



15 April 2024

Agenda Item: 6

REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

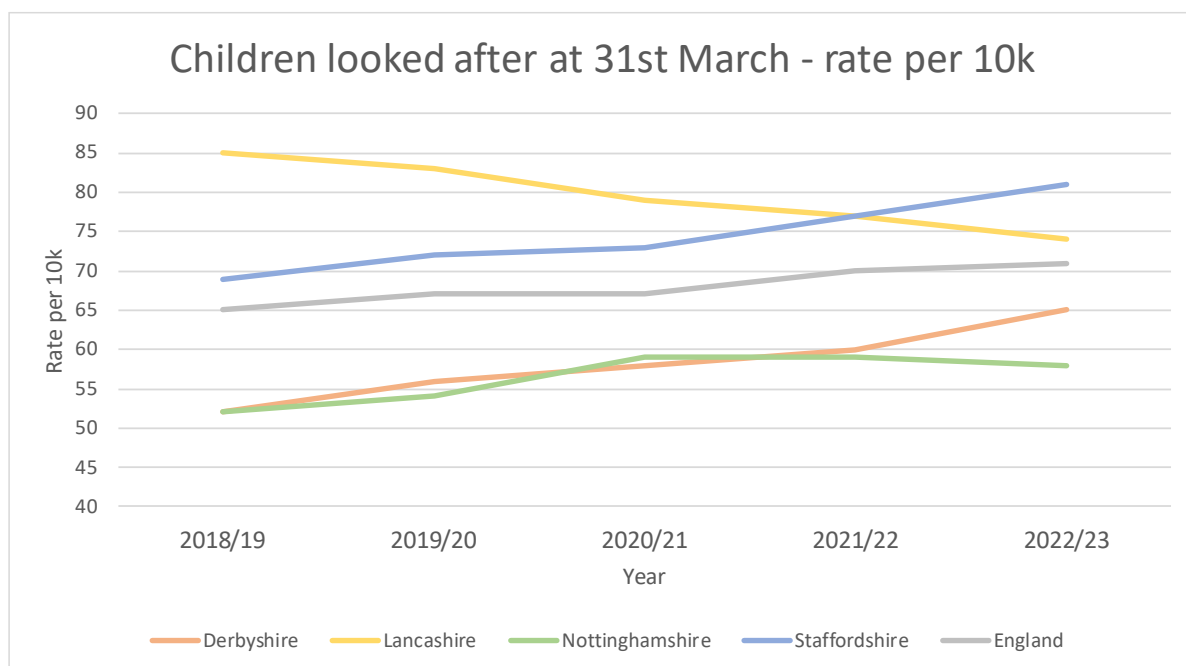
PROGRESS WITH THE SUFFICIENCY AND COMMISSIONING STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS

Purpose of the Report

1. To update Members on the progress made since the publication of the Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children in Nottinghamshire 2023-2025 and of any barriers to delivery.

Information

2. The Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children in Nottinghamshire 2023-2025 (herein referred to as the 'Sufficiency Strategy') sets out how Nottinghamshire intends to meet the Sufficiency Duty placed upon it under the Children's Act 1989 (Section 22G), informed by 'Statutory Guidance on Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children' (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2010)' and 'Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010'.
3. Improving placement sufficiency through the implementation of the Sufficiency Strategy is one of Nottinghamshire's Self Evaluation Framework (SEF) improvement priorities and the majority of improvement activity sits within the Safeguarding, Inclusion and Support Programme.
4. Nottinghamshire's ambition is that more children and young people are able to live in family-based placements, close to home. This means continuing to focus on strengths-based approaches to preventing care admissions by supporting children to remain safely at home where it is safe to do so or identifying and supporting kinship/family and friends arrangements. Alongside this Nottinghamshire is endeavouring to improve the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers, as well as growing the internal residential estate, and working with industry leading partners in establishing value for money block contracts which meet the needs of our children for whom it is right or necessary in the short term to be in residential care.



