

**WOLVERHAMPTON LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY  
2017-20**

**Support and Care Strategy for vulnerable children and young people and those  
in the care of the local authority**

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## **1. Introduction**

This new Strategy comes into effect at a time when the Council's Children and Young People's Services have been rated "Good" by Ofsted following their inspection in January 2017. The results of the inspection have underlined the success of the transformation journey that has been undertaken over recent years and the consequent improvement in outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The Inspection Report highlighted that there was clear evidence that the Council is systematically driving improvements in services for children and families. This has been a result of strong and effective corporate leadership linked to a clear sense of vision and purpose, and by focusing on key priorities and using performance management information to monitor and track performance, and deliver better outcomes for children across a range of different areas.

The Inspection Report further noted that good and sustained improvements have been made across the whole range of services for children looked after and highlighted that:

- edge-of-care services are targeted effectively to prevent avoidable family breakdown. As a result, children only become looked after when it is right that they should and come into care in a planned way. Overall the number of children looked after has been significantly reduced without compromising children's safety and most children are living in stable placements.
- permanence planning starts early and that good use is made of adoption to achieve permanence for those children for whom it is the right solution. This includes older children and those with complex needs, regardless of their ethnic identity. The timeliness of legal proceedings, and of matching and placing children with adoptive families, is improving.
- Care leavers receive a good, individualised service, which prepares them well for independence and all care leavers live in suitable accommodation.

The new Strategy forms part of a suite of documents and initiatives which include the Corporate Parenting Strategy, the Children's Services Transformation programme and the action plan we will put in place in responses to the Ofsted inspection recommendations. Collectively these documents set out the City of Wolverhampton Council and its partners' vision for building on this success and our continuing ambition to improve in terms of meeting the needs of all children, young people and their families. This Strategy provides a focus on those children and young people who are on the Children in Need on edge of care, in care or are care leavers.

## **Vision**

The City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) and its partners have a shared vision of improving the life chances of all children and young people living in Wolverhampton by ensuring that families get the right help, at the right time and in the right place and, as far as possible, keep families together.

Our ambition for the next three years is to:

- Further reduce our overall looked after children population.
- Continue to improve the effectiveness of our approach to early help and meeting the needs of children and young people on the edge of care.
- Have a greater proportion of looked after children in family based settings rather than residential ones.
- Have a greater proportion of all types of placement in, or as close as possible to, Wolverhampton.
- Improve placement stability.
- Wherever possible achieve permanence for looked after children and young people through increased use of Adoption and Special Guardianship.
- Reduce the time that children and young people spend in care before a permanent solution is found.
- Ensure that care leavers are prepared for and make as smooth a transition to adult life as possible, part of this being the development of services for those young people “staying put”.

The Sufficiency Strategy 2017-20 and the accompanying Implementation Plan set out how this ambition will be met by focusing on:

- Strengthening family based early intervention that is timely and effective in keeping families together where it is safe and reasonable to do so and helps prevent children and young people entering care.
- Providing a range of care placement options that match the needs of looked after children and improve stability.
- Providing timely options for looked after children and young people to achieve permanence.
- Providing an increased range and choice of provision for young people who will transition to adult life from care

The principles which underpin our planning and delivery of services in order to achieve our ambition are based on:

- family based care – sustained behaviour change is most likely to occur in the context of the family
- stability and permanence – in order to thrive children and young people need consistency of approach, safety and security
- quality and sufficiency –there needs to be enough provision at the highest possible standard
- partnership and co-production – all stakeholders need to be able to shape and comment on service provision

## 2. Looked After Children and Young People

The last three years have seen the start of a transformation in Children's Services and the fruits of this have included a reduction in the overall size of Wolverhampton's Looked After Children population. At the end of March 2014 the LAC population in Wolverhampton stood at 776. The size of the population continued to rise until the autumn of 2014 when it reached 807. However, since that time it has continued to decline to a point where, at end of March 2017, the population was 643 (17.1% reduction from the start of the 2014-17 Strategy period).

In terms of gender there has been a slight increase in the proportion of males in care rising from 55% to 60%.

