

Looked after children Placement Strategy

2011-13

1. Introduction

Section 22G of The Children Act 1989 requires a council to take steps, as far as reasonably practicable, that secures accommodation for looked after children within the authority's area and which meets the needs of those children. Councils should consider the number of accommodation providers in their area that is sufficient in the council's opinion, and take account of the range of accommodation in their area capable of meeting different needs.

In 2010 Statutory Guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children was published by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families. This outlined how councils should carry out their duty under The Children Act which came into force in April 2011.

This strategy therefore sets out the position in relation to placements for looked after children in Central Bedfordshire, including actions needed to ensure sufficient placements to meet future need.

2. Looked After Population Data and Trends

Overall numbers

On 1 April 2009 when Central Bedfordshire Council became a unitary authority the LAC population stood at 132. This represented a rate of 24 per 10 000 population. Our statistical neighbour rate, per 10 000 population, was 38.

The numbers of looked after children have risen significantly over the past 2.5 years and the population at 30 September 2011 stood at 192. This represented a rate per 10 000 population of 34 and a percentage increase of 45%. Over the same period the statistical neighbour rate, per 10 000 population, has risen to 46.

The increase can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, there has been a national increase in referrals to children's social care services, open cases and statutory intervention in relation to children as a result of the national awareness and response to the Baby Peter case. Secondly, Central Bedfordshire Council has applied more rigour than the legacy authority in applying thresholds and intervening to ensure children are protected from harm.

Age and gender

The current age profile of the looked after population is as follows:

Age	CBC LAC population (%)			England LAC population (%)
	Male	Female	Total	Total
0-4	10	14	24	23
5- 9	5	8	13	17
10-14	18	7	25	30
15-17	23	15	38	30
Total	56	44	100	

In comparison with the England looked after population (2010) children aged 5 – 14 are under-represented and young people over 15 are over-represented. In respect of the older age group this may indicate good practice in not seeking to discharge young people aged 16 from care.

Length of time in care

Data indicates no significant trends in relation to the length of time children remain looked after. In April 2010 59% of children had been looked after for one year or over. This increased to 63% in March 2011 and is currently at 62%.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity data shows that children from all non-white black and minority ethnic groups are over-represented in the looked after population when compared to both census data and information from Central Bedfordshire Council maintained schools. 18% of looked after children are non-white compared to 8% in the council maintained school population and 4% in the general council population.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

At 30 September 2011 11 of the 192 looked after children were unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. This number has fallen from a peak of 34 in May 2010 and there have been no new children claiming asylum since February 2011. However, it is difficult to predict trends in young people arriving in the council area and claiming asylum.

Placement Stability

In relation to the two measures of placement stability, performance in Central Bedfordshire has improved over the two years. This reflects the national and statistical neighbour picture of overall improvement. Performance in Central Bedfordshire exceeds that of statistical neighbours and nationally. At the end of September 2011 12 children had had 3 or more placements in the previous 12 months. Whilst the percentage in relation to the overall looked after population was low, nevertheless there were a small number of children who had experienced a significant number of placements and/or unplanned moves. All young people were aged over 11, and 62% were male. Five of the young people's last move was into residential care as a result of their complex needs. In addition 3 of the young people were unaccompanied asylum seeking young people whose moves were in relation to their move to independence.

Distance from Home

At March 2011 26 children were placed more than 20 miles away from their home address, representing 14.8% of the looked after population and above the national average of 13%. When analysed 16 of the 26 children placed more than 20 miles away were placed less than 40 miles away.

3. Current Placement Provision

Fostering Provision

Central Bedfordshire Council operates the 'in-house' fostering service providing placements for its own looked after population and to Bedford Borough Council under a service level agreement. At 30 September 2011 the service had 113 approved fostering households, including those caring for friends and family members under a fostering arrangement. 68 Central Bedfordshire looked after children were placed with in-house foster carers. This was an increase in absolute numbers from the 55 children that were placed in-house on 31 March 2010 and 59 that were in placement in March 2011.