Source: Children looked after return (SSDA903) 2022/23

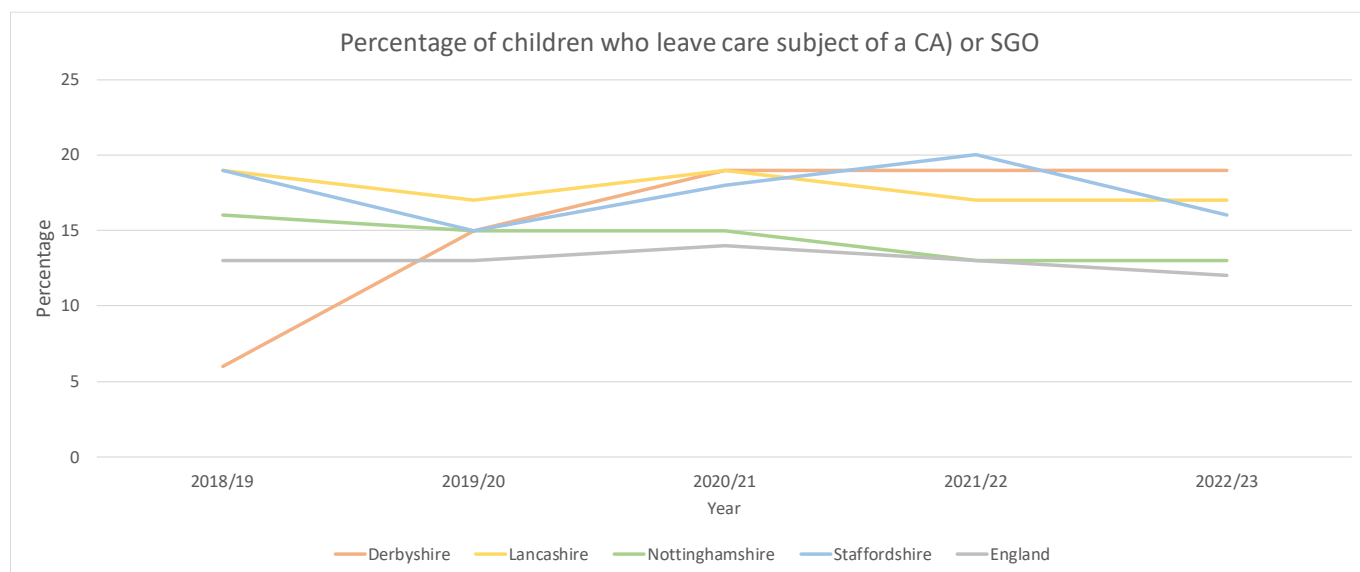
- Nottinghamshire has seen the rate of children looked after remain broadly stable at between 58 and 59 per 10,000 since 2020/21. The current rate per 10,000 remains 14% below the statistical neighbour and East Midlands average, and 18% below the England average. If Nottinghamshire was to match the statistical neighbour average, it would mean 1,110 children in care, an increase of 149. Decisions on whether to take a child into local authority care are always informed by the circumstances of the child and their safety and wellbeing, not on what placements are available.

Update on priority areas of the Sufficiency Strategy

Family Networking and Kinship Care

- A Family Networking Approach has been rolled out across the Assessment Service and District Child Protection Teams. The intention is that family members and connected people (including extended family, friends and neighbours) are invited to contribute to the plans for children from the beginning of their journey with Social Care, and so where alternative care options are required then the opportunity to place the child within a kinship arrangement is maximised. The Kinship Support Service was established in 2023 to ensure the support offer to those caring for children in kinship arrangements is commensurate to that which Foster Carers receive.
- A key priority for Nottinghamshire is to support Looked After Children to instead be cared for under a Special Guardianship Order (SGOs). An SGO is a private law order made by the family court which awards parental responsibility to a named adult which can include an extended family member, connected person or foster carer. When an SGO is granted then the child ceases to have a looked after status and would reduce the requirement for social worker involvement.
- Success in this area is measured through the proportion of children who leave care subject to a Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangement Order. At 13%, Nottinghamshire

