Children Looked After Placements Commissioning

Sufficiency Strategy 2017-2020
1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Strategy
The purpose of this Strategy is to set out Cumbria’s vision for and approach to providing sufficient, safe, secure and appropriate homes for children looked after and care leavers over the next 3 years. It supports the delivery of Cumbria’s overarching Children Looked After Strategy, and is aligned to Cumbria’s Council Plan, Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), the Children’s Improvement Plan and the Fostering and Adoption Statements of Purpose.

1.2 Summary of Content
This strategy considers Cumbria’s current position in relation to meeting its placement sufficiency responsibilities. It looks at the national and local context of children looked after in Cumbria, and identifies strengths and key challenges in providing sufficient placements and support. It sets out key strategic priorities and direction for the Council over the next 3 years to enhance provision and ensure children and young people are accessing the best possible placements to meet their needs.

This strategy is supported by the Sufficiency Analysis 2017 (appendix 1) which analyses the demand, supply and support across the provision of placements for children who are looked after, adopted and care leavers. It is also supported by the Sufficiency Action Plan (appendix 2) which sets out activities, targets and timescales for achieving the key strategic priorities. By working towards meeting these priorities the Council will be better placed to provide the best placements possible for children in or leaving care and meet its sufficiency duty.

1.3 Sufficiency Duty
This document sets out how Cumbria intends to meet its Sufficiency Duty laid out in section 22G of the Children Act 1989. This section requires local authorities to take steps that secure, as far as reasonably practical, sufficient accommodation for looked after children within their local authority area (“the sufficiency duty”). Relevant Statutory Guidance has been taken into account when writing this strategy, including: ‘Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children 2009’ and ‘The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations’.

1.4 Voice of the Child
Cumbria is committed to listening to the voice of children in care and care leavers. Their views have informed the development of this strategy, and will continue to be involved in its implementation and review. Their views are presented in various ways including through the Children in Care Council, Care Leavers Forum and the Respect Campaign.

1.5 Meeting the Public Sector Equality Duty
In considering sufficiency Cumbria has paid due regard to equalities. The profile and needs of children looked after changes all the time as Cumbria becomes more diverse in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender. The profile of disabled young people is also changing over time as medical science evolves and changes to assessment result for instance in more children being diagnosed with autism. These changes have been addressed in the analysis, the Equality Impact Assessment and the action plan.


2. Cumbria’s Vision

Cumbria’s overarching vision, set out in the Cumbria Children Looked After Strategy, is for every child or young person who is looked after to achieve their potential and have the best life chances possible. In terms of this strategy Cumbria’s vision is to provide sufficient high quality placements and support to enable children looked after and care leavers to succeed in this, attaining the best possible outcomes, the same as other children from Cumbria.

The quality, range, location and stability of homes are fundamental to support children and young people to achieve their potential and have the best life chances possible. Cumbria strives to provide every child with the best possible placement, which meets their needs, considers their wishes and feelings and provides them with the opportunity to thrive and achieve. Cumbria’s vision is for varied placement options which offer high quality, choice and good value provision that meets wide-ranging needs.

Cumbria plans to work towards achieving this vision by focussing on the priorities set out in this strategy.

3. National and Local Context

3.1 Nationally

Cumbria’s placement challenges reflect the national picture. Also, external factors outside the control of local authorities can also have a big influence on this area. For example, changes to statutory duties such as the introduction of Staying Put as a means of security for care leavers, events such as the tragic death of baby Peter, austerity, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and benefit changes for vulnerable young people. The section below outlines some key recent national considerations in relation to: residential homes, foster care, adoption and care leavers. It also refers to the Local Government Association’s Bright Futures Campaign.


Foster care: nationally the majority of children looked after are placed with foster carers: 53,420 of the 72,670 children looked after at 31 March 2017 were in a foster placement. This is 74%, a similar proportion as in previous years. Available capacity for placing children across the fostering sector has decreased over the last few years particularly for local authorities.