The service was inspected by Ofsted in 2008 and judged to be outstanding.

In addition to mainstream foster placements, the in-house service runs a Youth Care scheme providing specialist placements for young people aged 10-18 who have additional or complex needs. In addition to the fostering allowance carers receive a weekly fee, and the service provides additional supervision and support to carers. 14 Youth Care placements are available when the full complement of carers is approved, however the scheme has not been at full capacity since January 2011. Recruitment is ongoing and the scheme will be at full capacity by December 2011.

The number of children in Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements has remained reasonably constant over the last 2.5 years. In April 2009 63 children were placed in IFA placements; in September 2011 the number was 57. Given the rise in overall numbers of looked after children this means that the proportion of children in externally commissioned foster placements has fallen. In the rolling 12 months to September 2011 38 new IFA placements were made. 19 of these were in order to keep sibling groups together, 12 were for children over 10, 3 were for children with particular needs.

The proportion of looked after children who are in foster placements (in-house or IFA) has fallen over the last 12 months from 72 % to 67%.

Places in IFAs are sought on a spot-purchase basis, although a Framework Contract has been developed which will come into effect on 1 November 2011. More detail about this is given below in section 8.

Residential Provision

The legacy authority, Bedfordshire County Council entered into an agreement in 2007 for St Christopher's Fellowship to manage its three children's homes. This arrangement was continued by both new unitary authorities under a Service Level Agreement.

The arrangement provides for 12 places across 3 homes – one in the Bedford Borough Area and two in the Central Bedfordshire area. One home also has one emergency 72-hour bed. All provision is shared with Bedford Borough. The available number of beds has reduced during 2011 with the closure of a four-bed home in the Central Bedfordshire area following an adverse Ofsted inspection. All other provision is rated by Ofsted as outstanding or good with outstanding features. There are proposals to extend the provision offered in one of the homes by an additional two beds.

Overall occupancy in the homes remains high (ranging from 82% to 98% during 2010-11), Central Bedfordshire occupancy of places increased during that period from 47% to 54%. All young people placed at the homes by Central Bedfordshire Council were male.

At 30 September 2011 21 young people were placed in residential provision, including the St Christopher's homes. This is a 17% increase in the last 12 months. The overall proportion of looked after young people in residential provision has also risen steadily from 7% in April 2009 to 11% now.

The profile of young people living in residential care is 71% male; 62% of young people are aged over 15 years. A number of the young people placed in residential provision during 2011 have experienced multiple foster placements or present with behaviour that cannot be managed within a family setting.

Provision in private children's homes is sought on a spot purchase basis. There are no formal arrangements with providers for preferred rates or cost/volume contracts. All young people placed in residential provision other than the St Christopher's Fellowship provision are placed outside the boundary of Central Bedfordshire Council. 6 young people are in placements in neighbouring authorities, but 8 are a significant distance from their home address.

4 young people with disabilities are looked after in 52-week residential school placements. 3 are out of the Central Bedfordshire Council area and all are high cost specialist provision.

Secure Accommodation

In each of the last 3 years Central Bedfordshire Council has sought secure accommodation for one young person for part of the year. There is no secure provision locally to Central Bedfordshire with the nearest provision in Peterborough or Essex.

Independent and semi-independent accommodation

52 of the current looked after population are aged 16 or 17. Young people are supported to remain in foster care or in residential homes where this is consistent with their needs and wishes. However for those young people who wish to move towards independence or for those who become looked after at age 16 or 17 a range of semi-independent and independent living provision is required.

Central Bedfordshire Council operates a Supported Lodgings scheme offering 8 places spread geographically across the council area.

The council also works with two main providers of semi-independent provision, who offer young people housing tenancies and a package of staff support. There are no formal contracted arrangements with the two providers and placements are commissioned on a spot purchased basis.