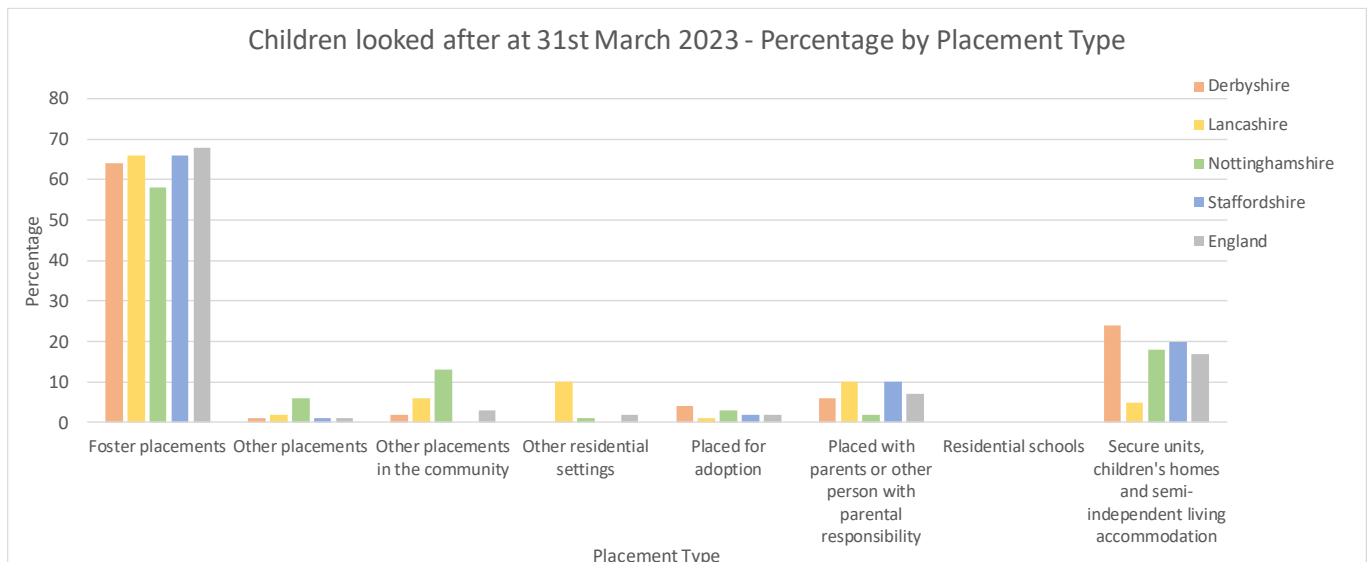
remains in-line with the England (12%) and statistical neighbour (13%) averages but below that of the closest statistical neighbours. This measure does not include children who are diverted from care (which is not currently reportable), so the more work that is done at the edge of care, the more it is expected that this will reduce.



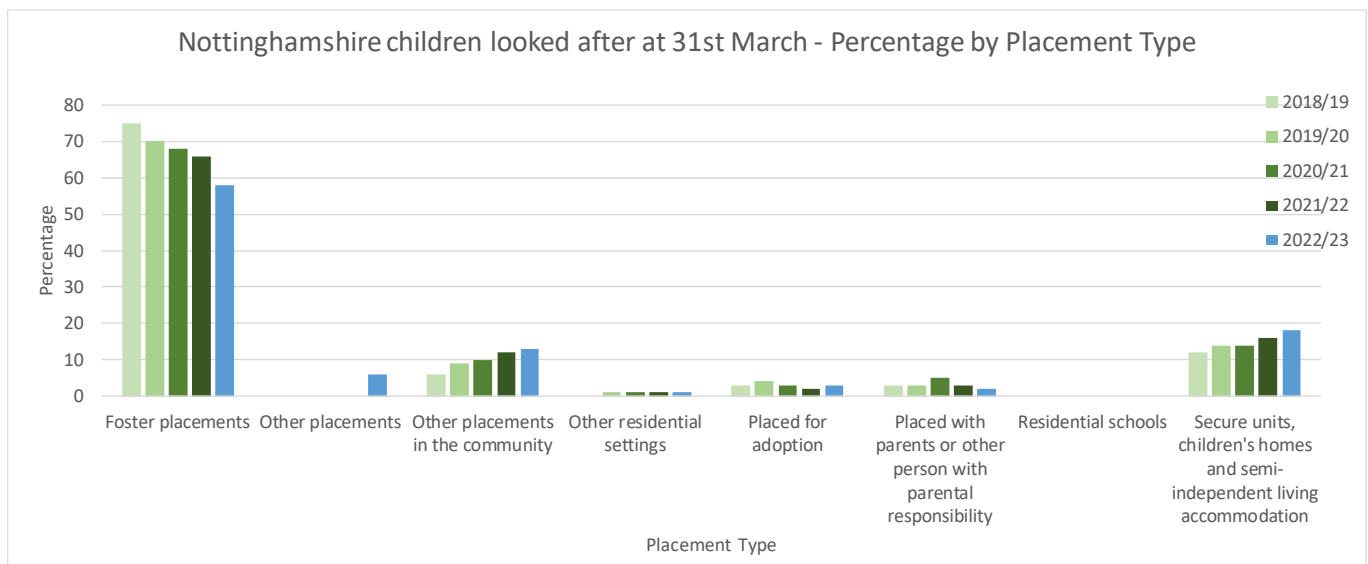
Source: Children looked after return (SSDA903) 2022/23