There have been significant changes to the overall age profile of the population during this period. The proportion of LAC aged 4 or under has decreased from 29.1% to 19.1%. Whilst the proportion 5 -9 year olds has remained static, those aged 10 years and over has increased from 45.8% to 55.6% with the biggest increase being in the 10-15 year olds (32.1% - 41.5%). This reflects the national trend although nationally the proportion of looked after children aged 10 years and over at 31 March 2016 was 62% compared to 54% in Wolverhampton.

In terms of the ethnicity of looked after children there have been relatively few changes. The most significant changes in representation in the LAC population have been:

<b>Ethnicity category</b>	<b>Changes in % of overall population</b>	<b>Changes in actual numbers</b>
White British	63.5% - 60.1%	490 - 384
Asian/British-Indian	2.6% - 1.9%	20 - 12
Black/British – Caribbean	6.9% - 8.2%	53 - 54
Total LAC population		776 - 643

Over the near future the likely increase in Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (UASC) may have an impact on the make-up of the ethnicity of the looked after children population. This in turn has implications for ensuring that there is an appropriate range of placements available to meet cultural and ethnic needs.

In March 2017 the number of Children in Need per 10,000 children had remained fairly constant compared to May 2014 (230 -227, but the rate per 10,000 children of Child Protection cases had decreased (44 – 30).

Whereas the balance between entries to and exits from care was almost equal in 2014/15, subsequent years have seen a significant reduction in starts and an increase in exits. However in 2016/17 there were 171 starts compared to 187 exits.

The greatest proportion of exits from care between April 2014 and November 2016 were returns home (42%) followed by adoptions (23%).

**3. Strengthening family based early intervention that is timely and effective in keeping families together where it is safe and reasonable to do so and helps prevent children and young people entering care.**

A primary focus of our approach is to ensure that wherever possible children and young people have the chance to grow up in their family environment. Over the last few years Wolverhampton has continued to develop services which:

- Identify need earlier
- Deliver co-ordinated services which promote family strength and resilience and provide support
- Help secure better outcomes
- Reduce the likelihood of children and young people need to be admitted to care.

In delivering this vision the City of Wolverhampton Children Services prioritises;

- strengthening families where children are at risk
- supporting families in times of need
- targeting effective early help and support to strengthen families, keeping children and young people with their families where it is safe and reasonable to do so
- identifying and protecting children at risk of harm including those at risk of child sexual exploitation
- improving outcomes for families affected by domestic violence by ensuring earlier access to information, advice and support

As part of this development a Specialist Support Service was established in Autumn 2015 to provide support to families on the edge of care. The service aims to keep children at home as well as enabling looked after children to return home from care. To achieve these aims a range of wrap around services are provided which:

- Utilise Family Group Conferences to enable families to find solutions and manage risk with support from the Edge of Care service.
- Address the problem of school exclusion
- Provide mediation to keep families communicating with each other.

- Develop the strength of the family so that they can manage crisis effectively and be the best family unit they can be.
- Respond to Child Sexual Exploitation and children missing from home.
- Provide access to mental health services.
- Offer respite opportunities
- Provide whole family intensive therapeutic support

Access to these services is by a single referral pathway and referrals are only accepted where there is an up to date and relevant assessment of the child's needs, there is a clear risk of child being accommodated and no other service can provide support, and where there is a clear and timed plan with specific actions linked to desired outcomes and a time set for achieving these outcomes and reviewing progress.

Work with families is short term, time limited, intensive and regularly reviewed to ensure that in cases where sufficient progress is not being made, alternative courses of action can be explored and implemented.

Over the next three years we plan to continue to build on the progress already made and in particular to develop improved multi-agency planning and delivery in relation to edge of care cases and ensure that there is an effective multi-disciplinary approach to the edge of care service.

Success in this strand of the Sufficiency Strategy is vitally important to ensuring that the ambition to ensure that children and young people in Wolverhampton have the best outcomes and that the overall LAC population reduces further are realised.

#### **4. Providing a range of care placement options that match the needs of looked after children and improves stability, particularly for children and young people who stay in care for a long period of time**

For looked after children, as with the rest of the population, our aim is to ensure that as many as possible have the opportunity to grow and thrive in a family environment and that only in those few cases where it has been assessed that a residential placement would provide the best opportunity to thrive will residential placements be provided. Whatever a looked after child's needs we will ensure that we have access to a wide enough range of placements to meet needs.