There is little hostel provision within the Central Bedfordshire boundary. There is one small hostel offering approximately 12 beds located in the south of the council area, but no priority is given to looked after children and applications for places are considered on a needs basis, alongside applications from people from the general population. If hostel provision is needed/sought for young people, hostels in Bedford Borough Council and Luton Borough Council areas tend to be approached.

There is also limited provision for homeless young people in the area. Under the Southwark Judgement, these young people will be considered looked after and the responsibility for their housing and care will be held by children's social care services. There is some provision for homeless people of all ages located in the east of the council area but this is not appropriate for many of the 16 and 17 year old homeless young people who may have additional vulnerabilities. Provision in Luton Borough Council area is used, particularly that provided by one organisation that works with disadvantaged homeless 16-25 year olds.

Emergency placements

Where a child is accommodated or needs a change of placement out of office hours the Emergency Duty Team have responsibility for making arrangements. They have access to the list of in-house carers who have vacancies and who are able to take emergency placements. They also have a list of independent fostering providers who can be approached if no suitable in-house placement is available. One of the St Christopher's Fellowship homes has a 72-hour emergency bed that can be used if available.

Provision for Children with Disabilities

The in-house fostering service has some foster carers with the appropriate skills to care for children with disabilities. Similarly some children are looked after in independent fostering agency placements. The council also has a residential provision for children with disabilities who require shared care or full-time care. 5 places are available for children aged 8 to 18 years.

Whilst the number of looked after children with disabilities is low at 7% of the total LAC population they are more likely to live in residential care or independent provision. Whilst

this may be attributed to the more complex needs that some children present with, in some cases it is due to lack of availability of foster placements.

A review of Children with Disabilities services is taking place in the Autumn of 2011 and will consider placement provision as part of the remit of the review. The review is due to report in January 2011 and its recommendations will form the basis of the strategy for services to children looked after who have disabilities.

Costs

The approximate unit cost of a mainstream in-house placement was calculated in January 2011 as £452 per week.

A youth care in-house placement was estimated at £837 per week.

The average cost of an Independent Fostering Agency placement is £820 per week – this masks the wide variation in individual placement costs depending on the age and needs of the young person.

The average cost of an independent residential placement is £3614 per week – this also masks a wide variation in placement cost.

The current cost of a placement in one of the St Christopher's Fellowship homes, including the specialist solo-placement home is less than independent provision.. When the planned additional beds come on line, the cost will fall further as the additional bed is being provided for very little additional cost. This assumes full occupancy of 7 beds.

4. Provision for children on the edge of care

Central Bedfordshire Council's aim is to support families to care for their own children wherever possible and where this is consistent with their welfare. This is what the majority of families want and will achieve the best for most children.

Where children are determined to be in need or in need of protection a range of support may be identified as needed during assessment to assist with meeting the child's needs or to prevent them from becoming looked after. In Central Bedfordshire requests for support or resources are presented to the Allocation Panel (CBAP), Children with Disabilities Allocation Panel (CDAP) or Joint Agency Panel (JAP) as appropriate. Support or resources may include:

- Services or payments to family members under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to enable them to care for child who otherwise does not need to be looked after by the council
- Childminding or nursery provision
- Services from the Family and Adolescent Support Team (FAST)
- Services from the Family Intervention Service (FIS)
- Crisis or intensive support to assist parents – also known as High Level Family Support Services
- Short breaks or respite breaks for children and their families

The Family Group Meeting service provides assistance in facilitating family meetings where support for the family and arrangements to prevent a child becoming looked after can be agreed from within the family network. Similarly Family Group Meetings can be instrumental in supporting a plan for a looked after child to return to their family – either through identifying family support for the parents or by identifying family members who may be able to care for the child.

5. Adoption and Permanence

The Central Bedfordshire Council adoption service has a recruitment strategy which identifies the number of adopters needed in the next 12 months to enable sufficient placements for children with a plan for adoption. It is anticipated that 26 new adoptive households will be needed to meet the needs of children in Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council.

