 6.6. Groups currently being run include Time for Me, Parents Plus Adolescent Programme (PPAP) and Secure Base. The groups are always well received by carers and receive excellent feedback. The team have also been working hard to promote self-care for carers, building resilience and valuing our carers. Whilst carers tell us how rewarding it is to look after our children, we appreciate it is also incredibly difficult at times and their own needs are often neglected. Therefore, the team have developed a ‘Time for Me’ group. This group focuses on carers coming together to do fun and relaxing activities – talking about the children during this group is put to one side!

6.7. Intervention – short term

- 6.8. The Therapeutic Support Service team provide a rapid response to referrals setting up an initial meeting within 2 weeks as well as providing immediate support when required. They offer a range of support to children and carers including carer consultation, family work and individual support for young people utilising evidence-based interventions.

6.9. Intensive Support Programme

- 6.10. The team also offer an intensive support programme for children who have complex needs and when risk factors to achieving stability are particularly high. These children have usually had multiple home and schools moves and are showing their distress through aggressive / high risk behaviour. This programme offers the following:

- weekly carer group and regular 1:1 support for carers

- daily carer reporting (including tracking of child’s behaviour and foster carer stress levels)
- skills coaching and support in school for children
- support for school staff

6.11. Support to Children’s Homes

6.12. The team have also been supporting the development and embedding of therapeutic care in our children’s homes through consultation, supervision, training and support for staff and some direct work with children.

7. Sufficiency Strategy: Commissioning from the independent sector

7.1. In order to meet need and provide sufficient placements, the local authority also uses regional framework (pre-qualifying) contract arrangements with the independent sector to secure independent fostering agency, children’s homes and independent non-maintained residential special school places for children in care. Bristol is a member of the South-Central framework for both fostering agency and children’s homes placements, alongside 13 and 18 other Local Authorities respectively.

7.2. Bristol’s Placement Finding Team work closely with in-house services to maximise use of in-house provision as a good match for children whilst also developing the relationship with the independent sector with whom Bristol invests £16 Million annually (excluding post-18 and Secure accommodation and Residential schools).

7.3. Our reliance on the independent sector has grown over the past two years with the number of children living in an independent residential care home or school almost doubling to a high of 48.

7.4. To increase our sufficiency more locally, we have taken part in the regional sufficiency programme alongside the independent sector, focused on Fostering, Residential, and Special Schools. The programme has completed data collection and a Market Position Strategy and will now commence market development on a regional and sub-regional level.

7.5. The service is also working with one provider on our framework with a view to developing independent fostering around a new Special school in Bristol and have also been working with Health colleagues across BNSSG to co-develop a children’s home for young people with significant emotional and mental trauma with escalation and de-escalation to/from in-patient mental health provision.

7.6. The Government strengthened the regulatory framework in September 2021 aimed at reducing the use of unregistered specialist provision. In response, Bristol is working with several providers who are seeking to convert their business through registration with Ofsted as a Children’s Home. This will bring regulated expertise around contextual safeguarding in particular into Bristol and will help us meet the needs of young people locally.

8. Sufficiency Strategy: innovation and future developments

8.1. Bristol is an outward looking and innovative local authority, making use of opportunities to improve outcomes and deliver for children in care.

8.2. In addition to the aforementioned developments Bristol is:

- A pilot local authority for the delivery of ‘staying close’ options for young people moving on from children’s homes over the past three years. This is a DfE pilot that followed recommendations made by Sir Martin Narey in his review of the children’s residential sector published in 2016⁶ and includes the addition of a self-contained pod in the grounds of one of our homes.
- Worked with the Clinical Commissioning group and neighbouring local authorities to jointly fund a complex needs pilot aimed at developing creative, preventative and community based solutions that reduce demand for residential care/tier 4 hospital admission.
- Working with Housing colleagues to revise and develop a joint protocol that improves the assessment, prevention and response to homeless young people.

9. Policy

There are two key documents that set out how Bristol aims to deliver sufficient care placements for children in and for those leaving care:

[Final Sufficiency Strategy 2020-23 v2 May 2021.pdf \(bristol.gov.uk\)](#)

[Bristol Corporate Parenting Strategy](#)

10. Consultation

a) Internal

Not applicable

b) External

Not applicable

11. Public Sector Equality Duties

- 11a) Before making a decision, section 149 Equality Act 2010 requires that each decision-maker considers the need to promote equality for persons with the following “protected characteristics”: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. Each decision-maker must, therefore, have due regard to the need to:
- i) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.
 - ii) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to --
 - remove or minimise disadvantage suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic;

⁶ [Residential-Care-in-England-Sir-Martin-Narey-July-2016.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

- take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it (in relation to disabled people, this includes, in particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities);
 - encourage persons who share a protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
- iii) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to –
- tackle prejudice; and
 - promote understanding.
- 11b) All commissioning activity regarding to securing sufficient care placements is undertaken in line with the Equalities Duty. EQIAs are undertaken routinely to ensure that decisions do not adversely impact any one group and that we are active in our attempts to secure a range of provision that reflects the diverse needs and make up of our child population.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Children in Care and Placements break down

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Background Papers:

See footnotes throughout.