For those children and young people who need to be taken into the care of the local authority, the corporate parenting aims of the Council and its partners are:

- To develop policies, initiatives, services and prioritise budgets in order to further the life chances of every child and young person in the local authority's care. This includes improving outcomes, narrowing the gap between LAC and

their peers by providing effective support which enables them to reach their full potential

- To support those young people who are in the care of the local authority when they make the transition to adult life in order to make that transition as smooth as a possible.

Some children and young people's time in the care of the local authority will be short term because they can safely return home or a route to permanency such as adoption is quickly identified. For those young people who do stay in care for a long period of time, we will ensure that we can provide a range of flexible, comprehensive and joined up services to ensure all looked after children have their needs met

### *Foster Care*

At the end of March 2017 79.5% of Wolverhampton's LAC were in foster care placements compared to 75.4% at the end of March 2014. During that time the proportion of LAC in internal and family and friends placements has increased and the use of Independent Fostering Agency placements reduced (49.2% - 38.7%). The proportion of Wolverhampton looked after children who were in foster care is slightly greater than the national position which was 74% in March 2016.

Nationally 62% of foster care placements were within the relevant council boundaries compared to 49% in Wolverhampton at the end of March 2017 In June 2016 there were 389 children on care orders with plans of long term fostering who have been linked and matched.

Despite concerted efforts to increase the number of internal foster carers the long-term trend remains fairly static. In Wolverhampton the internal foster care service has 151 approved foster carers.

Over the last three years there have been changes made to the relationship between the Council and its foster carers including changes to fees and allowances linked to the introduction of a tier system which reflects different levels of responsibility and skills.

Within our ambition to place as many looked after children in family based settings, there is also the desire to increase the proportion of foster care placements with our internal carers. This presents a number of challenges in terms of increasing the overall number of internal foster carers by improving out recruitment and retention of foster carers as well as ensuring that our foster carers are confident and capable of providing care to the whole range of age groups and complexity of need. At present two thirds of foster care placements for looked after children are provided by independent fostering agencies.

Across the whole of the foster care provision we can provide we need to ensure that as many looked after children as possible can benefit from stable family placements that are closer to the city, where children and young people can more easily maintain relationships with family and friends, continue to attend local schools and benefit from other local support services.

In addition we will need foster carer services which can be responsive to changing need such as emergency placements e.g. for young people remanded by the courts and the potential increase in Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) being placed in the city.

### *Residential Care*

We will continue with our ambition to reduce reliance on residential placements but this is tempered with an understanding that for some young people a residential placement will offer the best match to their needs. We will need to ensure that only those young people who have been assessed as needing a residential placement are actually placed in children's homes and that in these circumstances we have arrangements in place to be able to access a range of placement options that can provide the right support of a high quality.

At the end of March 2014 7.3% of Wolverhampton's looked after children were placed in residential care. This figure had reduced to 5.5% by 31 March 2017.

At the end of March 2014, half of all residential placements were within Wolverhampton, a quarter within 20 miles and a further quarter being further afield. At the end of March 2017 the proportion of residential placements within Wolverhampton's boundaries had decreased to 37%, however, those placed over 20 miles from the city had also decreased to 21.2%. It should be noted that the reduction in residential placements "in-city" is partly explained by the fact that the number of "internal" Council residential beds reduced over the time period from 29 to 3 (a reduction of 90%) as a result of the decommissioning of Council managed services and the termination of block contracts. This change was undertaken in response to a key strategic priority set in the last Sufficiency Strategy, i.e. to reduce reliance on residential placements.

The Council will continue to provide one 3 bed children's home for looked after young people with the most complex needs with services being delivered by an external provider. All other residential placements will be accessed throughout ongoing membership of regional framework agreements and occasionally through spot purchasing.

The processes for monitoring and reviewing the appropriateness of placements in terms of need and how well it is being met have been expanded and strengthened over the last 3 years e.g. introduction of the Resource Panel. As a result there is



increased confidence that residential placements are being provided only for those for whom residential care is the most appropriate option.