Fostering

- Compared with national average and statistical neighbour comparators, Nottinghamshire has a lower rate of children in foster placements and a higher proportion in residential children's homes and semi-independent supported accommodation placements suitable for some young people over the age of 16. With the exception of Lancashire, all of Nottinghamshire's closest neighbours have seen reductions in the proportion of fostering placements and an increase in residential and semi-independent placements over the last five years. The pattern is also repeated when looking at England as a whole, but the scale of change in Nottinghamshire is more pronounced with a reduction of 17 percentage points for children in fostering placements compared with 3 percentage points Nationally, 6 for Staffordshire and 8 for Derbyshire.



Source: Children looked after return (SSDA903) 2022/23



Source: Children looked after return (SSDA903) 2022/23

10. Since the publication of the Sufficiency Strategy, a successful D2N2 application to the *DfE Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme* has brought £1.8 million of central government funding into the region for improvements in this area. This should result in an increase in the number of available foster carers across the four local authorities, improving outcomes for children in care by ensuring more children can be in family-based placements close to home.
11. To address the region wide challenges with recruiting and retaining high quality Foster Carers, the D2N2 local authorities (Derbyshire County Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, Nottingham City Council, and Derby City Council) have partnered to launch a new regional approach to Fostering. The D2N2 fostering recruitment support hub 'Foster for East Midlands' launched in March 2024. Foster for East Midlands serves as the central point for all enquiries from prospective Foster Carers interested in fostering for Derbyshire County Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, Nottingham City Council and Derby City Council.