In addition the Education Committee launched an inquiry into fostering in England in October 2016. This inquiry looks at a range of fostering issues including the recruitment and retention of foster carers and concerns over reductions in the number of available foster care places. The inquiry looks into the role of voluntary and independent foster care providers and the impact of the Staying Put initiative. It aims to identify the main areas where Government needs to act to ensure the foster care system in England is fully equipped to provide young people with the loving, stable care they deserve.

Adoption: There has been a fall in the number of placement orders granted by courts in England between 2013-14 and 2015-16. There has also been a corresponding decline over the same period in the number of decisions to pursue plans for adoption for children in care. This decline is not fully replicated in Cumbria’s figures. The most recent data suggest that the number of placement orders and decisions for adoption have now stabilised at this lower level.

There has recently been a reduction in the number of approved adopters, seeing the end of a period (since January 2015) of there being more approved families than children needing to be placed. At a basic level current trends suggest significantly more children are now entering the system each quarter than adopters. If this continues it is expected that the number of approved families available in any given quarter will continue to fall faster than the number of children needing to be placed. For further information see www.first4adoption.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ALB-Report-on-Adopter-Sufficiency-2016-17.pdf

Care Leavers: Local authorities have a duty to provide sufficient, suitable accommodation for care leavers in their local area and if needed support to maintain their accommodation. In 2013 the government produced a Care Leaver Strategy and a one-year-on progress report in 2014, which included a section on Housing, and commitments by the government. This has resulted in improving support for care leavers through the introduction of Staying Put for young people leaving foster care, and piloting Staying Close for young people leaving residential care. However there remain inequalities in relation to housing and support in place for care leavers based on the nature of their final placement before leaving care. Nationally during the 2016 financial year 84% of care leavers aged 19, 20 and 21 were recorded as living in suitable accommodation. Care Leavers have some exemptions in relation to housing, priority if homeless and are likely to get some priority in social housing allocation schemes.

In 2015 Barnardo’s and St Basil’s developed and produced the ‘Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework’, which draws together expertise from local authorities, voluntary sector organisations and young people across England on how to provide appropriate accommodation for care leavers. This is available at the link www.barnardos.org.uk/care_leavers_accom_and_support_framework.pdf

Bright Futures: The LGA has launched the campaign Bright Futures, calling on the Government to fully fund children’s services. Find out more about the campaign at www.local.gov.uk/bright-futures

3.2 Cumbria
Cumbria is home to a population of 498,000 people including 104,900 0-19 year olds (ONS 2015 data). For current contextual data see Cumbria’s JSNA and Observatory link at www.cumbriaobservatory.org.uk/.

In March 2017 there were 627 children looked after by Cumbria County Council. Following 6 years of increasing, the overall number of children in care has reduced over the past 2 years. Therefore, although Cumbria’s rate per 10,000 population of 68 remains higher than the national average of 62 and the statistical neighbour average of 57 at 31 March 2017, Cumbria’s rate fell over the 2017 financial year by 5.3% compared to a National rate increase of 3.2%. The profile of Cumbria children looked after shows that:

- There are more male than female children;
- The majority are White British;
- The largest proportion are on a full care order;
- The 10-15 years age group accounts for the largest proportion of children in care.

Despite the reduction in number of children looked after, demand for placements remains high in Cumbria. Provision provided directly by the Council has been unable to keep pace with demand, particularly with cuts in government spending, competing pressures, increasing statutory duties, and the loss of large numbers of foster carers and staff.
This has resulted in more placements being made with external providers. The Council continues to face the key challenge of meeting the placement needs for children looked after whilst reducing expenditure in this area.

4. Sufficiency Summary

Appendix 1 provides a detailed analysis of Cumbria’s position in relation to the demand for and supply of placements and support for children looked after and care leavers. This reflects that Cumbria is meeting its sufficiency duty in terms of securing placements through a range of provision to meet the varied needs of children in care. There are clear strengths across Cumbria’s provision and also some gaps and challenges. These are outlined below. Cumbria will continue to build on its strengths and work towards meeting the gaps and challenges through focussing on the planned strategic priorities.