## **5. Providing timely options for looked after children and young people to achieve permanence.**

Our aim is to ensure that the right permanence option is achieved for all children and young people, no matter what their age, and family finding commences at the earliest opportunity where appropriate.

Our commitment to helping the appropriate children and young people achieve permanency includes ensuring that:

- it is done in a timely fashion with the aim of at least meeting national standards, permanence plans are rigorously tracked,
- matching practice is effective.
- support is provided to those finding permanence and for as long as it is needed.

The Council's Adoption Team has three elements: Family Finding, Adoption Social Work and Recruitment. The Team provides a range of services including counselling, information, advice and training to help adopters meet the needs of their adoptive children.

Over the last three years further action has been taken to ensure that permanence is considered from the very early stages of a looked after child's time in care. This has included the introduction of a Permanency Panel to provide oversight of all care plans for all children recently admitted to care where there is a possibility that the child may not be returned home and permanency clinics and the further development of concurrent planning and Foster For Adoption. These will continue to be central features of our approach to finding permanence for our LAC. Our aim is to reach a position where **all** children's care plans and **all** prospective adopters consider the suitability of fostering for adoption.

There has also been a continuation of Care Planning Tracking meetings to avoid drift and ensure plans for permanency are pursued in a timely fashion.

There was an increase in the number of looked after children adopted between 2014/15 (51) and 2015/16 (62). Similarly, there has been a marked increase in Special Guardianship Orders granted, rising from 5 in 2008/09 to 24 in 2013/14, a 380% increase.

Going forward there will be a continuing focus on Special Guardianship Orders and Family Arrangement Orders as well as seeking to promote other forms of family based solutions to long term care by the use of family Network Meetings and family Group Conferencing. This will continue to be a key area of work for the Council.

This approach will be further supported by the provision of staff training and mentoring on how to promote and develop permanency and in the short term 6 advance practitioners have been identified to lead on improving the quality of plans and reports.

In terms of recruitment and initial training of adopters Wolverhampton has been an active partner in developing Adoption Black Country (ABC) which is a sub-regional joint venture approach to adoption with the other three Black Country local authorities (Dudley, Sandwell, and Walsall). This collaborative approach to recruiting and training adopters was further enhanced during the last Strategy period by the opportunities provided by the Adoption Reform Grant.

Wolverhampton is taking a leading role in the planning for a new Regional Adoption Agency which is intended will taking sub/regional co-operation on adoption to a new level.

## **6. Providing an increased range and choice of provision for young people who will transition to adult life from care**

Our aim is to work with looked after children and care leavers aged 14-25 years in order to improve their short and long term outcomes by providing a range of services and opportunities which will enable them to make as smooth a transition to adult life as possible.

The emphasis on starting to prepare young people for adult life at an early age allows them to have time to think about their post 18 options and identify what they need to achieve to meet their goal whether is further education, living independently or 'staying put' with their foster carers.

The Council's Looked After Children Transition service has been established for over 4 years and this multi-disciplinary team works in close collaboration with specialists in housing support, education, training and employment to meet young people's needs. Young people themselves are encouraged to actively participate in influencing their own individual plans and the development of the service. In recent times the New Belongings Initiative and the embedding of its principles in future service planning have reinforced this commitment. Recently there have been increases in staff and the number of supported housing units.

Achieving our ambitions for these young people will take place in a challenging environment. For example, whilst the overall LAC population has been significantly reduced in the last few years, the 10+ age group has grown proportionally and in March 2017 it represented 55% of the total looked after children population. Over the last 7 years the number of looked after children aged 16+ has increased by 81% (49 – 89). Over the same period the number of 10-15 year old looked after children increased by 95% (135-263). This is the age group who are most likely to stay in the care system until they reach 18 years old and who will be eligible for support beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays.

This level of support beyond 18 has over recent times been increased as a result of more looked after children taking advantage of the improved “Staying Put” arrangements. Looking forward central government policy and proposed legislation, has the potential to further increase the responsibilities on local authorities to provide post 18 support.