12. Funded through the Department for Education (DfE) grant, the Foster for East Midlands team includes Social Workers, Recruitment Officers, a Performance Information Analyst, a Digital Marketing Officer, a Marketing Officer, and a Business Support Officer. Foster for East Midlands has a newly designed recruitment website ([Foster for East Midlands](#)) to represent the four local authorities, and will develop fostering-specific D2N2 social media pages, online advertising, outreach events and associated physical resources.
13. Working with the DfE and The Fostering Network, the D2N2 local authorities will also trial innovative approaches to the support and retention of Foster Carers. Each authority will develop a 'Mockingbird constellation' to support up to 10 fostering families. The Mockingbird model sees several foster families linked together in an extended family network or 'constellation community'. Led by a Hub Home Carer and Liaison Worker, with the support of their fostering service, the constellation offers vital peer support and guidance alongside social activities and sleepovers to strengthen relationships, stability, and permanence.
14. The D2N2 authorities have worked with the DfE on establishing targets and key performance indicators for Foster for East Midlands. The team aim to attract 660 enquiries, and from these approve 15.45% which will be 103 new Foster Carers across the region. The target 103 approvals represent an 89% increase on the baseline of 54 anticipated D2N2 mainstream approvals for financial year 2023/24. Additionally, the hub will be measured against timescales for responding to enquiries and processing applications, with an improved drop-out rate and target turnaround time of 6 months from enquiry to approval.
15. Nottinghamshire is seeking to understand and address the rate at which Foster Carers have been leaving the Local Authority and have established an additional local Foster Carer retention project running concurrent to the D2N2 project. Quality assurance activity and engagement events with Social Workers and Foster Carers has identified that there are opportunities to improve the communication and relationship between Social Workers and children's Foster Carers. Work is now underway to co-produce solutions with Foster Carers and other professionals involved in Fostering, involving feedback from Children in Care about their experiences; what worked well with their foster families and what could have been better. The aims of the project are to raise the profile of Foster Carers so that other professionals gain a greater understanding of their role and have a more positive attitude towards them. The ambition is that the Foster Carer will be treated as an essential member of the team of professionals around the child. The training and support offer for Foster Carers will be made more accessible, and work will be undertaken to improve the timeliness, quality and quantity of the information a Foster Carer receives about a child before they arrive in their care. Having undertaken the scoping, the next set of workshops for the project are scheduled for May 2024.
16. The success measures for this project will be improved Foster Carer retention rates, a greater level of placement stability, and increased positive feedback about the experience of working as a Foster Carer for Nottinghamshire gained through workshops and questionnaires.

Internal Residential Estate

17. Nottinghamshire owns and operates 8 internal residential homes, including emergency accommodation, specialist disability homes and a secure children's home. The Sufficiency

Strategy sets out plans to expand and improve the internal residential estate and these ambitions have evolved and are being delivered through the Safeguarding, Inclusion and Support Programme.

18. Through the lifetime of the Sufficiency Strategy Nottinghamshire intends to undertake improvements to existing homes whilst expanding its estate by 6 homes and has been successful in attracting £900,000 of DfE match funding from the *DfE Children's Homes Capital Programme 2022-25* to support the intentions.
19. The plans include the development of 5 new 2-bed residential homes which will provide care and support for 10 Looked After Children. The properties will be purchased by the Local Authority and either run as internal homes or leased to strategic partner Homes2Inspire (H2I) to be run as part of a block-contract arrangement (more details on this arrangement can be found in **paragraph 23**). Two of the properties have been purchased and are in operation by H2I, giving homes to four Nottinghamshire Looked After Children – Sudbury House opened in Spring 2023 and Lantern House opened in November 2023. The target completion date for the remaining properties is 1 April 2025.
20. There have been delays in the internal homes development project and continue to be risks associated with Nottinghamshire's ability to deliver by the target date. One property, Ellesmere House, has been purchased but awaiting planning permission for renovation to a 2-bed home. Cost estimates for this home have increased, reducing the overall budget available for the remaining homes. Two further properties have been identified and are undergoing surveys and renovation cost estimation before an offer to purchase can be considered in the context of other forecast overspends.
21. To mitigate the risk of drift and delay, a Children's Property Group has been established, chaired by Service Director for Place (Green Growth, Investment and Assets) and with membership from Children's Residential Services, Commissioning, and Property Services. The group will oversee the delivery of the Council's residential homes expansion with additional project support. A Children's Home Specification document has been developed to support the survey and cost estimation process for any purchases, and a workflow responsibilities chart has been developed to agree accountability for officers responsible delivering the project.
22. The final residential home Nottinghamshire is developing will be a specialist home for teenagers with complex emotional and behavioural difficulties. Nottinghamshire is partnered with the D2N2 authorities and the NHS in delivering this new provision, with each authority identifying a property for the service to be delivered from, and jointly commissioning the care package. The relevant Integrated Care Boards will be commissioning dedicated emotional and mental health services for children in the placement. Across the region the project will provide for 8 Looked After Children who have previously been sectioned under the Mental Health Act, commonly referred to as being in 'tier 4 beds', and who are stepping down into local authority care. Nottinghamshire has identified a property to be converted to a 2-bed home and is in the process of undergoing surveys and renovation cost estimation before an offer to purchase can be considered. This aspect of the project will be overseen locally by the Children's Property Group, with a regional group established and lead by Derby City overseeing the commissioning and procurement.