The in-house fostering service seeks to recruit foster carers who can offer permanent or long-term placements, and in respect of some children has advertised for carers for specific children. The recruitment target for 2011-12 is 40 new households to enable a net increase of carers and range of placements available.

6. Principles of good placements

Where children become looked after a placement within their family or friends network will be sought as a priority where this is consistent with their welfare. As a looked after arrangement, the carer will be assessed and supported as a foster carer.

Where a placement within the child's family or friends network is not available an in-house fostering placement will be sought. Unless it is not safe to do so it is expected that such a placement will be close enough to the child's community to enable them to remain at their school and involved in their networks. It is usual that a child will be placed with siblings wherever possible unless it has been assessed that this is not appropriate.

Where an in-house placement is not available a foster placement from an independent fostering agency will be sought. A placement closest to the child's community will be sought unless this is not consistent with their safety or welfare.

Where the needs of a young person cannot be met within a family environment a residential placement will be considered, with placement within the St Christopher's homes being considered first. Children aged under 12 will not usually be placed in residential homes unless it is clearly demonstrated that this is consistent with their welfare and the only way of meeting their needs.

Any placements will only be made in provision which has been assessed as good or outstanding by Ofsted or the appropriate regulatory body.

Where a highly specialist therapeutic placement or placement in secure provision is assessed as required, this will only be agreed after agreement from the appropriate Joint Agency Panel or Secure Accommodation Panel (and subsequent Court agreement.)

Where children and young people are not able to return to those with parental responsibility planning will take place in a timely way to enable them to move on to permanent families

who can offer them legal and emotional security. For younger children the placement of choice will be adoption. For older children who retain significant ties to their birth family, long-term or permanent fostering may be more appropriate if Special Guardianship is not suitable.

7. Assessing Demand

It is not anticipated that increases in national population or local population based on estimates of new local housing provision will make any significant statistical changes to the looked after population in Central Bedfordshire.

Whilst the LAC population rate per 10 000 in Central Bedfordshire Council is lower than the statistical neighbour and national rates it is not anticipated that there will be any significant increase in the LAC population. It should be noted that other factors can have influence on LAC population, such as high media profile cases, judgements in case law and national policy change.

No expansion of the overall placement provision is needed although some remodelling in types of placements will be required to meet need.

Our current LAC population data and placement provision tells us that:

- Older teenagers are over represented in the LAC population.
- Non-white children are over represented compared to the local population
- A higher number of children than the England average are placed more than 20 miles away
- Girls needing residential care are placed a significant distance away

Gaps in current provision are:

- The overall number and choice of in-house fostering placements
- Specialist in-house foster placements for teenagers who have complex needs
- Sufficient in-house foster placements for sibling groups and children with disabilities of all ages
- Provision in the local area for young people with complex needs – those needing therapeutic residential placements or who have experienced multiple placements
- A mix of local provision for 16 and 17 year olds, particularly hostel accommodation and emergency/homeless accommodation.

8. Planning for Change

Key areas for development in 2011- 13 are outlined below with a detailed action plan outlined at Appendix One.

Independent Fostering Agency Framework Agreement

During 2010-11 Central Bedfordshire Council has joined in partnership with Luton Borough Council and Bedford Borough Council to develop a Framework Agreement for the provision of independent fostering agency placements. It was recognised by the partners that a more systematic and holistic approach was required to provide a consistent quality assurance framework, reduce negotiation times, better understand and review pricing structures of placements.

The partnership has tendered a framework agreement with 18 independent fostering agencies. The contract will commence on 1 November 2011 and it is expected to improve the quality of provision and reduce costs of new placements made after that date.

Residential Provision

The Service Level Agreement with St Christopher's Fellowship will continue until 2014. It is proposed to expand the provision offered by one home by two beds. The additional beds will be available to both Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council and as well as increasing available beds will serve to reduce the unit costs of this provision.

The Commissioning team in partnership with operational managers will consider whether formalised arrangements for the provision of local private sector residential placements, particularly for girls will be of benefit in widening choice, enabling young people to remain locally and in managing costs.