For example, The Children and Social Work Bill includes the introduction of a “Care Leavers Covenant” which will require local authorities to consult on and publish a ‘local offer’ to care leavers setting out the services that they will be entitled to and ensuring that all care leavers have access to a personal adviser up to the age of 25 years.

In addition, the introduction of the National Transfer Protocol for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children in July 2016 aims to enable the safe transfer of unaccompanied children from one UK local authority to another. The actual size of the impact that this initiative will have on looked after children services in general and transition services in particular has yet to be fully realised but it will bring new set of challenges both up to and beyond young people’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays in terms of the range of ethnic backgrounds, cultures and languages which will need to be accommodated.

These examples highlight the likely increase in demand for a range of transition and post care services ranging from accommodation to support. As well as increasing demand for services, experience has also shown that young people in care present an increasing complexity of need and this can mean that they find the acquisition of skills and confidence to live independently difficult to acquire. This in turn can increase vulnerability, and adversely impact on life chances in terms of education, and securing and maintaining accommodation.

This reinforces the importance of how we plan for and deliver flexible services that can respond quickly to changing circumstances as they arise. Both Council led services and those of our partners and external providers will need to demonstrate a willingness and commitment to providing both resources and services flexibly.

## **7. Implementation Plan Priorities**

This Strategy will be accompanied by an Implementation Plan which will be reviewed and refreshed on annual basis. This will allow us to define our ambitions and how we will measure progress in a more detailed way, as well as presenting opportunities to adjust our approach in response to changing circumstances.

The table below sets out our broad priorities based on the experience of the last Strategy period, current circumstances and our expectations based on current knowledge. The Ofsted Inspection report noted that the Sufficiency Strategy 2017–2020 clearly sets out the challenges faced and the priorities agreed by children’s social care.

<b>Ref:</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Change that needs to be achieved</b>
1.	To ensure we have access to sufficient appropriate services to support children and young people, especially those on the edge of care, to remain with their family where possible	<p>A high proportion of those children and young people supported by the edge of care services are not admitted to care</p> <p>There are fewer admissions to care</p> <p>A high proportion of LAC with a return home plan that actually return home</p>
2.	To increase the proportion of looked after children and young people placed in family settings and ensure that only those Looked After Children with complex needs who are assessed as needing a residential placement are placed in residential settings.	<p>There is an increased proportion of LAC in foster care placements</p> <p>Only those LAC who have an assessed need for residential care are placed in children’s homes or other residential settings.</p> <p>The cases of all LAC assessed as needing a residential setting are systematically scrutinised</p>
3.	To increase the size of the pool of internal foster carers and ensure that there are placement options for LAC of all ages and levels of complexity.	There is a larger pool of internal foster carers who are willing and able (trained, confident and supported) to meet the full range of assessed needs particularly in relation to health and education needs.
4.	To continue to improve our understanding of which types of need we have not been able to meet thorough “internal” placements in order to change profile of internal carer population so we have sufficient internal carers to meet need (less reliance on external providers)	<p>An appropriate balance of internal foster carers across the 4 levels is achieved and maintained</p> <p>A high proportion of internal foster carers have completed appropriate training</p>
5.	To achieve permanence for LAC as early as possible	<p>Increased opportunities for LAC to achieve permanence including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an increase in the number of early permanence placements.</li> </ul>

Ref:	Priority	Change that needs to be achieved
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>an increase in LAC to be placed in Family and Friends placements which lead to Special Guardianship Orders or adoption.</li> </ul> <p>Timeliness of achieving permanence inc. revocation of care orders is improved and is at least the same as the national average.</p>
6.	To ensure that we have access to sufficient appropriate services, accommodation and types of placement to prevent admission to care and respond positively to increasing and changing needs in the LAC population (especially in terms of older LAC and care leavers up to 18 years of age and beyond)	<p>There is improved placement stability</p> <p>Care leavers feel safe and supported in their accommodation</p> <p>High proportion of care leavers sustain their own tenancies post 18.</p>
7.	To ensure that a Market Position Statement is developed and published as part of a cross Directorate approach to developing closer working relationships with providers (internal & external) in order to improve choice, quality, quantity and availability of services to closely match needs of children and young people on the edge of care and in care.	<p>There is improved provider engagement leading to more flexible and responsive service provision.</p>