4.1 Cumbria’s Strengths

- **Cumbria’s Edge of Care outreach and respite services established in Kendal rated ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted.**
- **Local authority foster carers are located widely across the county.**
- **The provision of emergency foster carers.**
- **Cumbria’s Foster Care Framework.**
- **Cumbria’s two local authority residential homes rated ‘Good’ by Ofsted.**
- **The quantity of private residential provision available within / close to Cumbria.**
- **The high number of children being successfully adopted over the last 2 years.**
- **The high proportion of care leavers living in suitable accommodation.**
- **The successful Staying Put and Homestays supported lodgings services.**
- **Integrated working with Placements Northwest local authorities, including regional residential and leaving care purchasing systems.**

4.2 Key Challenges and Gaps

- **To recruit more adopters who can meet the needs of children who need to be placed in sibling groups, older children and children with complex health needs.** It is more challenging to recruit adopters to meet the needs of these children.
- **To ensure all children with a plan for adoption are able to move to their adoptive home in a timely way and are well prepared for the transition.** Current practice is timely although statistics are still infected by historical drift. The Council will work to meet this challenge alongside ensuring children are well prepared for this move.
- **To recruit and retain more local authority foster carers.** The overall number of local authority foster carers continues to reduce, leading to placing more children in purchased provision.
- **To continue to place children in a family environment where this best meets their needs.** The number of available IFA foster care placements is also reducing, alongside increased demand from local authorities.
- **To place children in foster care close to home.** An increasing number of children are being placed at a distance from home / outside Cumbria due to a lack of local placements.
- **To provide more sibling placements.** Children are sometimes separated from siblings, or their preferred permanence placements are not achieved, as suitable placements cannot be found for sibling groups.
- **To find suitable good value placements for children with complex needs.** The number of children looked after with more complex needs continues to rise, leading to an increase in residential placements which are higher cost.
- **To reduce the number of unplanned placement moves.** The number of unplanned moves has increased and the Council is working to increase the number of stable placements.
- **To place children who require residential care within or near Cumbria.** Where residential care is needed, the Council is working to place more children in provision located closer to home.
• **To work more closely with other local authorities and external providers to control the external market place and where possible reduce placement costs.** Purchased placement costs are rising. Cumbria works with other local authorities to develop regional purchasing systems for residential, foster care and leaving care placements, and meets providers to review services.

• **To embed clear, effective quality monitoring processes across purchased provision.** Cumbria is reviewing this area with Placements Northwest and other local authorities.

• **To offer a range of suitable accommodation to care leavers.** Cumbria needs to ensure there are clear pathways available to meet the wide-ranging needs of young people leaving care aged 16+.

### 5. Strategic Priorities

This section sets out Cumbria’s planned strategic priorities and direction over the next 3 years.

#### 5.1 Early Help and Edge of Care: To ensure these services continue to effectively prevent children from entering care unnecessarily and where appropriate return home in a timely way.

Cumbria’s Early Help and Edge of Care services need to positively impact on the number of children needing to be looked after and therefore placements required. An Early Help Strategy is being developed and Edge of Care Services being expanded. The continued focus on developing these services will work to ensure that children do not enter or remain in care unnecessarily. This includes reducing the numbers who become looked after as a result of neglect.

#### 5.2 Children Leaving Care: To ensure suitable permanence plans are in place and realised, increasing timely move-on and reducing drift.

Cumbria will continue to focus on permanence planning, ensuring that suitable plans are in place and children move on from care as soon as appropriate. Early permanence planning also helps inform sufficiency planning.

#### 5.3 Internal Fostering: To increase the number of internal foster carers, including carers willing to take siblings, older children and children with more complex needs.

Cumbria is modernising its recruitment and retention practice to more effectively target and retain appropriate foster carers. This is being led by the Foster Carers for Cumbria project. The Council is also working to increase the number of children who are matched with in-house carers on a permanent basis.

#### 5.4 Internal Residential Placements: To maintain the high level of occupancy and quality in Cumbria’s two children’s homes, moving children on as soon as appropriate.

Cumbria is working to ensure the two children’s homes continue to provide high quality and effective placements. Clear care and permanence planning will ensure that children and young people are moved on as appropriate either to identified foster carers, reunification home or to independent living arrangements.