Commissioning

23. The Commissioning and Placements Group leads on the strategic commissioning, market facilitation and contract management of a range of externally commissioned services for Looked After Children. Nottinghamshire has developed some excellent relationships with residential providers both in its own right and through the D2N2 partnership which has led to commissioning a framework of approved providers of Foster Carers and residential homes at a pre-agreed price across the region. In addition to this framework Nottinghamshire has a Block Residential Care Contract currently delivered by Homes 2 Inspire which provides 31 residential care beds for Children in Care, and therefore provides more placements than the Council's own internal residential estate.
24. The 2023-25 Sufficiency Strategy sets out that a strategic direction would need to be agreed in relation to the D2N2 framework, both for the contract extension required in 2024 and the end of the contractual term in 2026. Furthermore it sets out the need to review the block contracting arrangements for residential care.
25. Progress has been made in this area, with an extension of the D2N2 commissioning framework to 2026 and establishment of a new commissioning manager post to lead work on commissioning several essential services with imminent scheduled contract end dates. This will include the block residential care contract (scheduled to end February 2025) and D2N2 children in care contract for fostering and residential placements (scheduled to end March 2026).
26. A strategic review will commence in April 2024 to identify a future commissioning strategy for these services. It is crucial to look at the recommissioning of both the block contract and the D2N2 contract in parallel as the scope of the block contract will have a direct correlation to the use of the D2N2 framework. The review will seek to identify solutions to the increasing complexity of young people requiring residential care and the increase in demand for single occupancy placements, of which Nottinghamshire has none available internally nor in the block contract, which increases likelihood of high-cost spot purchased placements for such children. Links will be made between the Fostering projects and Commissioning work to identify and manage interdependencies as well as capitalising on opportunities for collaboration.

Other Options Considered

27. A 'Sufficiency Duty' is placed on local authorities under the Children's Act 1989 (Section 22G). The Sufficiency Duty requires local authorities to ensure that there are sufficient placements within their geographical area to meet the needs of children and young people in care, and to take steps to develop provision to meet the needs of all children and young people in care locally as far as is possible.

Statutory and Policy Implications

28. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability, and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below.

Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

29. Whilst there are no additional costs to the Council identified within the strategy, it is underpinned by the continuing financial commitment of the Council to children in care and care leavers. The increasing cost of residential care placements, a nationally recognised issue, is exacerbated in Nottinghamshire by the greater rate at which the internal Foster Carer cohort is reducing. Outcomes of children in care are better for children in family-based placements, which are also significantly cheaper than both internal and external residential placements.
30. The average weekly cost of a foster placement is between £500 and £1,000 depending on the unique needs of the child and on whether the Foster Carer is internal or recruited through an independent fostering agency. The average weekly cost of a residential placement is currently around £6,000 (with a range of £3,000 to over £10,000). Whilst some children need to be in high-support high-cost residential placements, the recent reduction in available Foster Carers is leading to children who could be supported in family based placements being accommodated in residential care as a costly alternative.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Children and Families Select Committee:

- 1) considers and comments on the current plans that are in place for Looked After Children and Care Leaver placement sufficiency.
- 2) considers the establishment of a task and finish review that would enable members to examine in detail the issues surrounding Looked After Children and Care Leaver placement sufficiency and to offer subsequent recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Children and Families.

Councillor Tracey Taylor
Cabinet Member for Children and Families

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Constitutional Comments (SF 25/03/24)

31. The recommendations fall within the scope of the terms of reference for the Children and Families Select Committee.

Financial Comments (CDS 25/03/24)

32. There are no financial implications arising directly from the report. The total budget for Children Looked After placements for 2024-25 is around £100million.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

[Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy-2023.pdf \(nottinghamshire.gov.uk\)](#)

[Looked After Children Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2023-25 – report to the Cabinet Member for Children & Families on 17 April 2023](#)

[Nottinghamshire Placement Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy 2023-25 – report to the Corporate Parenting Panel on 9 January 2024](#)

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All

CFS0019