In house fostering provision

The recruitment strategy for fostering identifies how in-house capacity will be maximised. This includes a recruitment target for 2011-12 with particular emphasis on attracting carers who can provide for sibling groups, older children and permanent placements.

Recruitment will continue to ensure the Youth Care scheme can offer the full 14 placements. A costed proposal to expand the scheme will be developed by January 2012 with a view to reducing the numbers of children placed in costly IFA or residential provision.

Semi independent and independent services

Work will be undertaken with Housing, Commissioning colleagues and local providers in order to widen the housing and support options in the Central Bedfordshire area for 16 and 17 year olds.

Children with disabilities services

The recommendations of the Children with Disabilities Review will be considered and implemented in line with the scope and reporting of that review.

Children from Black and Minority Ethnic groups

We will continue to explore the reasons why the non-white LAC population is higher than that of the general population to ensure that the specific needs of BME communities are met and that children do not become looked after as the result of unconscious stereotyping, or lack of culturally appropriate support to families or communities. We will ensure that all our placement provision can meet the heritage, identity and cultural needs of children and will seek to increase the diversity of our foster carers and providers.

Appendix One

Placement Strategy Action Plan						
	Identified Need	Action	Target Date	Lead Officer	Desired Outcomes	Progress
1.	Improve cost framework and quality of Independent Fostering Agency Provision	Implement and monitor Framework Agreement for new IFA placements	1/11/11- implementation 1/4/11 – review	Head of Children's Services Commissioning Head of Adoption and Fostering	Reduce costs on IFA budget Implement quality framework for IFA provision Ensure IFA provision can meet needs of CBC children	
2.	Review current provision of residential care, particularly placements outside of the St Christopher's Fellowship contract	Undertake further analysis of the need for local provision for children with complex needs and a commissioning model that could support identified need	31/12/11	Head of Children's Services Commissioning Head of Safeguarding and Children in Care	Identify whether commissioning activity is required to secure local provision at best value	
		Work with St Christopher's to realise the additional two beds	31/3/12	Head of Children's Services Commissioning Head of Safeguarding and Children in Care	Increase local residential provision	

		Review St Christopher's contract to ensure it remains fit for purpose and to inform planning for when the contract ends	30/9/12	Head of Children's Services Commissioning	Ensure future provision meets the need of CBC children	
3.	Increase number and availability of in-house fostering placements	Recruit 40 new fostering households in 2011-12 and achieve net increase in fostering placements available	31/3/12	Head of Adoption and Fostering	Increase availability and choice of foster placements Ensure foster placements can meet need	
		Review existing foster carers' approval to ensure maximum flexibility and capacity	31/3/12	Head of Adoption and Fostering	Increase foster care placements and minimise placement moves	
		Recruit to Youth Care Scheme to maximise placements	31/12/11	Head of Adoption and Fostering	Increase available placement to reduce number of placements in IFA or residential provision	
		Complete costed proposal to expand the Youth Care Scheme	31/12/11	Head of Adoption and Fostering	Invest to save – increase youth care placement to reduce IFA or residential placement demand.	

4.	Develop wider mix of provision for 16 and 17 years olds	Undertake liaison and work with housing on establishing homeless and hostel provision	31/3/12	Head of Safeguarding and Children in Care	Increase choice of placement for 16 and 17 years olds	
		Undertake analysis of the benefits of a different commissioning model for semi-independent provision	30/9/12	Head of Children's Services Commissioning Head of Safeguarding and Children in Care	Consider Identify whether commissioning activity is required to secure local provision at best value	
		Continue the expansion of the supported lodgings scheme	31/3/12	Head of Safeguarding and Children in Care	Increase choice of placement for 16 and 17 years olds	
5.	Consider outcomes of Children with Disabilities review	Implement the action plan arising from the review	31/1/12	Head of Children with Disabilities and Child Health	Ensure appropriate mix and choice of placement to meet need and reduce costs where possible. Increase numbers of foster placements available in-house for disabled children	