#### 5.5 Purchased Independent Fostering Agency Placements: To track placements with IFAs and continue to build strong provider relationships.

Cumbria aims to use IFA placements where this is the best match for a child using the child’s profile and care plan, and is strengthening relationships with local IFA providers. However, the Council will closely track IFA placements and move to a position where the majority are used for short-term placements, and also consider step-down IFA placements to move children and young people on from residential care where this is in their best interests.

#### 5.6 Purchased Children’s Homes Placements: To reduce the number of purchased residential placements, track placements and utilise local provision effectively.

The Council will: closely track placements and have planned exit dates with clear child focussed step-down plans; strengthen relationships with local residential and IFA providers; make placements as close to home as possible; and monitor the development of additional residential provision within Cumbria.
5.7 Commissioning Purchased Placements: To ensure that placements are made fairly and transparently that are both in the best interests of the child and best value. Foster, residential and leaving care placements are to be made via Cumbria’s or regional Frameworks or Flexible Purchasing Systems. Providers are encouraged to join these purchasing systems and quality is monitored.

5.8 Multi-Agency Working: To work effectively with other agencies providing universal, targeted and specialist services to support children in their placements. To focus on ensuring that multi-agency working effectively supports the provision of placements for children looked after. This includes: Placements Northwest, other local authorities, other directorates, Health, CAMHS and District Councils.

5.9 Support Services: To ensure that Plans and Reviews effectively support children and young people to access accommodation that meets their needs. Care planning, care plan reviews, pathways planning, and foster carer reviews are carried out effectively, timely and monitored to ensure they meet the needs of children in care and care leavers. Support will be put in place to enhance reunification where possible.

5.10 Adoption: To build upon the success of the Adoption Service in improving timeliness of placements and support for children and adopters. Cumbria plans to build on the successes of its adoption work by focusing on the recruitment of adopters, support for adoptive families, and reviewing the way in which children’s adoption work is carried out to further reduce the time children wait for a suitable adoptive family.

5.11 Adoption: To work towards being part of a Regional Adoption Agency by 2020. Cumbria continues to work towards being part of the Coast to Coast RAA consisting of Cumbria, Durham, Sunderland local authorities and After Adoption, ARC, Barnardo’s, Caritas and Durham Family Welfare Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

5.12 Care Leavers: To ensure there are a range of accommodation options available to meet the varied needs of care leavers and other vulnerable young people. Cumbria is undertaking a strategic review of accommodation options, involving young people and other stakeholders.

5.13 Staying Put: To continue to build on the success of Staying Put. To monitor the evaluation of Staying Close initiatives around the country as best practice models for future development in Cumbria. Cumbria plans to build on the Staying Put service so that more young people are able to remain with their foster carers once turning 18, including children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies. Cumbria will also consider best ways of developing additional Staying Close options for young people leaving residential care.

5.14 Homestays: To continue to expand the successful Homestays supported lodgings and outreach support services. Cumbria plans to build on this service to benefit more care leavers and other vulnerable young people. Further Homestays providers will be recruited so that more young people are able to improve their outcomes through accessing this service.

6. Implementation and Review

Action Plan
Appendix 2 sets out the action plan that is in place to implement the strategic priorities above. This describes the activities that will be carried out to progress the priorities, the targets that are in place and timescales. The strategy and action plan are working documents to be adapted to changing circumstances.

Governance Arrangements
The implementation of this strategy and action plan will be jointly led by the Council’s Commissioning and Children’s Services Directorates. Overall responsibility for its implementation will be held by Cumbria’s Placement Commissioning Board who will monitor progress on a monthly basis.
Regular updates will be provided to: Children’s Services Directorate Management Team; the Children’s Improvement Board; and the Corporate Parenting Board. The Corporate Parenting Board will carry out an annual review of the delivery against the activities and targets set out in the Action Plan as part of the review of the Children Looked After Strategy.

7. Conclusion

The successful delivery of this strategy will result in children looked after and care leavers living in safe, secure and appropriate homes that can best meet their needs. This will support them in achieving their potential and having the best life chances possible.